

**IS IT THE ECONOMY, STUPID?: THE SHORT-TERM ECONOMIC  
ROOTS OF RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN GERMAN  
MUNICIPALITIES**

By  
Simon Konstantin Schumacher

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Supervisor: Daniel Bochsler

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Vienna, 25 May 2025

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the extent to which short-term economic downturns, specifically rising unemployment and income stagnation, explain support for right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) at the municipal level in Germany. While existing research has extensively linked long-term regional decline to RWPP support, the role of acute, short-term economic changes remains comparatively underexplored, particularly in the German context. To address this gap, the study applies a communitropic economic voting framework, which posits that voters evaluate economic conditions through the lens of their local community. Using a multi-election dataset covering federal elections in 2013, 2017, and 2021, the analysis reveals that short-term regional increases in unemployment and income stagnation are significantly associated with AfD support, but only after the party's rightward ideological shift in 2015. These effects are particularly strong during periods of broader economic slowdown, such as the COVID-19 era. In contrast, the hypothesized sensitivity of middle-income municipalities to income stagnation is not supported. The findings underscore the need to account for localized, short-term economic anxieties in explaining contemporary RWPP support and highlight the evolving role of the AfD as a political vehicle for economically disaffected regions.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

**RWP** – Right-Wing Populism

**RWPP** – Right-Wing Populist Party

**AfD** – Alternative für Deutschland

**CSU** – Christian Social Union

**NPD** – National Democratic Party of Germany

**IC/ICE** – InterCity / InterCity Express (train services)

**NUTS** – Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics

# INTRODUCTION

The electoral success of right-wing populist parties (RWPPs) across most developed democracies over the past decade has been striking. Whether it is the *Front National* in France, *Reform UK* in Great Britain, *Fratelli d'Italia* in Italy or the *Alternative für Deutschland* in Germany, these parties have increasingly gained substantial vote shares across Europe and beyond (Aktas 2024). Through their rejection of liberal institutions, they have been described as the most pressing contemporary threat to liberal democracies (Rosenberg 2019; Kriesi 2014; Spittler 2018). Consequently, understanding how these parties attract voters, and how such insights might be used to curtail their electoral rise, is of pressing importance.

“It’s the economy, stupid!” - once a campaign slogan of Democratic candidate Bill Clinton, serves as a poignant idiom for one side of the literature explaining RWPP support: the economic-materialist perspective. The importance of economic factors is underscored by a large body of literature linking long-term regional economic decline to support for RWPPs. However, the influence of short-term economic developments on such support, especially at the regional or municipal level, remains underdeveloped. This gap is particularly apparent in the case of Germany, where most studies on the AfD emphasize cultural factors or long-term economic decline. Given the current economic slowdown faced by many European economies, further attention to the effects of short-term developments is warranted.

This thesis therefore investigates whether acute, short-term changes in local economic conditions, specifically unemployment and income stagnation, help explain variation in AfD support across German municipalities. To understand these regional differences, this study applies a community-dependent economic voting model, which assumes that voters perceive economic conditions primarily through the lens of their immediate surroundings: their in-group.

The analysis finds that short-term increases in unemployment and income stagnation are significant predictors of AfD support at the municipal level, particularly where economic decline is most acute. In doing so, the thesis aims to contribute to our understanding of how economic dynamics shape support for RWPPs by focusing on recent economic development in an explicitly community-dependent framework.

To answer the research question, the paper first defines right-wing populism and reviews the literature on the mechanisms that explain RWPP electoral success. The next chapter outlines the community-based, retrospective economic voting framework, along with the three hypotheses derived from it. This is followed by a description of the research design: a multi-election regression analysis that examines the interaction between short-term economic changes and regional AfD vote shares. Finally, the empirical findings are presented and subsequently discussed in light of the proposed theory and the wider literature.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Defining RWP

Despite the recent electoral success of right-wing populist parties, debates persist about how best to define populism and what distinguishes its right-wing variant. For conceptual clarity, this paper adopts the ‘ideational’ definition of populism. According to this perspective, populism is “a thin-centered ideology” that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: the pure people and the corrupt elite (Mudde 2004, 543). Right-wing populism extends this binary categorization through the lens of nativism, distinguishing between “natives” and “foreigners” (Mudde 2017). Beyond this, RWPPs promote platforms rooted in nationalism, authoritarianism, and cultural conflict (Mudde 2007). Just as there is debate over how best to define these movements, there is similar disagreement over what drives their growing appeal. Broadly speaking, the literature offers two dominant explanatory frameworks: one emphasizing cultural grievances, the other focusing on economic factors.

## Cultural Explanations of RWP

Within the domain of cultural explanations, the most influential account is the *cultural backlash* theory, developed by Norris and Inglehart (2019a). According to this perspective, the rise of right-wing populism is best understood as a reaction to the cultural and political gains made by the postmaterialist Left in recent decades. As younger, more educated, and urban populations have increasingly embraced socially liberal values, such as support for gender equality, multiculturalism, and environmentalism, older, less educated, and rural populations feel alienated and threatened by the erosion of traditional norms centered on religion, family, and national identity (Norris and Inglehart 2019a). Migration, in particular, has amplified this

perception of cultural displacement (Noury and Roland 2020; Dinas et al. 2019). This sense of cultural loss has fueled resentment and spurred support for authoritarian-populist leaders who pledge to restore traditional values and confront liberal elites (Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2019). A substantial body of empirical work supports this cultural account. Numerous studies have shown that cultural attitudes, particularly toward immigration, are strong predictors of RWPP support (Norris and Inglehart 2019b; Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Dinas et al. 2019; Noury and Roland 2020). Cultural views and values, then, clearly play an important role in driving RWPP success.

Yet, this perspective has faced growing criticism, with other scholars arguing that cultural explanations alone are insufficient (Gidron and Mijs 2019; Noury and Roland 2020). Instead, economic factors are often found to underlie and amplify cultural grievances, making individuals more receptive to the exclusionary rhetoric of RWPPs (Gidron and Hall 2017; Lucassen and Lubbers 2012; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas 2019). For instance, Carreras, Irepoglu Carreras, and Bowler (2019) found that in the Brexit referendum, economically depressed districts were more prone to adopt anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic views. In this way, economic factors may function as both mediators of cultural resentment and as independent drivers of RWPP support, warranting further attention.

## **Economic Explanations of RWP**

Building on this critique, a second strand of literature focuses more directly on economic determinants of RWPP support. These economic explanations can be broadly divided into two levels of analysis: individual-level and territorial-level approaches.

## **Individual-Level Economic Explanations for RWP**

At the individual level, the dominant approach examines how personal economic development and perceived insecurity shape party preference. Often seen as the classical method of analyzing populist voting (Greve, Fritsch, and Wyrwich 2023), this level of analysis emphasizes variables such as labor market vulnerability (Sipma, Lubbers, and Spierings 2023), income inequality (Han 2016), and fear of personal downward mobility (Engler and Weisstanner 2021; Kurer 2020). In general, this research finds that RWPPs attract support from individuals in the lower-middle strata of the income distribution who feel they are falling behind in terms of both income and social status (Burgoon et al. 2019; Schraff and Pontusson 2024; Rooduijn et al. 2017).

Nonetheless, results at the individual level are often inconsistent and sometimes contradictory. For example, while some scholars find a link between economic insecurity and RWPP support (Swank and Betz 2003; Wroe 2014), others suggest that such insecurity is unrelated or more closely tied to left-wing populism (Watson, Law, and Osberg 2022; Coffé, Heyndels, and Vermeir 2007; Guiso et al. 2024). Similarly, the relationship between income inequality and populist voting remains contested, with conflicting findings on both its significance and its mechanism of influence (Han 2016; Kurer 2020; Engler and Weisstanner 2021; Stoetzer, Giesecke, and Klüver 2023).

## **Regional and Community-Level Economic Explanations for RWP**

In light of these inconsistencies, scholars have increasingly turned to meso-level analyses that focus on community or regional economic conditions (Chou, Moffitt, and Busbridge 2022), which will also be the lens used in this paper. This shift in perspective reflects the argument that while individual motivations are important, economic shocks/developments have localized spillover effects, making the community the appropriate unit of analysis to study populism (Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021). Indeed, the regional literature offers more consistent

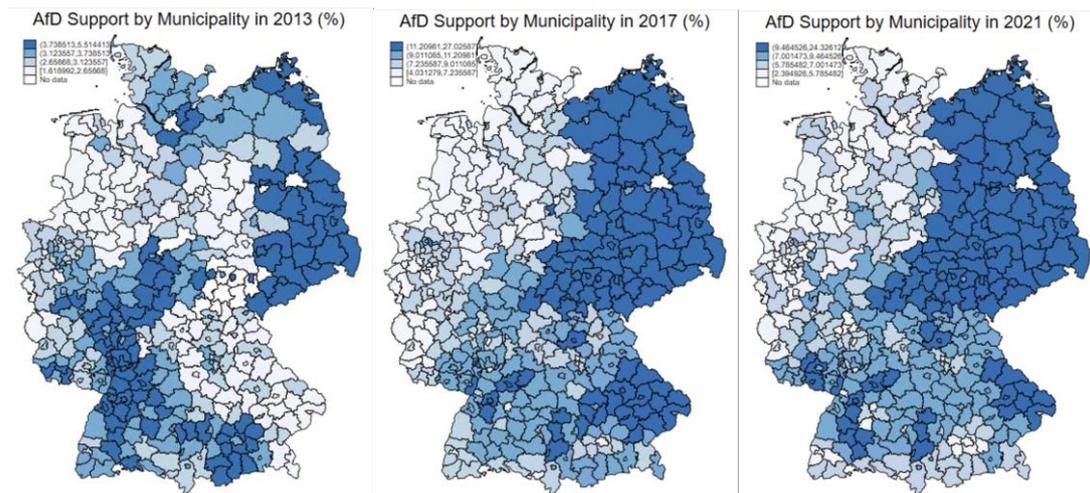
findings. Research shows that areas experiencing higher levels of labor market insecurity, typically measured through unemployment, tend to show stronger support for RWPPs (Georgiadou, Rori, and Roumanias 2018; Gozgor 2022; Swank and Betz 2003). For example, Algan et al. (2017) demonstrate that within-region increases in unemployment during the European financial crisis (2008–2012) were closely associated with rising populist support. Similarly, Essletzbichler, Disslbacher, and Moser (2018) find that U.S. regions with persistently high unemployment and those disproportionately affected by the 2008 crisis were more likely to support right-wing positions. Likewise, Dijkstra and Rodríguez-Pose (2020) show that in European regions, low employment opportunities and high labor market pressure significantly drive populist voting. Together, these findings highlight the value of regional-level analysis in uncovering structural economic roots of populist support that may be obscured in individual-level studies.

Beyond short-term economic insecurity, several studies have emphasized the role of long-term economic stagnation. This literature introduces the concept of “left-behind” regions, communities that have faced enduring marginalization or relative economic decline (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). In such areas, electoral choices often reflect a protest against being neglected or overlooked by national policymakers, especially when compared to prosperous urban centers (Rodríguez-Pose 2018; Dijkstra and Rodríguez-Pose 2020). Importantly, findings suggest that it is not poverty per se that drives support for RWPPs, but regions experiencing prolonged decline compared to past status (Dijkstra and Rodríguez-Pose 2020; Diemer et al. 2022). This ties into the broader modernization backlash thesis, which argues that both short-term recessions and long-term structural changes associated with globalization create a class of economic “losers” who are particularly receptive to RWPP platforms (Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021; Greve, Fritsch, and Wyrwich 2023; Rodríguez-Pose, Terrero-Dávila, and Lee 2023). These dynamics underscore the importance of examining not only static economic

conditions but also trajectories of decline: how perceived downward mobility and regional decay shape political discontent.

## **The Case of the AfD**

Turning to Germany specifically, we find a growing body of literature seeking to explain the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). Initially founded in 2013 as a fiscally conservative, Eurosceptic party by members of the academic and economic elite, the AfD's early platform was comparable to that of the CSU (Arzheimer and Berning 2019). At this stage, the party remained moderate on cultural issues and situated itself to the left of the far-right NPD (Arzheimer 2015; Conrad 2020). As such, it could not be considered a RWPP at this point. However, the refugee crisis of 2015 marked a turning point. In response to the arrival of over one million refugees, the AfD underwent a dramatic ideological shift, embracing anti-immigration and anti-Islam rhetoric (Lees 2018). The shift paid off electorally: in the 2017 federal elections, the AfD garnered over 12% of the national vote and became the first new party since the 1990s to enter the Bundestag (Arzheimer and Berning 2019). Yet, the AfD's support is far from evenly distributed. While it performed strongly nationwide, its vote share exceeded 35% in several East German districts, particularly in Saxony. These regional disparities persisted in the 2021 federal election, with the party continuing to perform better in the East while still attracting notable support in parts of Bavaria, Baden-Württemberg, and the Ruhr (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** AfD vote share by Municipality in the 2013, 2017 and 2021 federal elections.  
 Data source: Statistische Bundesamt

Scholars have proposed various explanations for this geographically uneven support. Some argue that the rural-urban divide or peripheralization play central roles, characterizing AfD support as a “revenge of the village” (Förtner, Belina, and Naumann 2019; 2021). Others emphasize enduring grievances related to the East-West divide (Arzheimer 2023), while still others focus on negative attitudes toward immigration and democratic institutions (Hansen and Olsen 2019; Rösel and Samartzidis 2018). Despite this, a growing literature suggests that AfD support is multifaceted and requires more nuanced, context-sensitive approaches (Weisskircher 2020).

From a regional-economic perspective, several studies have focused on the importance of long-term economic decline in the rise of the AfD. Greve, Fritsch, and Wyrwich (2023), for instance, show that regions experiencing long-term relative decline, extending over a century, are significantly more likely to vote for the AfD. The authors thus demonstrate that these “left-behind” dynamics persist even across generations in Germany, while Schneider (2020) finds that the decline of regional manufacturing employment since the 1980s has strongly influenced AfD support. However, much of this literature focuses on structural decline over time. A clearer

understanding of how short-term economic changes relate to AfD voting behavior remains underdeveloped.

## **Contribution**

This paper offers two key contributions to the existing literature on the AfD and right-wing populism more broadly. First, while prior research has demonstrated a link between short-term regional increases in unemployment and support for RWPPs in various contexts, this perspective has not yet been applied in detail to the case of the AfD in Germany. By introducing this lens into the German context, the study seeks to determine whether similar mechanisms of economic disruption are at play. Second, this paper moves beyond the prevailing focus on long-term structural decline by incorporating a dynamic approach that emphasizes recent changes in economic conditions. Specifically, I argue that short-term income stagnation, rather than only prolonged economic deterioration, can act as a proximate trigger for regional perceptions of decline and subsequent support for the AfD. By integrating short-term measures of regional economic performance, this paper aims to help our understanding of how economic anxiety manifests at the ballot box, not only in Germany, but as part of broader patterns of right-wing populist mobilization.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand the effects of short-term economic developments on support for RWPPs, I draw on insights from retrospective economic voting theory. This well-established concept holds that voters reward or punish incumbents based on their perceptions of recent economic performance (Green et al. 2025; Healy and Malhotra 2013). The central question, however, concerns the level of reference voters use when making these evaluations: whose economic performance are they judging?

Traditionally, scholars distinguish between two types of retrospective economic voting. Egotropic voting occurs when individuals base their decisions on changes in their own personal financial situation (Rogers and Tyszler 2018). Sociotropic voting, by contrast, refers to evaluations based on perceptions of the national economy as a whole (Rogers and Tyszler 2018). The prevailing consensus is that sociotropic considerations tend to outweigh egotropic ones (Rogers 2014; Hansford and Gomez 2015). However, this binary framework has been increasingly questioned by scholars who argue that national-level economic aggregates conceal significant regional disparities, which lead to regionally differing conceptions of the economy. This has given rise to a third model: communitropic economic voting (Rogers 2014; Stiers and Hooghe 2023). In this framework, voters base their assessments not solely on national indicators or personal experiences, but primarily on the economic wellbeing of their immediate community.

The concept of communitropic voting utilized in this paper builds on work by scholars such as Enos (2017), who emphasize the importance of local attachment and in-group solidarity. Voters are not isolated individuals but members of social environments; they form impressions of the economy through what they observe happening to their neighbors, coworkers, and community

institutions (Rogers and Tyszler 2018). Even when a voter's personal situation is stable, visible local economic hardship may trigger perceptions of decline and shape political behavior. As such, voting becomes less about the "self" or the "nation," and more about the collective experience of the community: the "us."

## **Hypothesis 1**

Applying this concept of community-dependent voting to the previously discussed literature on the relationship between economic development and support for RWPP, we can formulate hypotheses about how local economic changes may influence RWPP support. We begin with the concept of economic insecurity. As noted above, economic insecurity, broadly defined as the anxiety produced by the exposure to adverse economic events (Bossert and D'Ambrosio 2013, 1018), is found to be linked to RWPP support. Previous research has shown that economic insecurity, especially at the macro or meso level, is associated with increased in-group solidarity, rejection of outsiders, and a rise in authoritarian responses (Inglehart and Norris 2017). For example, Watson, Law, and Osberg (2022) found that, in 2016 the U.S. presidential election, macro-level insecurity correlated with more negative attitudes toward out-groups (e.g., Muslims, the LGBTQ+ community, feminists, immigrants). While economic insecurity can be operationalized and measured in various ways, the most common approach is through the lens of employment (Watson, Law, and Osberg 2022; Bergh and Kärnä 2022; Sipma, Lubbers, and Spierings 2023), which is also the lens I will adopt.

Within the framework of retrospective communitropic voting, I consequently argue that when voters perceive rising unemployment within the community they identify with (i.e., the in-group), this fosters a heightened sense of personal economic insecurity. At the same time, it fuels growing resentment toward political elites as well as out-groups such as migrants, who are seen as responsible for the decline. In this view, community-level economic hardship is not

merely an individual experience but a collective one, generating increased political distrust, xenophobia, and openness to right-wing populist narratives (Steenvoorden and Wright 2019; Watson, Law, and Osberg 2022). Right-wing populist parties successfully tap into these localized anxieties by promoting national protectionism, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and economic nationalism as solutions to perceived community hardship. Consequently, I propose the following hypothesis:

**H1:** *German municipalities that experience short-term increases in unemployment are expected to exhibit a higher propensity to vote for right-wing populist parties.*

If Hypothesis 1 is supported, we should observe a robust, positive relationship between economic insecurity, operationalized through changes in unemployment rates and support for right-wing populist parties at the municipal level. In other words, even when controlling for relevant socio-demographic and structural factors, municipalities experiencing increases in unemployment are expected to consistently exhibit higher levels of electoral support for RWPPs. To further validate this argument, we should also observe variations in outcomes across election years. Specifically, we expect distinct results when comparing the 2013 election to the 2017 and 2021 elections. Since the AfD did not yet function as a right-wing populist party in 2013, economic anxieties at that time should not have translated into support for the AfD in the way they did once the party adopted a more explicitly populist and nativist platform. In addition to this core test, I also include a separate regression examining absolute levels of unemployment. While this analysis falls outside the main theoretical framework, it serves as a robustness check. If economic insecurity is politically salient even in the absence of recent shocks, we might expect municipalities with persistently high unemployment to also show higher levels of AfD support. Nonetheless, I expect short-term changes to exert a stronger and more consistent effect, in line with the communitropic mechanism outlined above.

## Hypothesis 2

Moving beyond the focus on economic insecurity, this paper contributes to the literature on the temporal dynamics of economic decline and populist voting by examining how short-term income growth shapes support for RWPPs. Maintaining the same community-centered economic voting framework, this paper argues that voters are attuned to the short-term economic trajectory of their communities and translate this awareness into voting preferences. Research suggests that it is not deprivation per se, but rather the threat of decline, that pushes voters toward the radical right (Engler and Weisstanner 2021). Building on this insight, I propose that sharp changes in income trends act as a warning signal to voters about whether their community is progressing or stagnating. I expect voters to interpret stagnation as a threat to the future economic well-being of their community, one to which they feel a sense of collective attachment. These perceptions of stagnation trigger strong fears of economic decline, which in turn, are likely to foster out-group resentment and increase support for economic nativism. Thus, irrespective of their individual economic positions, voters who perceive their community as significantly deteriorating may be inclined to support RWPPs.

One potential challenge with this approach lies in the assumption that voters are sufficiently informed about their community's short-term economic development. It is possible that such awareness, and the political reactions it provokes, only emerges when stagnation becomes severe or visible in the long-term. In this view, support for RWPPs may be driven less by subtle income trends and more by intense stagnation that becomes apparent through everyday experiences, such as store closures or discussions within social networks. Accordingly, I expect the effect of short-term economic stagnation on RWPP support to be most pronounced in cases where such stagnation is acute and perceptible.

Hence, I propose my second hypothesis:

**H2:** *Municipalities experiencing short-term stagnant income growth are more likely to vote for right-wing populist parties.*

If Hypothesis 2 holds, we should observe a negative relationship between short-term income growth and support for right-wing populist parties. Specifically, municipalities with stagnant income growth are expected to show higher RWPP vote shares. As previously argued, this relationship should also shift between the 2013 and 2017 elections, reflecting the AfD's transformation into a right-wing populist party.

### **Hypothesis 3**

To gain a more nuanced understanding of Hypothesis 2, this paper examines whether the reaction to short-term income stagnation is moderated by a municipality's economic status. Evidence suggests that the relationship between fears of economic decline and support for RWPP varies significantly depending on initial economic position. Specifically, this connection appears stronger for middle-income voters than for low-income ones, as the perceived "height of the fall" is greater for those in the middle, intensifying their anxieties about potential decline (Engler and Weisstanner 2021). In contrast, voters who have already been "left behind" may be less affected by further economic setbacks, as their expectations are already diminished. This individual-level perspective aligns with broader regional-level literature emphasizing how formerly prosperous or middle-class communities tend to exhibit heightened populist support when confronted with relative decline (Rodríguez-Pose 2018; Becker, Fetzer, and Novy 2017; Carreras, Irepoglu Carreras, and Bowler 2019).

Within the communitropic voting framework, this would entail that voters hold a reference point for the economic standing of their in-group, based on past prosperity relative to other municipalities. That is, voters have a general sense of how their region's economic standing compares to others, a claim supported by previous research (Rickardsson, Mellander, and

Bjerke 2021). Observing their community fall below this perceived reference point generates strong collective dissatisfaction and resentment, making voters more susceptible to populist appeals. Consequently, middle-income municipalities react more strongly to regional stagnation, as they are more apprehensive about losing their status. While my data does not allow for a direct operationalization of economic and social status, income levels can serve as a meaningful proxy to capture these dynamics. This informs my third hypothesis:

**H3:** *Middle-income municipalities experiencing stagnant income growth are more likely to vote for right-wing populist parties compared to low-income municipalities experiencing similar economic developments.*

If Hypothesis 3 holds, we expect to find that the relationship between economic stagnation and RWPP support is especially pronounced in middle-income municipalities.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

To assess my hypotheses effectively, this paper will analyze the extent to which differences in economic conditions across Germany's 400 municipalities (NUTS-3 regions) influence support for right-wing populist parties in the three federal elections. Examining multiple German national elections (2013, 2017 and 2021) provides two key advantages for testing the outlined hypotheses. First, it allows the analysis to capture the dynamic nature of political realignments associated with the rise of right-wing populism, accounting for short-term fluctuations as well as enduring shifts in voter preferences (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018). Second, observing several election cycles, dating from the conception of the AfD to its arrival as an established RWPP, allows for the further testing of my hypothesis validity. After all, for my hypotheses to hold, they should exclusively apply in the 2017 and 2021 election and not in 2013, where the AfD did not function as a RWPP. Thus, the multi-election approach enables a nuanced and robust analysis of how economic factors shape voting behavior over time.

To test the hypotheses, I will employ ordinary least squares (OLS) multivariate regressions. The dependent variable will be electoral support for the AfD in a given federal election, measured at the municipal level. Although municipal boundaries have not remained entirely constant over this period, the Statistische Bundesamt provides harmonized electoral data that aligns historical voting results with modern municipal boundaries, ensuring consistency. In cases where election data is unavailable for a municipality in a given year, the municipality will be excluded from the respective regression. However, this issue affects only 12 instances for the 2013 election.

A key limitation of this research design, inherent to any analysis conducted at the meso level, is the risk of ecological fallacy: drawing inferences about individual-level voter behavior based

on aggregate-level data. However, because this study seeks to capture the electoral consequences of localized economic spillover effects, aggregate data is the most appropriate and relevant source for addressing the research questions. Thus, while this paper's ability to conclude voting motivation is limited, aggregate-level analysis remains a methodologically justified and suitable approach for this study.

## **Explanatory Variables**

For H1 and H2, I use short-term unemployment trends and short-term income growth as the main explanatory variables, respectively. These are operationalized as the change in unemployment rate and the average percentage change in aggregate income per municipality over the three years preceding each election. This three-year window avoids overlap between election periods while allowing sufficient time for voters to internalize short-term changes. Change in unemployment rate serves as a proxy for economic insecurity, while income growth reflects fear of economic decline.

For H3, I categorize municipalities into ordinal income groups for each election year to examine whether middle-income municipalities with stagnant income growth are more likely to support RWPPs compared to low-income municipalities. To this end, municipalities are grouped into four income brackets based on their national percentile ranking of average income: low income (0–30th percentile), middle income (30–60th percentile), upper-middle income (60–80th percentile), and high income (80–100th percentile).

## **Control Variables**

To effectively assess my hypotheses, I draw on established literature to define control variables that capture plausible alternative explanations for regional RWPP support and the AfD specifically (Schwander, Gohla, and Schäfer 2020; Rodríguez-Pose, Terrero-Dávila, and Lee

2023). These variables are intended to isolate the effects of short-term economic conditions by accounting for competing theoretical mechanisms commonly cited in the literature.

The first set of controls relates to social backlash theory, which attributes RWPP support to cultural resentment and opposition to progressive social changes (Norris and Inglehart 2019a). While such attitudes are difficult to observe directly at the meso level, research has shown that persistent regional differences, particularly between East and West Germany, can serve as proxies for underlying cultural divides (Arzheimer 2023). I therefore include a dummy variable distinguishing East (1) from West (0) Germany to capture these historical and political legacies. In addition, degrees of urbanization have also been linked to cultural variation in RWPP support (Förtner, Belina, and Naumann 2019). To reflect this rural-urban divide, I include population density, measured as the natural logarithm of the number of inhabitants per square kilometer.

The second explanation is the “revenge of the village” thesis, which suggests that it is not urbanization, but peripheralization from economic and cultural centers that drives RWPP support (Förtner, Belina, and Naumann 2021). To capture this, I include the distance to the nearest IC/ICE train station, measured in minutes by car, following the approach used by Greve, Fritsch, and Wyrwich (2023). While this variable is moderately correlated with population density (see Appendix 8.), the relationship is not strong enough to raise concerns about multicollinearity (see Appendix 9.) and both are retained given that they capture theoretically distinct mechanisms for RWPP support.

Finally, the globalization backlash or long-term economic decline theory argues that support for RWPPs stems from the dislocation caused by global market integration, deindustrialization, and perceived status loss, particularly in regions with strong manufacturing bases (Broz, Frieden, and Weymouth 2021; Rodríguez-Pose, Terrero-Dávila, and Lee 2023). To account for this, I include the change in manufacturing share of municipal economic output (%) between

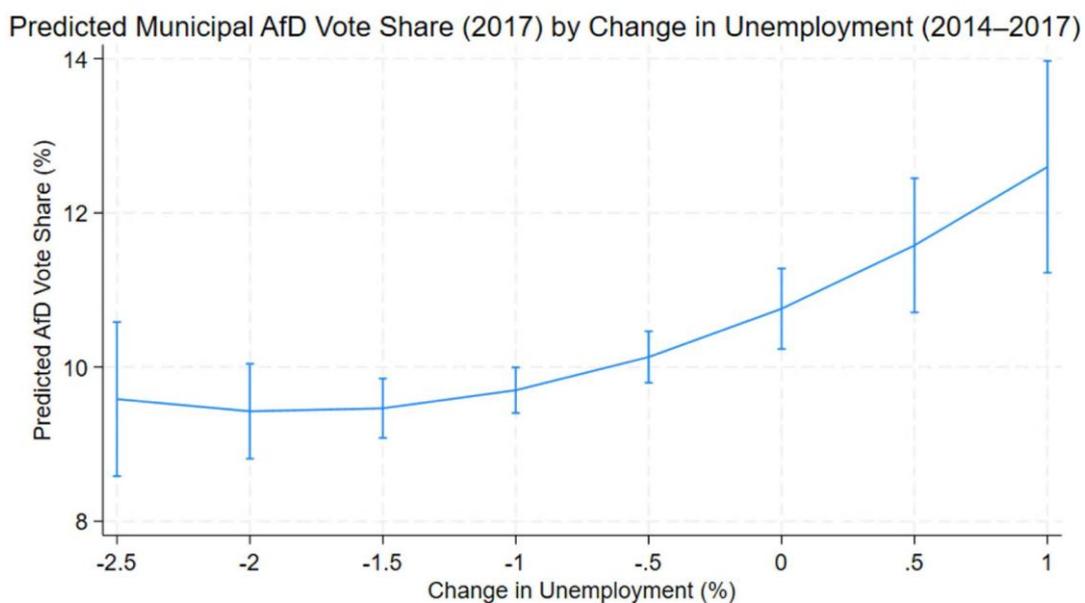
2000 and the respective election year. While a longer timeframe would have been preferable, the necessary data were not available.

# RESULTS

## Results Hypothesis 1

In the 2013 election, changes in unemployment between 2010 and 2013 are not significantly associated with support for the AfD and the overall explanatory power of the model is low. These results are consistent with expectations, as the AfD in 2013 was still primarily focused on Eurozone issues and had not yet positioned itself as a populist vehicle for economically disaffected voters.

By the 2017 election, a strong and statistically significant relationship emerges between short-term unemployment change (2014–2017) and AfD vote share. The linear coefficient is substantial and positive, and the squared term is also significant. This indicates a non-linear pattern: municipalities with sharper increases in unemployment saw disproportionately higher levels of support for the AfD (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2: Predicted Municipal AfD Vote Share (%) in the 2017 Federal Election by Municipal Change in Unemployment Level (2014-2017)*

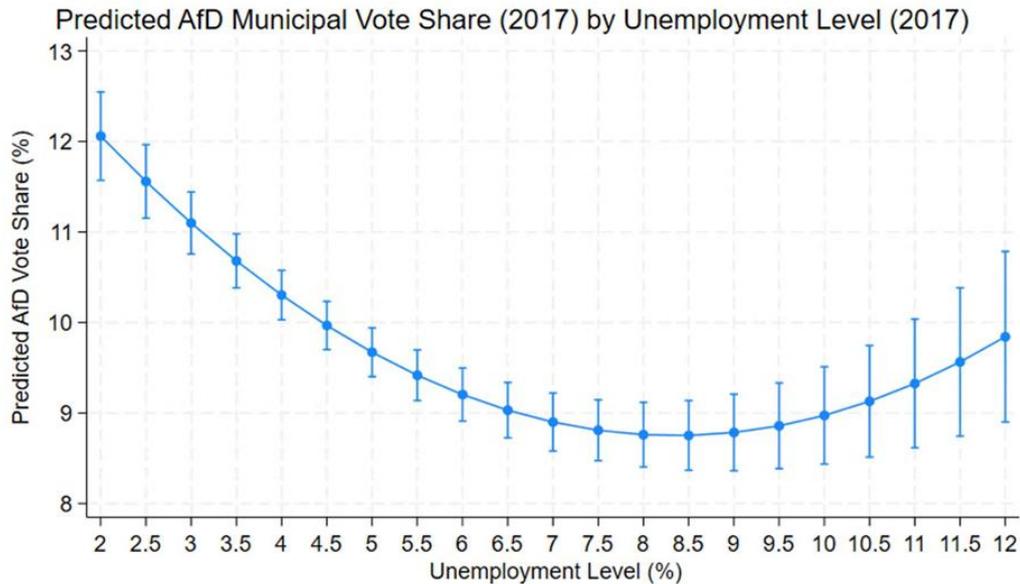
In the 2021 election, the positive effect of unemployment change remains robust. A one-percentage-point increase in unemployment between 2018 and 2021 is associated with an estimated 1.08 percentage-point increase in AfD vote share (see Appendix 3). While the quadratic term is not statistically significant in this context, the linear relationship is strong and highly significant, indicating a consistent association between rising unemployment and AfD support.

These results suggest a clear temporal pattern: unemployment change had no measurable effect on AfD support in 2013 but became a significant and consistent predictor in 2017 and 2021. This reflects the changing character of the AfD: from a narrowly focused protest party to a broader right-wing populist movement capable of mobilizing economically insecure voters.

### **Absolute Levels of Unemployment**

To check for the robustness of the previous results, this paper also tested for the impact of absolute levels of unemployment. However, the regression analysis of absolute unemployment levels yields surprising results that contrast with initial expectations. In all three elections analyzed, the linear effect of unemployment is negative and statistically significant, suggesting that, counterintuitively, municipalities with higher unemployment rates tended to show lower support for the AfD.

However, in both 2017 and 2021, the inclusion of a significant positive squared term reveals a nonlinear, U-shaped relationship. This indicates that AfD support was highest not in municipalities with moderate unemployment, but rather in those with either very low or very high unemployment rates (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Predicted Municipal AfD Vote Share (%) in the 2017 Federal Election by Municipal Unemployment Level (2017)

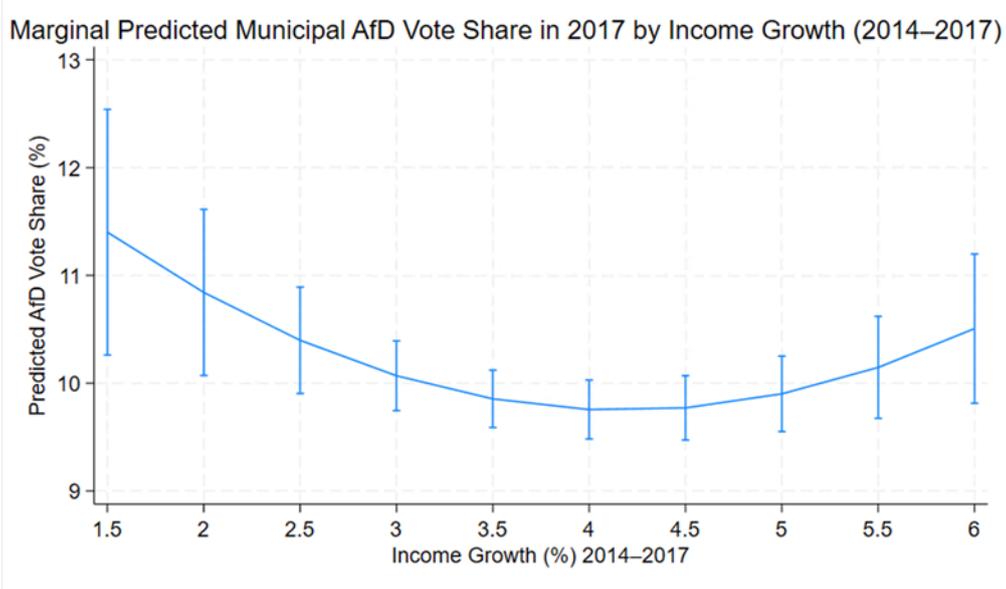
Although no formal interaction test was conducted, the distinct effects of unemployment levels and unemployment change across models, combined with their conceptual separation as structural versus short-term indicators, suggest that they operate through separate mechanisms.

## Results Hypothesis 2

Hypothesis 2 proposed that municipalities experiencing recent income stagnation or decline would exhibit higher levels of support for right-wing populist parties. As expected, in the 2013 election, there is no statistically significant association between regional income growth (2010–2013) and AfD support. The coefficient is small and insignificant, again suggesting that, in the early phase of the party’s development, local economic performance had little bearing on its electoral outcomes.

In the 2017 election, the initial linear model again shows no significant relationship. However, when a quadratic term is introduced, the results reveal a statistically significant U-shaped

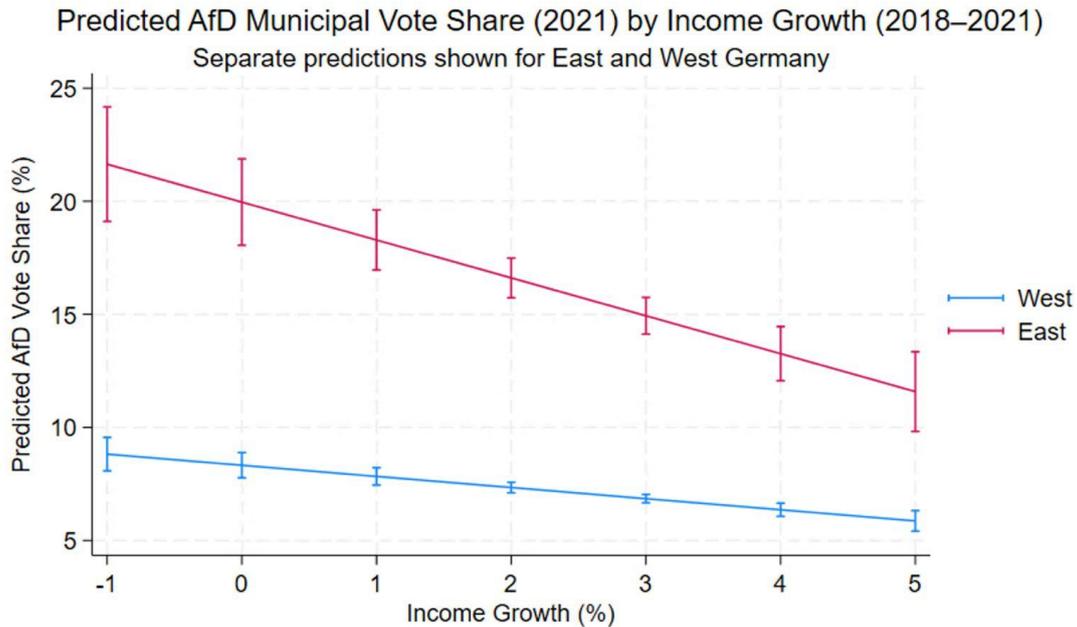
relationship. These surprising results suggest that AfD support was higher in municipalities experiencing either particularly low or particularly high-income growth (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4:** Predicted Municipal AfD Vote Share (%) in the 2017 Federal Election by Average Municipal Income Growth (%) 2014-2017

By the 2021 election, the relationship becomes both strong and linear. Municipalities with lower income growth between 2018 and 2021 exhibit significantly higher AfD vote shares. The squared term is not included in this model, as it does not reach significance. This finding indicates that income stagnation had become a significant predictor of right-wing populist support, especially in the context of broader economic stagnation during the COVID-19 period.

Interestingly, as shown in Figure 5, when dissecting the impact of income stagnation in East and West Germany, we see that while the relationship is negative in both regions, the effect is considerably stronger in the East than in the West. In the East, the predicted AfD vote share in a municipality with -1% income growth is almost 10 percentage points higher than in a municipality with 5% income growth.



*Figure 5: Predicted Municipal AfD Vote Share (%) in the 2021 Federal Election in East- and West Germany by Average Municipal Income Growth (%) 2018-2021*

In summary, the results across three federal elections suggest that this relationship between short-term income growth and AfD vote share is somewhat inconsistent but strengthens over time. The evidence for H2 is expectedly weak in 2013, emerges more clearly in 2017 through a non-linear pattern, and becomes robustly significant in 2021. This evolution aligns with the growing relevance of economic discontent and perceived decline as key drivers of AfD support.

### Results Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 proposed that middle-income municipalities would be particularly responsive to short-term income stagnation, as they might be especially fearful of losing their relative economic status. However, this expectation is not supported by the data.

In the 2013 election, neither the income group categories nor their interaction with income growth show statistically significant effects on AfD vote share. The only exception is that results indicated that high-income municipalities exhibit a marginally higher level of AfD

support in 2013, suggesting a distinct pattern during the party's early phase. In the 2017 and 2021 elections, neither income group status nor its interaction with income growth shows a meaningful relationship with support for the AfD. This illustrates that while income stagnation became a meaningful driver of RWPP support overall, the expectation that middle-income municipalities would be particularly responsive is not supported by the data.

# DISCUSSION

## Discussion Hypothesis 1

Beginning with the analysis of changes in unemployment, we broadly observe results in line with the expectation, that short-term increases in regional unemployment are linked to RWPP support in Germany. As theorized, we see that in the 2013 federal election, short-term increases in regional unemployment hold no significant explanatory power for AfD support. Since the AfD had not yet fully transitioned into a right-wing populist party at that time, the finding that unemployment changes only became significant in later elections strengthens the argument that the party only began to attract an economically insecure electorate after its ideological shift. This temporal development thus reinforces the internal validity of the findings by demonstrating that it is specifically populist positions that mobilize economically insecure voters.

Beyond this, and in line with expectations, both the 2017 and 2021 elections show a positive relationship between short-term increases in unemployment and AfD vote share. Notably, existing literature finds that individual job loss is often associated with support for left-wing parties (Emmenegger, Marx, and Schraff 2015; Sipma, Lubbers, and Spierings 2023; Wiertz and Rodon 2021), rather than right-wing ones. In this context, these results provide compelling support for the communitropic voting framework: it is not necessarily the newly unemployed themselves, but also economically secure members of their community who channel rising unemployment in their surroundings into support for AfD.

Additionally, the fact that we observe similar, statistically significant results for both the 2017 and 2021 elections further strengthens the argument that rising regional unemployment triggers support for RWPPs generally. Nonetheless, the nature of this relationship appears to differ slightly across the two elections. However, the fact that we observe a quadratic relationship in

2017 but not in 2021 may be explained by broader economic trends. Between 2014 and 2017, Germany experienced widespread job growth, and unemployment fell in many municipalities. Therefore, communities that did face rising unemployment during this period may have stood out more starkly, leading to a stronger reaction in voting behavior. In contrast, between 2018 and 2021, there was a general uptick in unemployment across the country. This more widespread increase may have led to a more uniform, linear relationship between unemployment and AfD vote share, as fewer communities were exceptional in their experiences of economic deterioration.

Given these findings, we can conclude that there is considerable evidence suggesting that rising regional unemployment is linked to RWPP support at the municipal level in Germany. Whether, as theorized, it is specifically a sense of resentment triggered by witnessing hardship within one's community that drives this support cannot be directly assessed with aggregate data and would require additional individual-level analysis. Despite this limitation, I contend that previous research identifying unemployment as a distinct trigger of economic insecurity (Bergh and Kärnä 2022) and the earlier argument that, at the individual level, unemployment is often linked to support for left-wing parties (Sipma, Lubbers, and Spierings 2023; Wiertz and Rodon 2021), lends support to the interpretation that a communitropic mechanism is at work here.

However, the findings on short-term changes in unemployment are complicated by the less straightforward results regarding absolute levels of unemployment. As a full discussion of these patterns falls beyond the scope of this thesis, I will briefly revisit them in the discussion of H3, where similar patterns are visible. However, importantly, since absolute levels of unemployment and short-term changes conceptually capture distinct dimensions of economic hardship, these additional findings do not undermine the core conclusions related to H1.

## Discussion Hypothesis 2

The results for Hypothesis 2, while not entirely consistent with expectations, still offer some evidence towards the mechanism outlined in the theoretical framework. As with the results for Hypothesis 1, we do not observe a statistically significant relationship between short-term income growth and AfD support in the 2013 election. Given that the AfD had not yet established itself as a RWPP in 2013, the absence of a correlation at this stage further reinforces the interpretation that an ideological shift was needed for the AfD to attract economically aggrieved voters.

However, in contrast to the H1 results, the findings for the 2017 and 2021 federal elections present a more complex picture. In 2017, the inclusion of a quadratic term reveals an unexpected pattern: both low and very high levels of short-term regional income growth are statistically significantly correlated with AfD vote share. While the association with lower income growth aligns somewhat with the theoretical expectations of this paper, the positive correlation in high-growth municipalities cannot be explained within the proposed framework, highlighting that different mechanisms drive RWPP support in municipalities not suffering economic hardship. That said, the applicability of the 2017 results to the proposed theory is limited. The years preceding the 2017 election were economically strong both nationally and regionally, with an average regional income growth rate of nearly 4% and a minimum of about 1% (see Appendix 2). In this context, very few regions experienced genuine stagnation. As a result, the mechanisms theorized to produce a collective sense of economic decline were not broadly present during this period. Thus, the results for the 2017 election, while not perfectly in line with expectations, do not disprove the hypothesis as a whole.

Unlike the 2017 election, which was not preceded by regional stagnation, the 2021 election followed a period of significant economic slowdown. The COVID-19 crisis led to a

substantially lower average regional income growth rate of 2.8%, with some municipalities experiencing declines as large as  $-0.8\%$  (see Appendix 2). Consequently, the proposed framework is much more applicable to this period. This is also reflected in the findings, where we observe a statistically significant negative relationship between income growth and AfD vote share. These results offer indication that voters translate short-term income developments in their regional economies into AfD support, only when regional stagnation is acute. Nonetheless, as is the case with the H1 findings, whether, as theorized, voters transfer economic stagnation within their community specifically into fear about their community's economic future, cannot be proven on the meso level.

The 2021 findings become especially interesting when viewed through the lens of the East–West divide. As noted earlier, in East- and West Germany, stagnating short-term income growth is associated with increased AfD support, strengthening the validity of the findings. However, the swing in vote share between the lowest and highest growth municipalities in the West is only a few percentage points, while in East Germany it is a difference of 10 points. This result suggests two distinct mechanisms at play. First, likely driven by cultural factors, AfD support in East Germany remains higher than in the West regardless of economic conditions. This is seen in every regression, where the East-West divide accounts for large differences in AfD support. Second, we see that this baseline level of AfD support meaningfully interacts with short-term income growth. It appears that while cultural factors underpin the East–West divide, they are exacerbated by economic fears. Alternatively, a more optimistic outlook on a community's economic trajectory may dampen the salience of cultural grievances. In either case, this dynamic is significant and adds an important layer of nuance to the findings: short-term economic development and cultural differences interact in a meaningful manner. These results thus give credence to the understanding that support for AfD in Germany cannot be

understood as either a purely economic or cultural phenomenon, but a complex interplay of both (Weisskircher 2020).

In conclusion, within the scope of this analysis, we do find evidence suggesting that acute short-term economic decline at the regional level contributes to increased support for RWPPs. However, given that only one election period, 2021, combines both a clearly established RWPP and widespread economic stagnation, further election cycles will be needed to robustly test and validate this theory.

### **Discussion Hypothesis 3**

Lastly, the results regarding Hypothesis 3 allow us to confidently reject the claim that middle-income municipalities are more likely than other income groups to translate fears of relative economic decline into stronger support for the AfD. The most straightforward explanation is that the concept of relative decline, that is, how voters perceive their community developing in comparison to others, may not be meaningful in the short term. While the literature on “left-behind” regions suggests that long-term relative decline can foster resentment and increased RWPP support (Gordon 2018), this process likely requires time. A longer timeframe may be necessary for voters to observe and internalize how their municipality is falling behind others. In contrast, short-term developments may not provide enough context or visibility for such comparative evaluations to emerge.

These findings, however, do not undermine the validity of Hypothesis 2. Even if voters are not aware of how their municipality is performing relative to others in the short-term, they may still experience the effects of local economic stagnation directly and express their dissatisfaction at the ballot box. In this sense, the comparative aspect of decline is not a necessary condition: economic anxiety generated by stagnation alone may be sufficient to drive RWPP support in the short term, regardless of a municipality’s position in the broader income distribution.

The only result from the H3 analysis that aligns with our theoretical expectations is that, in the 2013 election, high-income municipalities were marginally more likely to support the AfD than other income groups. This is consistent with the understanding of the AfD's early phase as a party with an elitist, fiscally conservative profile, which initially attracted support from higher-income voters. Extending beyond this, it is also noteworthy that we do not observe a significantly negative association between higher-income municipalities and AfD support in later elections. Combined with the finding that both low unemployment (in 2017 and 2021) and high-income growth (in 2017) were also associated with increased AfD vote share, this highlights that economic insecurity is not the only pathway to right-wing populist support.

Paradoxically, voters in economically stable or affluent communities may also be drawn to the AfD for reasons that lie outside the scope of the proposed economic framework. A possible explanation is that cultural values can drive support for fringe right-wing parties across all income groups. However, while middle-income voters tend to be more risk-averse and reluctant to support unestablished parties, affluent voters, insulated by their economic security, are more willing to support parties that advocate for drastic changes (Green and Pahontu 2024). This dynamic could explain the U-shape seen in multiple results, where both economically aggrieved and economically secure voters support RWPPs. However, since this dynamic is only seen in some results, it would require further research to validate in a broader context.

## CUMULATIVE DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion, analyzing the effects of short-term economic developments on German municipalities has yielded several valuable insights that warrant further exploration. First, the paper provides robust support for the idea that short-term increases in regional unemployment are positively associated with support for right-wing populist parties. In the context of existing research suggesting that individuals directly affected by job loss often support left-wing parties, this finding reinforces the validity of the proposed communitropic approach. The results concerning short-term income stagnation as a proxy for fear of economic decline are more nuanced. While the necessary economic conditions were absent in 2017, the relationship became statistically significant in 2021 amid widespread regional stagnation. These findings suggest that voters become attuned to short-term economic trends in their communities and respond to them politically only when signs of stagnation are sufficiently pronounced. Still, since this dynamic only clearly appears in one election, further research is needed to assess whether the pattern holds in other contexts. The federal election of 2025, which was also preceded by several years of economic slowdown, would offer a perfect complement to this analysis. In contrast, the findings allow us to firmly reject the claim that middle-income municipalities are particularly responsive to short-term economic stagnation due to fears of relative status loss. No significant interactions between income group and income growth were observed, suggesting that relative economic positioning may only become politically relevant over longer time horizons.

Beyond the evidence supporting the role of short-term economic developments, this paper sheds further light on the ideological evolution of the AfD. Across all three hypotheses, variables linked to economic downturns only become significant after the 2013 election. This transition highlights that an ideological shift by the AfD towards overt RWP positions was necessary to

attract economically struggling regions. While one could argue that the 2013 results reflect the party's early disorganization, the association between AfD support and high-income municipalities in that election suggests that its initial support base was indeed distinct from the electorate it would later attract.

Furthermore, this paper clearly illustrates that economic factors are by no means the sole drivers of RWPP support. In every regression, the East–West divide remains a significant factor, suggesting that long-standing cultural and historical differences continue to shape political preferences. However, this divide does not operate entirely independently of economic conditions. While in 2021 stagnation was associated with AfD support across Germany, the effect was particularly strong in East German municipalities. This finding implies that cultural resentment is more potent when paired with regional economic stagnation, while it appears to be dampened in contexts of economic optimism. Thus, rather than being entirely separate or competing explanations, economic and cultural factors can interact in a meaningful way. This supports the literature that AfD support cannot be attributed to a single cause, but an interaction of different factors (Weisskircher 2020).

Nevertheless, several limitations to the paper must be acknowledged, calling for further complementary research. Firstly, the scale of analysis (Kreise and Kreisfreie Städte) might present certain challenges. Many of these administrative units encompass hundreds of thousands of residents, which may stretch the boundaries of what can meaningfully be considered a voter's "community." It is unclear to what extent individuals perceive and respond to economic developments at this scale. Thus, if the data becomes publicly available, utilizing smaller administrative regions such as "Gemeinden" might more accurately represent the in-group dynamic theorized in this paper and would thereby be a valuable avenue to further this line of research.

Secondly, while I argue that short-term unemployment change and income stagnation serve as reasonable proxies for local economic anxiety and fear of decline, we cannot definitively know whether these are the precise concerns motivating voters. This limitation reflects the ecological fallacy: individual-level motivations cannot be directly inferred from aggregate-level data. However, as this limitation is inherent to meso-level analysis, I contend that the theoretical framework remains sound, given the thesis's aim to explore the regional economic underpinnings of RWWP support. Still, if similar dynamics are observed in other contexts, complementing this analysis with individual-level data, particularly on voters' awareness of and identification with their in-group, would help substantiate the proposed mechanism more directly.

In sum, this paper contributes to the growing literature on the regional and economic roots of right-wing populism by revisiting a classic question in a new context: is it still the economy, stupid? The findings here suggest that the answer is, *partially* yes. Short-term economic downturns, particularly rising unemployment and income stagnation at the municipal level, appear to be linked with RWPP support, especially when such stagnation is acute and perceptible. However, this effect is not uniform across all contexts, nor can it be disentangled from cultural factors, such as the persistent East–West divide in Germany. The community-based, retrospective economic voting framework developed in this study offers a valuable lens through which to understand how voters interpret economic signals through their local social environment. Yet, the limitations of aggregate data and administrative scale also highlight the need for future studies to refine this approach: particularly through the use of smaller administrative units, which may better reflect the in-group dynamics theorized here. With the 2025 federal election being defined by economic stagnation, future research has a timely opportunity to test whether short-term economic decline will again serve as a catalyst for right-wing populist mobilization, or whether other forces will take center stage.

## APPENDIX

Variable Name	Description	Source
<b>AfD_13_pct</b>	AfD vote share 2013 (%) – NUTS-3	Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland
<b>AfD_17_pct</b>	AfD vote share 2017 (%) – NUTS-3	Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland
<b>AfD_21_pct</b>	AfD vote share 2021 (%) – NUTS-3	Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland
<b>unemploy_13</b>	Unemployment rate 2013 (%) – NUTS-3	Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder
<b>unemploy_17</b>	Unemployment rate 2017 (%) – NUTS-3	Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder
<b>unemploy_21</b>	Unemployment rate 2021 (%) – NUTS-3	Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder
<b>unemploy_change_10_13</b>	Change in unemployment 2010–2013 (difference between rates, NUTS-3)	Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder
<b>unemploy_change_14_17</b>	Change in unemployment 2014–2017 (difference between rates, NUTS-3)	Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder
<b>unemploy_change_18_21</b>	Change in unemployment 2018–2021 (difference between rates, NUTS-3)	Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder
<b>income_growth_10_13</b>	Average income per capita growth 2010–2013 (3-year average, NUTS-3)	Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland
<b>income_growth_14_17</b>	Average income per capita growth 2014–2017 (3-year average, NUTS-3)	Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland
<b>income_growth_18_21</b>	Average income per capita growth 2018–2021 (3-year average, NUTS-3)	Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland
<b>diff_industry_13</b>	Change in manufacturing share of economic output 2000–2013 (NUTS-3)	Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder
<b>diff_industry_17</b>	Change in manufacturing share of economic output 2000–2017 (NUTS-3)	Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder
<b>diff_industry_21</b>	Change in manufacturing share of economic output 2000–2021 (NUTS-3)	Statistische Ämter des Bundes und der Länder
<b>log_inhabitants_per_km2</b>	Log of population density (inhabitants per km <sup>2</sup> ) – based on 2011 Zensus, NUTS-3	Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland
<b>ICE_min</b>	Average minutes by car to nearest IC/ICE train station	Data provided by Greve, Fritsch, and Wyrwich (2023)
<b>income_group</b>	Income group based on municipal income percentile in a given election year	Statistisches Bundesamt Deutschland

*Appendix 1: Variable Overview with Descriptions and Data Sources*

Descriptive Statistics					
Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
AfD 13 pct	389	3.248	.739	1.619	5.514
AfD 17 pct	400	9.958	3.748	4.031	27.026
AfD 21 pct	400	8.5	4.242	2.395	24.326
unemploy change 1~13	391	-.789	.632	-3.1	.7
unemploy change 1~21	398	.337	.525	-1.2	2.4
unemploy change 1~17	397	-.917	.755	-4.2	1.1
unemploy 13	397	6.426	3.001	1.3	15.2
unemploy 17	398	5.339	2.413	1.5	14
unemploy 21	398	5.213	2.167	1.9	14.8
income growth 10 13	401	3.691	1.228	.257	11.57
income growth 14 17	401	3.935	.957	1.219	8.059
income growth 18 21	401	2.824	.951	-.73	6.02
diff industry 13	398	-3.161	2.585	-14.8	4.7
diff industry 17	398	-3.583	2.878	-14.6	5.6
diff industry 21	398	-3.705	3.214	-14.8	7.8
log inhabitants pe~2	400	5.641	1.11	3.555	8.489
ICE min	398	22.085	15.325	0	79

*Appendix 2: Descriptive Statistics of Variables used in Regressions*

VARIABLES	(1) 2013	(2) 2017	(3) 2021
unemploy_change	-0.0282 (0.0726)	1.449*** (0.385)	1.088*** (0.251)
c.unemploy_change#c.unemploy_change		0.392** (0.153)	
eastwestdummy	0.5901*** (0.1352)	7.555*** (0.643)	8.970*** (0.461)
log_inhabitants_per_km2	0.0887** (0.0429)	0.149 (0.139)	-0.535*** (0.145)
ICE_min	0.0006 (0.0031)	0.038*** (0.010)	0.044*** (0.010)
diff_industry	-0.0118 (0.0149)	0.071* (0.042)	0.014 (0.036)
Constant	2.5756*** (0.2917)	7.907*** (0.917)	8.541*** (0.893)
Observations	381	397	398
R-squared	0.0934	0.613	0.744

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Appendix 3: Rregression Results regarding Hypothesis 1: Change in Unemployment*

VARIABLES	(1) 2013	(2) 2017	(3) 2021
unemployment	-0.092*** (0.013)	-1.370*** (0.164)	-0.768*** (0.173)
c.unemployment#c.unemployment		0.082*** (0.012)	0.051*** (0.011)
eastwestdummy	1.105*** (0.123)	8.369*** (0.469)	8.902*** (0.510)
log_inhabitants_per_km2	0.180*** (0.044)	0.379*** (0.139)	-0.226 (0.145)
ICE_min	0.001 (0.003)	0.038*** (0.009)	0.045*** (0.009)
diff_industry	-0.025* (0.014)	0.010 (0.042)	-0.009 (0.039)
Constant	2.531*** (0.275)	9.968*** (0.922)	9.474*** (0.902)
Observations	387	398	398
R-squared	0.168	0.650	0.739

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Appendix 4: Regression Results regarding absolute Unemployment Levels*

VARIABLES	(1) 2013	(2) 2017 (Linear)	(3) 2017 (Quadratic)	(4) 2021
income_growth	-0.007 (0.028)	-0.060 (0.125)	-1.876*** (0.671)	-0.762*** (0.115)
c.income_growth#c.income_growth			0.225*** (0.080)	
eastwestdummy	0.605*** (0.114)	7.040*** (0.430)	7.109*** (0.431)	8.297*** (0.423)
ICE_min	0.001 (0.003)	0.034*** (0.010)	0.034*** (0.010)	0.039*** (0.010)
log_inhabitants_per_km2	0.089** (0.042)	0.056 (0.140)	0.052 (0.140)	-0.406*** (0.126)
diff_industry	-0.012 (0.015)	0.089** (0.043)	0.100** (0.043)	0.047 (0.036)
Constant	2.612*** (0.308)	8.135*** (1.068)	11.634*** (1.734)	10.699*** (0.955)
Observations	387	398	398	398
R-squared	0.096	0.604	0.613	0.760

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Appendix 5: Regression Results regarding Hypothesis 2: Income Growth*

VARIABLES	(1) 2013	(2) 2017	(3) 2021
income_growth	-0.021 (0.030)	-0.012 (0.121)	-0.492*** (0.096)
eastwestdummy = 1	0.259 (0.294)	8.416*** (2.219)	11.637*** (1.032)
0b.eastwestdummy#co.income_growth	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
1.eastwestdummy#c.income_growth	0.111 (0.084)	-0.352 (0.560)	-1.184*** (0.359)
ICE_min	0.001 (0.003)	0.034*** (0.010)	0.035*** (0.009)
log_inhabitants_per_km2	0.085** (0.042)	0.062 (0.139)	-0.424*** (0.123)
diff_industry	-0.011 (0.015)	0.081* (0.045)	0.012 (0.036)
Constant	2.699*** (0.319)	7.884*** (1.032)	9.984*** (0.902)
Observations	387	398	398
R-squared	0.100	0.605	0.771

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Appendix 6: Regression Results regarding Interaction between Income Growth and East- West Dummy Variable*

VARIABLES	(1) 2013	(3) 2017	(4) 2021
income_growth	-0.015 (0.044)	0.061 (0.240)	-0.698*** (0.235)
income_group = Middle-Income	0.079 (0.229)	0.262 (1.220)	-0.356 (0.889)
income_group = Upper_Middle-Income	0.436 (0.370)	0.144 (1.462)	0.427 (1.039)
income_group = High-Income	0.574* (0.317)	0.075 (1.349)	-0.726 (0.790)
1.Low-Income#c.income_growth	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
2.Middle-Income#c.income_growth	0.019 (0.059)	-0.111 (0.297)	-0.056 (0.298)
3. Upper_Middle-Income#c.income_growth	-0.019 (0.098)	-0.078 (0.383)	-0.128 (0.365)
4.High-Income#c.income_growth	-0.074 (0.074)	-0.226 (0.345)	-0.015 (0.277)
eastwestdummy	0.593*** (0.111)	7.016*** (0.439)	8.217*** (0.422)
ICE_min	0.001 (0.003)	0.033*** (0.010)	0.036*** (0.009)
log_inhabitants_per_km2	0.036 (0.044)	0.175 (0.152)	-0.337** (0.134)
diff_industry	-0.013 (0.015)	0.085* (0.044)	0.049 (0.036)
Constant	2.757*** (0.342)	7.263*** (1.330)	10.505*** (1.151)
Observations	387	398	398
R-squared	0.127	0.609	0.765

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

*Appendix 7: Regression Results regarding Hypothesis 3*

Pairwise correlations														
Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	(14)
(1) unemploy_chan~13	1.000													
(2) unemploy_chan~17	0.406 (0.000)	1.000												
(3) unemploy_chan~21	0.260 (0.000)	0.488 (0.000)	1.000											
(4) unemploy_13	-0.193 (0.000)	-0.732 (0.000)	-0.361 (0.000)	1.000										
(5) unemploy_17	-0.073 (0.000)	-0.528 (0.000)	-0.256 (0.000)	0.962 (0.000)	1.000									
(6) unemploy_21	-0.005 (0.925)	-0.423 (0.000)	-0.017 (0.729)	0.901 (0.000)	0.967 (0.000)	1.000								
(7) income_growth~13	0.004 (0.937)	0.372 (0.000)	0.209 (0.000)	-0.494 (0.000)	-0.473 (0.000)	-0.432 (0.000)	1.000							
(8) income_growth~17	-0.040 (0.436)	0.073 (0.146)	0.037 (0.462)	-0.331 (0.000)	-0.388 (0.000)	-0.387 (0.000)	0.269 (0.000)	1.000						
(9) income_growth~21	0.105 (0.037)	-0.033 (0.516)	-0.203 (0.000)	-0.037 (0.458)	-0.050 (0.316)	-0.105 (0.037)	-0.040 (0.423)	0.228 (0.000)	1.000					
(10) diff_industr~13	-0.145 (0.004)	0.003 (0.953)	-0.111 (0.027)	-0.166 (0.001)	-0.219 (0.000)	-0.260 (0.000)	0.145 (0.004)	0.156 (0.002)	0.015 (0.761)	1.000				
(11) diff_industr~17	-0.180 (0.000)	0.006 (0.913)	-0.124 (0.013)	-0.232 (0.000)	-0.298 (0.000)	-0.342 (0.000)	0.211 (0.000)	0.243 (0.000)	0.017 (0.729)	0.935 (0.000)	1.000			
(12) diff_industr~21	-0.166 (0.001)	-0.003 (0.950)	-0.175 (0.000)	-0.217 (0.000)	-0.283 (0.000)	-0.341 (0.000)	0.210 (0.000)	0.245 (0.000)	0.118 (0.018)	0.872 (0.000)	0.945 (0.000)	1.000		
(13) log_inhabitan~2	0.184 (0.000)	0.117 (0.019)	0.440 (0.000)	0.218 (0.000)	0.334 (0.000)	0.461 (0.000)	-0.035 (0.491)	-0.056 (0.267)	-0.017 (0.736)	-0.389 (0.000)	-0.412 (0.000)	-0.434 (0.000)	1.000	
(14) ICE_minl	-0.228 (0.000)	-0.060 (0.236)	-0.260 (0.000)	-0.139 (0.006)	-0.208 (0.000)	-0.289 (0.000)	-0.030 (0.548)	0.023 (0.644)	-0.050 (0.320)	0.267 (0.000)	0.286 (0.000)	-0.289 (0.000)	-0.614 (0.000)	1.000

Appendix 8: Pairwise correlation of Independent Variables

*H1:*

<b>Variance inflation factor</b>		
	VIF	1/VIF
log inhabitants pe~2	2.082	.48
ICE min	1.608	.622
unemploy change 1~21	1.544	.648
eastwestdummy	1.346	.743
diff industry 21	1.234	.81
Mean VIF	1.563	.

*H2:*

<b>Variance inflation factor</b>		
	VIF	1/VIF
log inhabitants pe~2	1.908	.524
ICE min	1.625	.616
diff industry 21	1.25	.8
eastwestdummy	1.083	.923
income growth 18 21	1.026	.975
Mean VIF	1.378	.

*H3*

<b>Variance inflation factor</b>		
	VIF	1/VIF
income growth 18 21	1.355	.738
1.eastwestdummy	9.796	.102
1.eastwestdummy#c~18	9.797	.102
log inhabitants pe~2	1.91	.524
ICE min	1.641	.609
diff industry 21	1.313	.761
Mean VIF	4.302	.

**Appendix 9: Multicollinearity Diagnostic (Variance Inflation Factors) for the 2021 election in H1, H2 and H3**

All VIF values remain well below conventional thresholds, indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern in any of the models. Additionally, all regression models presented in this thesis were estimated using robust standard errors to address potential heteroscedasticity and ensure the validity of statistical inference.

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