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## **Ideological voting in context: The case of Germany during the Merkel era**

Matthias Mader & Harald Schoen

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### **Abstract**

The chapter addresses whether the extent of ideological voting undertaken by German citizens varied in different media contexts in the period 2009 and 2015. Ideological voting is understood here as the choice of a political party on the basis of one's ideological identity. We argue that in times of low ideological conflict, these identities may or may not become psychologically salient – and thus enter the calculus of voting – depending on the presence of relevant cues in the public discourse. This hypothesis is tested using 30 GLES Online Tracking surveys and the complementary GLES Long-Term Media Agenda Analysis. Our analysis shows considerable variation in the extent of ideological voting, both among the politically involved and among the politically uninvolved. In contrast to theoretical expectations, however, ideological voting did not increase with the salience of retirement and health issues among the issue public of the elderly. The chapter closes with a discussion of the substantive, theoretical, and methodological implications of the findings.

### **Keywords**

Ideological voting, social identity, media context, political involvement, issue publics

## Introduction

A growing body of evidence suggests that the extent of ideological voting is context dependent. The ideological polarization of a party system has been identified as a crucial contextual feature (e.g., Dalton 2010; Lachat 2008; Stone, Buttice 2010; van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder 2005). Accordingly, polarization implies a chronic salience of ideology and ideological labels in political debates, which in turn induces ideological identities to be more accessible and easier to incorporate in the calculus of voting at the citizen level. Conversely, if parties do not use ideological labels, it will be unclear to citizens what these labels actually mean. More fundamentally, they may not even come to the citizens' minds. Ideological orientations will then be largely irrelevant for the formation of voting preferences. Considering the case of Germany, some have argued that at least since the election of Chancellor Angela Merkel in 2005 the major political parties (CDU/CSU and SPD) have become rather similar (Walter, Michelsen 2013). More generally, one might argue that the salience of ideological labels in the German political discourse has decreased. Thus, ideological voting might have abated in Germany in recent years.

While the meanings of ideological labels such as "left" and "right" are socially constructed and can therefore change in the long run, van der Eijk et al. (2005: 181) are probably correct in noting that "[o]ver brief intervals of time, these meanings are usually quite stable, and function as constraints on political thinking and imagination".<sup>1</sup> Hence, even in times of low salience of the left-right distinction, ideological identities should still matter for German citizens' voting intentions due to stereotypical beliefs acquired in the past. This implies that although the current chronic psychological accessibility of the left-right distinction may be low, suitable cues in the public discourse may still activate them (Chong, Druckman 2007; Scheufele, Tewksbury 2007). In short, in times of chronically low salience of the left-right divide, political events and ensuing media attention might be necessary to prime ideological thinking.

Considering voter heterogeneity, citizens vary in the number of associations between ideological labels and specific political issues they have internalized. This could imply that the level of ideological voting is higher among the politically involved in low salience situations, because they are able to make the connections between political context and ideological identities more easily than politically less involved citizens (Dalton 2010). From a

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<sup>1</sup> We are not aware that this hypothesis has actually been tested empirically with individual level data.

different theoretical perspective, different citizens have internalized different associations based on domain specific involvement, resulting in issue publics who feel strongly and think ideologically about only a small subset of the political agenda (Converse 1964; Kinder 1983; Krosnick 1990; Zaller 2012). Citizens might thus respond to political debates with increased ideological voting only if they are interested in the specific object which is being debated and care to reaffirm their sense of belonging to an ideological group. Alternatively, ideological voting might decrease in issue publics with increased media attention because not only ideological but also partisan identities are activated, with the latter crowding out the relevance of the former (Berglund et al. 2005).

The purpose of this chapter is to study the veracity of these claims using data from Germany for the period 2009 to 2015. Online surveys conducted on behalf of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) are employed to gauge the relevance of ideological identities on vote choice and its variability at 30 points in time during this period both in the general public and in subgroups differing by political involvement. This allows us to shed light on the context dependency of ideological voting within a medium time frame, in which the context can vary in terms of the specific media agenda but not in terms of the overall long-term level of ideological polarization of the party system. Furthermore, the GLES Long-Term Media Analysis is used to study the effects of the media context on ideological voting statistically, relying on information from 23 points in time between 2010 and 2015. Assuming that the elderly are especially concerned about the pension and health care systems, this subpopulation is analysed to test the claims regarding issue publics. The following section describes the theoretical approach to studying ideological voting in context. Afterwards, we derive specific hypotheses about ideological voting of German citizens in the recent past. The description of the survey and media content data is followed by the discussion of the results from our empirical analyses of these data. The chapter closes with discussing implications as well as limitations of the present study and points out possible avenues for future research.

### **Ideological voting in different contexts**

We take a group-centred approach to the question of ideological voting. Given citizens' highly amorphous and idiosyncratic ideas about the meaning of left and right, it seems unlikely that ideology, in the sense of left-right orientations, forms the basis of some kind of cognitively demanding, rational proximity voting in the general public. Consequently, ideology is treated here foremost as the identification with the labels "left" and "right", and

only secondly as a summary of issue positions (Conover, Feldman 1981: 623; Devine 2015: 510; Levitin, Miller 1979: 751; Neundorf 2011: 233; Popp, Rudolph 2011: 809-10). This approach situates ideological voting within the domain of the self-categorization theory, which describes “how the process of self-categorization transforms the self-conception to conform to and express group-defining attributes” (Hogg 2005: 207). This theoretical perspective is well-suited to explain how ideological identities may exert varying effects on voting in different informational contexts.

A social identity can be understood as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel 1978: 63). This definition includes three elements: the cognitive awareness that one is part of a group, the emotional investment in the membership, and the evaluation of the membership in terms of goodness or badness (Ellemers et al. 1999: 323). A second dimension of social identity comprises cognitive elements about the meaning of this group membership. Applied to the relationship of a citizen to ideological labels, the *affective* dimension of an ideological identity thus consists of a subjectively important tie to “the left” or “the right” or alternative labels.<sup>2</sup> As for the ideological *content* dimension, there seem to be at least two sub-dimensions covering social/moral and economic/welfare aspects (e.g. Conover 1984; Feldman, Johnston 2014; Kriesi et al. 2006). While many studies have shown this two-dimensional description to be the best approximation of the content dimension in Western European countries, considerable heterogeneity seems to persist within each ideological group both at a given point in time as well as across space (e.g., Fuchs, Klingemann 1989; Jagodzinski, Kühnel 1994; Neundorf 2011; Trüdinger, Bollow 2011). Thus, it is empirically problematic to assume that the affective tie to an ideological label is accompanied by a fixed set of policy preferences among the general public.

Ideological identities can influence vote choice by inducing citizens to choose a party they view as ideologically similar to themselves. Doing so serves various universal psychological needs (Fiske 2004; Hogg 2000; Jost, Frederico, and Napier 2009). In order to employ this mode of decision making, citizens must have internalized ideological identities themselves

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<sup>2</sup> In the German context, the ideological label “right” has strong negative connotations due to the right-wing extremist Nazi past. The (moderate) right in Germany thus avoids the term “right” and uses other labels such as “bürgerlich” (~ bourgeois) instead. The implications of this imbalanced meaning and use of the left-right distinction are not well understood.

and hold beliefs about the ideological positions of the political parties.<sup>3</sup> Since everybody possesses multiple social identities, it is crucial to ask under which circumstances the ideological identity becomes salient. Following Oakes, by a salient identity we mean one “which is *functioning psychologically* to increase the influence of one’s membership in that group on perception and behaviour” (Oakes 1987: 118; emphasis in the original). One of these influences has been studied extensively in research concerned with the impact of communication on attitudes. Accordingly, the psychological salience of a mental representation depends, inter alia, on external stimuli that refer either to this representation directly or to idea elements which are associated with it in long-term memory (e.g. Chong, Druckman 2007; Nelson, Kinder 1996; Sniderman, Theriault 2004). Applied to our case, this means that elite communication which draws on the ideological labels “left” and “right” explicitly or covers elements closely connected to these labels can induce ideological identities to become psychologically salient.

In line with these theoretical considerations, current research suggests that party polarization, understood as the divergence of parties’ policy positions, represents the most important contextual determinant of ideological voting (e.g. Dalton 2010: 111; Ensley 2007: 106; Lachat 2008: 688; van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder 2005: 177). This is caused by the fact that parties clash more fiercely over issues and cast debates more clearly and directly in left-right terms. Ideological concepts then become more accessible and easier to use in citizens’ calculus of voting, as they are transmitted via an increased salience of the ideological labels in media coverage of the political discourse. Beyond this general mechanism describing how polarization and, more proximate, media salience of ideological labels influence the level of ideological voting, various strands of research suggest that context dependency should vary between individuals. First and foremost, political involvement, i.e., interest and knowledge, enhances the frequency and recency of exposure to politically relevant information, which is usually received via the media. Therefore, the likelihood that media content influences individual level processes simply because the amount of information reaching the politically involved is higher than the amount reaching the politically less involved. Furthermore, politically involved citizens exhibit belief systems which are larger and more tightly

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<sup>3</sup> How these beliefs come about, whether they are policy-related or in some other way connected to reality is not relevant here. As long as citizens have a subjective notion of the ideological position of the parties, ideological voting in the sense used here can take place.

organized. This increases the number of associations a given media contribution activates, which may also increase the probability of media effects (Druckman, Nelson 2003).<sup>4</sup>

The literature is divided regarding the meaning of these issues for the three-way interaction of the salience of ideological labels in the media, political involvement, and ideological voting. Some argue that when relevant media coverage increases, citizens with high political involvement will be more likely to understand the ideological stakes and try harder to make ideologically consistent electoral decisions (Lachat 2008: 688). This should lead to more ideological voting among the politically involved but not (or less so) among the politically uninvolved. Others expect ideologically relevant media content to make it easier for the politically uninvolved to vote ideologically, because relevant cues are more frequent and easier to detect (Dalton 2010: 116). In other words, ideological identities are assumed to be chronically accessible among the politically aware irrespective of the informational context, and that some level of ideological discourse is needed so that these identities become relevant among the politically uninvolved as well (Dalton 2010: 116; Ensley 2007: 113; Lachat 2008: 695).<sup>5</sup>

One reason for the mixed empirical evidence regarding the role of political involvement might stem from the different meanings citizens associate with ideological labels. Even the politically involved are unlikely to feel equally passionate about all issues on the national agenda. Yet if they care more for some issues than for others, the constraints between ideological label and the issues likely vary as well. This line of reasoning suggests that only those who feel passionately about a given policy – and thus constitute an issue public (Converse 1964; Krosnick 1990; Zaller 2012) – react more sensibly to external stimuli. Issue publics care for a specific topic and thus have incorporated associations between this topic and their ideological identities (e.g. Weber, Saris 2015). Increased media attention should thus

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<sup>4</sup> Another psychological disposition which has been shown to moderate the impact of external information on citizens' decision making is party identification (e.g., Zaller 1992). The interpretation, evaluation, and storage of media information are biased among identifiers in a way to fit to the defining attributes of the party group (e.g., Taber, Lodge 2006). Consequently, information which might be relevant for activating ideological identities is likely to be evaluated in the light of this other, concerning vote choice probably more important, political identity. It is beyond the scope of this article to disentangle the intricate relationship between ideological and partisan identities. Instead, we understand ideological voting in a limited way here, i.e., as the ideological identity influencing the formation of voting intentions in and of itself. Put in a slightly different way, we consider only the direct effects of ideological identity.

<sup>5</sup> Note that Lachat (2008: 688) and Ensley (2007: 105) understand ideological voting as rational proximity voting. They believe that citizens use heuristics as the default mode of decision making and switch to the more systematic mode of ideological voting once the stakes of the election, i.e., ideological polarization, increase. Consequently, they assume that ideological voting is relatively rare. Dalton, in contrast, seems to have a broader definition of ideological voting in mind when pointing to the ideological continuum as a „political identity and policy orientation that helps individuals make political choices“ (Dalton 2010: 106). From this perspective, ideological voting is a heuristic device which is used rather pervasively in citizens' calculi of voting.

lead to especially strong ideological voting among this segment of the public. On the other hand, increased media attention for an issue usually means increased coverage of the partisan discourse over this issue. Especially in the issue public this should lead to the activation of partisan identities, which might drown out considerations based on ideological identities (e.g., Berglund et al. 2005). A rivalling causal mechanism leading to the same observational hypothesis would be that the perceived stakes rise with media attention, shifting the calculus of voting from expressive and group-centric considerations to utility maximizing proximity voting (Lachat 2008).

-- Figure 1 about here --

Figure 1 translates these theoretical considerations into a simple causal model consisting of three elements. Vote choice is influenced by ideological identities. The size of this influence is moderated by media content, as the latter can influence the psychological salience of ideological identities when voting intentions are formed. Yet this moderation is itself moderated by political involvement, because citizens differ with respect to the amount of external information received and how much they care about it.<sup>6</sup>

## **Hypotheses**

We propose two sets of hypotheses. The first set is concerned with observable implications which are testable by drawing only on micro level evidence. They refer to the variability of ideological voting effects in the German public. A second set refers to consequences of the two-level interactions which can be addressed by simultaneously analysing information from both levels.

During the time period under consideration, most German citizens considered the Left Party (*Die Linke*), the Green Party (*Bündnis 90/Die Grünen*), and the Social Democratic Party (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, SPD*) as parties of the left to be located on the left-hand side of the left-right dimension, while the Christian Democratic parties (*Christlich*

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<sup>6</sup> Naturally, this model does not include all factors which play a role in the calculus of voting. E.g., party identification influences voting behaviour directly and indirectly via more proximate phenomena such as candidate and issue orientations, and is itself a likely moderating factor of the impact of the media context on ideological voting.

*Demokratische/Soziale Union, CDU/CSU*) were considered right to be located on the right-hand side (e.g., Kurella, Pappi 2015: 95).<sup>7</sup> Against this backdrop, two general micro-level hypotheses concerning the average effects of ideological identities can be proposed: Identification with the left should increase the probability to vote for the Left Party, the Green Party, and the SPD while it should decrease the probability to vote for the CDU/CSU. Identification with the right should decrease the probability to vote for the Left Party, the Green Party, and the SPD while it increases the probability to vote for the CDU/CSU (H1a). Given citizens' perceptions of the SPD having moved to the middle of the left-right continuum (Neundorf 2011: 238), ideological identities should be less decisive for voting intentions concerning this party. In contrast, ideological identity should be especially important with regard to the Left Party. Thus, we expect the Left Party to be more successful than the SPD in garnering support on the left side of the political spectrum (H1b). No analogous hypothesis can be proposed for the right wing parties, since citizens did not perceive the CDU/CSU as having converged on the centre the middle as clearly as in the case of the SPD. In the time period under consideration, furthermore, there was no clear alternative located to the right of the CDU/CSU in the political spectrum.<sup>8</sup>

The second hypothesis concerns the over-time variability of ideological voting. As we have argued above, we assume that ideological salience has been rather low in the public discourse, resulting in a low chronic accessibility of the corresponding identities. In such a situation, contextual cues might be necessary to activate these identities, making ideological voting highly dependent on the informational context of the day. We thus expect considerable short-term variability in effect of ideological identity on voting intention (H2).

One perspective on the moderating impact of political involvement suggests that the level of ideological voting should be stable among the politically involved irrespective of the informational context because identities are always accessible. Another perspective suggests that there should be greater variability in this subgroup because they react more sensibly to the context and realize when the ideological stakes are especially high. At the same time, ideological voting among the politically uninvolved might be influenced by the availability of ideological cues because at times when many cues are available even the less involved are

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<sup>7</sup> We do not consider the FDP here, which would be classified as a party of the centre right, because the party lost political significance in the course of the 2009-2013 legislative term (Mader 2014). The number of participants in the GLES Online Trackings who indicated a voting intention for the FDP was so low that methodological problems would arise if these responses would be subjected to multivariate analyses.

<sup>8</sup> The AfD was founded in 2013 and represents such an alternative. Yet insufficient numbers of observations prohibit an inclusion of the AfD in the analysis.



able to draw on ideological identities. Yet there might also be stability because citizens with low political involvement do not perceive their political surrounding). In light of these rivalling hypotheses, we will not propose an expectation about differences in the extent of ideological voting depending on political involvement.

Turning to the hypotheses about the micro-macro interactions, we can propose but not test the most obvious hypothesis, namely that the presence of a clear left-right distinction in public discourse interacts with the pervasiveness of ideological voting. Yet, the available media data do not allow measuring this salience, hence the hypothesis is not testable here. It is, however, possible to investigate the conditional hypothesis that older citizens will rely more heavily on their ideological identities when pension and health issues are salient in the public discourse (H3). The relevance of pensions and health care for older citizens makes it more likely that members of this specific subgroup will follow these issues more closely and are thus able to relate them to the abstract left-right continuum. No such pattern should emerge among younger citizens. A rivalling mechanism which might grade such a difference between the young and the old is the greater salience of partisan cues which should accompany any increase in the media attention to a given topic. In fact, it seems likely that it is conflict among political actors about an issue which gives rise to an increase in media attention. Pervasiveness of partisan cues might prime partisan identities, especially in issue publics, and thereby drown out increases in the accessibility of ideological identities. We will try to take account of this possibility with a suitable statistical modelling strategy, which will be discussed after a description of data and measures in the next section.

### **Data, measures, and methods**

The following empirical analyses draw on data from two components of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES). To study the micro-level associations between ideological identity and voting intention, the first 30 surveys of the Long-Term Online Tracking are used, which cover a time period beginning in April, 2009, and ending in December, 2015. Each wave consists of a cross-sectional online survey of an online-recruited panel, with about 1000 interviews completed every wave. In 23 of these 30 waves, quantitative media content analyses of the four weeks before each of the Tracking waves

(GLES Long-Term Media Agenda Analysis) have been conducted. This subset of 23 cases covers the time period between December 2009 and December 2015.<sup>9</sup>

To operationalize the central dependent and independent micro-level variables, namely voting intention and ideological identity, we employed standard survey items. Voting intention in the next German federal election was measured in all surveys by displaying a ballot on the screen, with the instruction for respondents to indicate which party they were planning to vote for in the next federal election. To capture respondents' ideological identities, we use their self-placement on an 11-point scale from "left" to "right". We treat this self-placement both as the expression of a respondent's preferred ideological label as well as of the intensity of her preference, which parallels Rabinowitz and Macdonald's (1989: 95) interpretation of issue questions in direction-intensity terms. This is not an optimal measure of citizens' ideological identities, as it might also capture extremity with regard to content (Devine 2015). Furthermore, the question format assumes a bipolar conceptualization of ideology and forces this conceptualization on the respondents. But as discussed above, identification with an ideological label is conceptually unipolar and does not necessarily imply anything about the relationship towards the other label (Conover, Feldman 1984). This problem can be ameliorated by the creation of separate indicators for the intensity of affect for the labels "Left" and "Right", respectively: In the variable "Left ID", respondents who placed themselves on the right side of the continuum or at the midpoint are assigned the value "0". Ascending values are assigned to the respondents on the left side of the spectrum, depending on how close they placed themselves to the label "Left". The second variable, "Right ID", is constructed as a mirror image. The inclusion of both variables in our regression models eases the bipolarity assumption, since separate coefficients are estimated for left and right identities, which in turn indicate differences vis-à-vis respondents with no ideological identity (for a similar approach see, e.g., Popp, Rudolph 2011: 813).<sup>10</sup>

To test the third hypothesis about the context dependency of ideological voting in issue publics, we have to measure the salience of issues and identify corresponding issue publics. The GLES Long-Term Media Analysis offers the relevant information concerning the media context. News articles were automatically coded into broad issue categories using a dictionary

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<sup>9</sup> An overview over the surveys used here is given in Table A1 in Online Supplement. For detailed additional information about the data see Rattinger et al. (2014a,2014b) and the GLES homepage (<http://gles.eu>).

<sup>10</sup> By treating only respondents located at the mid-point of the scale as having no ideological identity, we might underestimate the size of this group. That is because a self-placement immediately on the left or right from the mid-point might also be an expression of some mild issue or partisan preference. In this case, we are likely to underestimate the real extent of ideological voting. Additional analyses, however, reveal no substantive differences in effect size when a larger middle category is chosen.

of key words deemed relevant for each category (Rattinger et al. 2014a). To identify issue publics, individual-level data on issue-specific involvement would be necessary. Yet no such information is routinely measured in the surveys. This problem can be sidestepped by the reversion to socio-demographic variables as indicators of issue publics. This means that we have to assume that a given socio-demographic characteristic and involvement in a specific issue area are closely correlated. We believe that probably this correlation is especially high between age and interest in pension and retirement systems. Due to better health and a longer working period, younger citizens should feel less passionate about these topics, while the elderly should be highly interested in these dimensions of the welfare state.<sup>11</sup>

Health and retirement are two issues which have not been clearly ideologically connoted in the German political discourse during the period under consideration. As far as citizens outside the issue public are concerned, this feature makes it easy to test the issue public hypothesis – it is especially unlikely that health and retirement issues are closely connected to the ideological identities of citizens who do not care about them. Thus, due to the missing association, this part of the public should be unable to engage in ideological voting irrespective of media salience. At the same time, this argument can be forwarded for the issue public as well, as even members of the issue public will have a harder time of deriving voting intentions from ideological identities on the basis of political discourse about these issues. Still, this difficulty makes age and retirement a hard case to test the issue public hypothesis on.

Finally, there is some variance in the media salience of health and retirement issues, which obviously is a necessary condition for detecting context-dependent ideological voting.<sup>12</sup> These features make the retirement and health topic suitable (but not perfect) for testing the hypothesis that ideological voting becomes more important in issue publics when the respective issue is covered by the media.

Where statistical modelling issues are concerned, party identification is controlled for in all analyses because it represents a confounding factor for the causal mechanism we want to

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<sup>11</sup> Operationally, we treat citizens above 50 years of age as “elderly“. This coding decision is somewhat arbitrary (and the term “elderly” perhaps premature for some members of this group), but the general assumption that citizens in their sixth decade of life increasingly are interested in health and retirement issues seems reasonable. In addition, alternative operationalisations do not alter the substantive conclusions.

<sup>12</sup> The coverage of the topic varies between one and seven percent of the articles coded, with a median of three. The distribution is displayed in

isolate in this paper.<sup>13</sup> As was described in the theoretical section, ideological voting is understood as voting on the basis of one's ideological identity, i.e., an affective bond to the labels "left" or "right", which creates a we-feeling among individuals sharing this bond and thereby triggers specific group processes. Citizens may also have developed partisan identities, and there may be complex feedback effects of ideological and partisan identities. Nonetheless, we are interested in the distinct, direct effect of ideological identities, which is why we choose the conservative strategy of controlling for party identities.

The empirical section below starts with dummy variable models, a common modelling approach to pooled cross-sectional data (Steenbergen, Jones 2002: 220). Multiple regression analyses are conducted that include dummy variables which indicate the subgroups (i.e. time points/samples). We further include interaction terms between the dummy variables and the ideological identity indicators to uncover heterogeneity in ideological voting (Steenbergen, Jones 2002: 220). Finally, multilevel mixed-effects regressions (Rabe-Hesketh, Skrondal 2008: 251) are used to address the impact of media issue salience on ideological voting directly. Specifically, cross-level interactions between the coverage of health/retirement issues and ideological identities are specified to study whether variation in the media salience of these issues explains the variability of ideological voting. It should be noted, however, that the low number of macro level observations at our disposal ( $N = 23$ ) makes the use of multilevel techniques somewhat problematic (Stegmueller 2013). Given this complication, the best approach is to treat the results from the multilevel analysis as a plausibility probe, to interpret them only cautiously, and to keep in mind that precision of estimation may be even lower than indicated by the standard errors.

## **Results**

The results of the empirical analysis are reported in three steps. First, we focus on the estimated effects of ideological identities on voting intentions at all 30 points in time for which we have comparable cross-sectional data (GLES Online Trackings, T1-T30). This first step will yield an impression of the level of variability of the relevance of ideological voting between 2009 and 2015. In a second step, we report results for subgroups with high and low levels of political involvement in order to address whether the patterns found in the first step hold once voter heterogeneity is accounted for. Finally, we address the question whether this

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<sup>13</sup> Party identification is measured with the standard item developed for this purpose (Falter, Schoen, and Caballero 2000): Respondents were asked whether they lean towards a political party for an extended period of time, although they might vote for a different party now and then, and if so, which party.

(micro-level) variability can partly be explained by shifts in the magnitude of ideological voting in issue publics based on the differing (macro-level) salience of the respective issues. When this chapter was written, media data were available for 23 of the 30 Online Trackings, limiting this part of the analysis to a subset of the observations used in the first steps (i.e., to Trackings 8-30).

For the first step described in the preceding paragraph we calculated a series of binary logistic regression models of intended vote choice for each party and time point. The results, depicted in Figure 2, reveal the patterns expected in the hypotheses H1a and H1b. A strong identification with the left increases the probability of voting for a left party while reducing the probability of voting for a party located on the right-hand side of the political spectrum. However, considerable variability in effect sizes without clearly discernible trends emerges as well, suggesting that short-term contextual features were important determinants of ideological voting. Furthermore, the figure shows an overall low mean of effect size. Citizens with strong ideological identities (i.e., citizens who placed themselves at one of the end-points of the left-right scale) rarely differ in their probability to vote for a party from those without any ideological identity (i.e., citizens who placed themselves at the mid-point of the scale) by more than twenty percentage points. This pattern is especially clear for positive effects of ideological identities. Taking estimation uncertainty into account often makes it impossible to conclude that ideological considerations played any role at all in making an electoral intention more likely. These findings support the general hypothesis of low ideological salience during the Merkel era.<sup>14</sup>

-- Figure 2 about here --

Beyond the variability in (small) effect sizes, several party-specific patterns of ideological voting can be identified. Citizens who considered themselves as politically left were consistently more likely to voice a voting intention for the Left Party, while no such consistent effects emerge with regard to the SPD and the Green Party (H1c). Overall, citizens with a left identity were clearly favouring the Left Party over the SPD and the Green Party, a

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<sup>14</sup> Note again that, since we control for party identities, we study only direct effects of ideological identities. Given the intricate causal relationship between these concepts, this strategy yields conservative answers to the question of total effects. It is beyond both the scope of this paper and the leverage of the cross-sectional data employed here to disentangle the relationship between these explanatory factors.

pattern which fits nicely with the political convergence of the SPD and the Green party on the center of the ideological spectrum. While both parties have tried to compete for the political middle, only the Left Party has consistently used the ideological terms to advertise its position. As a consequence, the Left party was (not only by name) the most obvious choice for citizens who identified with the left.

Ideological voting varied most in the case of the CDU/CSU. There are multiple instances in which the influence of ideological identities changed from having a large impact to having none at all. This pattern was most notable in March 2011, when the probability of indicating a vote choice favouring the CDU/CSU was 24 [CI95: 41, 8] percentage points lower among citizens with a left identity compared to citizens with no partisan identity, while it was 8 [CI95: 1, 15] points higher among citizens with a right identity than among citizens with no partisan identity. In contrast, neither identity had an impact on intended vote choice immediately before or after March 211. This suggests that the relevance of ideological identities was strongly driven by the politics of the day.<sup>15</sup> These results might be explained by the occurrence of the Fukushima nuclear disaster, which happened during the field time of the March 2011 survey (Tracking 13). In that case the ensuing German domestic debate over the symbolic issue of a nuclear phase-out could have been responsible for the observed spike in ideologically driven voting intentions (see Meyer and Schoen (2015) on this issue).

Another reason for the greater variability of ideological effects concerning CDU/CSU voting intentions might be that it was the only relevant conservative party. Media coverage clearly focused on partisan actors from this party and, more generally, from the right (conservative) political spectrum.<sup>16</sup> The CDU/CSU thus was the centre of gravity around which the political discourse revolved. The fact that multiple parties of the left competed for the attention of citizens without being able to distinguish themselves might have been another reason for the low impact of ideological identities on voting intentions for the left parties.

-- Figure 3 about here --

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<sup>15</sup> This is not to say that there was no underlying long-term trend. The time period we consider here might merely be too short to detect it. As we have argued throughout this paper, it might be that the Merkel era should be viewed as an especially “un-ideological” period, with the CDU/CSU becoming more liberal both economically and socially and the SPD struggling to come to terms with the market-oriented welfare reforms it administered at the beginning of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>16</sup> The development of media coverage of partisan actors in the time period under consideration is documented in the online supplement (see Figure A1).

These results for the general public may obscure stability in ideological voting among the politically involved. One of the theoretical perspectives we reviewed above suggests that citizens who follow politics closely should be able to translate their ideological identities into electoral preferences at any point in time, irrespective of the salience of the left-right distinction. Yet Figure 3 shows that this is not the case. The top panel shows the effect of a left political identity on vote choice for the CDU/CSU separately for the politically involved and the politically uninvolved.<sup>17</sup> The bottom panel shows the same comparison for voters identifying with the political right. No systematic difference between the involved and uninvolved respondents catches the eye immediately. The relevance of ideological considerations is fluctuating in both subgroups. While there does seem to be a larger and more stable negative effect of having a left identity on CDU/CSU vote choice among the politically involved, the high uncertainty in the point estimates of this effects renders judgement difficult. Overall, these results yield little evidence for the hypothesis predicting large general differences in ideological voting based on political involvement (H2). A similar conclusion can be drawn from the analogous analysis of voting intentions for the SPD, the Green Party, and the Left Party, the results of which are documented in the online supplement.

What remains to be investigated, then, is the possibility of issue publics reacting sensitively to the salience of “their” issues. As explained above we test this hypothesis for the issue public of the elderly, who should be specifically interested in issues regarding retirement and health. We focus on voting intentions for the CDU/CSU, since the party possesses the clearest policy profile in this area. We therefore expect the differences between issue public and “normal” public to be especially strong in the calculus of voting for this party. As for the statistical approach, two types of multilevel models are of substantive interest. One is a model with random intercepts and random slopes (RI/RS) for the ideological identity variable; the other is a model with cross-level interactions (CLI) between ideological identity and the media content variable.<sup>18</sup> The former reproduces the variability of the coefficients we found in the cross-sectional analysis and sets up a reference point for comparison with the latter. A better model fit of the CLI model compared to the RI/RS model can be interpreted as (indirect) evidence that the respective contextual feature is a moderator of the impact of ideological

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<sup>17</sup> Political interest was measured on a five-point scale. Respondents who reported to be somewhat or very interested in politics represent the high-involvement group, while respondents indicating very low, low, or mid-level interest were assigned to the low-involvement group.

<sup>18</sup> To estimate robust coefficients, the separate measures for left and right ideologies had to be collapsed to a one-dimensional indicator where low values indicate strong left identities and high values indicate strong right identities. The macro-level variable was centred at its grand mean (Enders, Tofighi 2007: 135), the individual level predictor “Ideological identity” at the cluster-specific mean (Enders, Tofighi 2007: 128).

voting. The cross-level interactions are the parameters we are especially interested in as they speak directly to the question whether the media coverage of retirement and health issues influenced the extent of ideological voting.

-- Table 1 about here --

In Table 1, the results for the models with cross-level interactions for the salience of retirement and health issues are reported in the second and fourth column for the young and the elderly, respectively. Based on a comparison of global model fits, there is little evidence that ideological voting among the older segment of the populace varies with health and retirement issues. The log-likelihood value is minimally higher for the interaction model (CLI) than for the baseline model (RI/RS) in the subgroup of the young (-4520 vs. -4516), while they are the same in both models for the elderly (-1989). Bayes' criterion suggests that the interaction model fits the data worse in both subgroups. Turning to the estimated coefficients, we find a statistically insignificant interaction term between the salience of retirement and health issues and possessing a right ideological identity in both subgroups (older citizens:  $b = -0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ; younger citizens:  $b = 0.14$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ). Thus, based on this criterion, the extent of ideological voting did not vary with the salience of this topic, irrespective whether the citizens (presumably) cared about the issue area or not.

-- Figure 4 about here --

Plotting the effects yields additional insights. Although the interaction terms are not statistically significant, it is nonetheless possible to identify differences in ideological voting for the CDU/CSU between the young and the elderly depending on the salience of health and retirement issues. Namely The plot shows that ideological identities mattered less among the young than among the elderly in a context of low media salience of health and retirement issues. In fact, the young do not seem to have formed voting intentions for the CDU/CSU on ideological grounds when the salience of these issues was very low. In a media context characterized by mid-level and high salience of these issues, however, the marginal effects among the younger and older citizens were indistinguishable. These findings lend weak



evidence to the conjecture that less involved citizens are only able to vote ideologically if some cues on the topic are available in public discourse which connect the ideological identity and a given issue (Dalton 2010). However, there is no clear difference between younger and older citizens in the context sensitivity of ideological voting for the other parties.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, we have found substantial variability of ideological voting during the short time frame studied here. In many instances, effect sizes were found to shift by twenty percentage points and more between two subsequent data points. This finding holds for citizens with high and low levels of political involvement. Since the meaning citizens associate with the ideological labels “left” and “right” is unlikely to change quickly and the samples of the cross-sectional surveys were drawn from the same population, the most likely explanation for this variability are contextual effects which influenced the salience of the ideological identities. A feature which can – and did – change quickly from one point in time to the next is the media salience of topics, and we have found (some) evidence that the extent of ideological voting depended on this contextual feature.

## **Discussion**

In this article we have studied whether the relevance of ideological identities for German citizens’ calculus of voting varied across time and across contexts. As the cross-sectional results have shown, during the whole time period under consideration the relevance of ideological considerations varied strongly around an overall relatively low mean. This pattern should be interpreted as evidence for the low chronic psychological salience of ideological identities during the Merkel era. If identities were chronically salient, they would exert a stable and substantial effect on voting intentions. Furthermore, we found little evidence of stable differences in the level of ideological voting depending on the level of political involvement. It seems likely that differences based on this feature need a more careful contextualization than we were able to employ. Some situations might trigger involvement-based differences in ideological voting, while others grade them. The same is likely to hold for the dynamic which leads to such similarities and differences, i.e., for the direction of adjustment. In some contexts, the politically involved might move towards the less involved and become more like them, in other contexts it might be the other way around.

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<sup>19</sup> For results analogous to those in Figure 3, see Figures A5 through A7 in the online supplement.

Two specific features of this contribution merit discussion. First, we focused on the variability of ideological voting within a single country during a relatively short time frame. In contrast, previous research on the context dependency of ideological voting has focused on longer time periods or compared different countries (e.g., Dalton 2010, Lachat, 2008; van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder 2005). The finding that ideological polarization and, in turn, the prevalence ideological cues are important driver of ideological voting was used here to broadly characterize a shorter time frame. Germany in the Merkel era is characterized by low overall ideological polarization and, in turn, low salience of ideological labels in the public discourse. Against this backdrop, we derived hypotheses about a contextual feature which long-term or comparative studies (must) assume to be stable, i.e. the short-term media agenda. Studying shorter time frames in more detail seems to be a necessary addition to long-term longitudinal and cross-national research on the context dependency of ideological voting.

Second, we dissected the specific effects of ideological identities by controlling for party identifications (see also Lachat 2008). Our results indicate that this might be necessary in order to understand the context dependency of ideological voting in a more general sense, even if the research interest does not lie in isolating a specific effect of ideological identities vis-à-vis other dispositions. Different features of a situation might have countervailing implications for citizens' calculus of voting, operating via different and potentially countervailing mechanisms – e.g., by simultaneously activating ideological and partisan identities.

Several methodological issues limit the reliability of our findings. The operationalization of the ideological identities and the issue publics on the individual level as well as the available measures of the media content were suboptimal. In each case, the configuration of the data prohibited a satisfactory measurement of the relevant concepts. If we measured multi-dimensional concepts such as ideological and partisan identities using multiple-item instruments, we would be able to trace the intricate effects of these complex concepts. Promising efforts are being made in this direction (Devine 2015; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015), but current research has to be satisfied with the amorphous information obtained from the ideological self-placement measure. Additionally, unless issue attitudes are incorporated routinely into public opinion surveys, the analysis of stability and change of identities' content dimensions will remain beyond our grasp. Furthermore, it has proven extremely difficult to operationalize the intensity of the ideological discourse with the existing media data. Thus, our characterization of the Merkel

era as one in which the salience of ideology has been low on average has in fact the status of an assumption – which may, of course, be wrong. Finally, the low number of level II observations in the multi-level analysis lowers the robustness of these findings, especially concerning the cross-level interactions (Stegmueller 2013). Luckily, the data collection efforts of the media context in the GLES Long-Term Media Agenda Analysis continue and promise to solve or at least attenuate this problem for analyses of the German context in the foreseeable future.

Considering the shortcomings of our research, two avenues for further research appear to be especially suitable to support, differentiate, or correct the findings presented in this place. Additional observations and less noisy and more fine-grained measures for the media context could provide more information about the actual content of political debates. Multilevel analysis of the kind we reported here would illuminate the general patterns of macro-level variation in media content and micro-level variation in ideological voting. The possibility to account for other topics and their corresponding issue publics is bound to shed additional light on the nexus of the political agenda, citizens' passions for different issues, and the psychological salience of ideological identities. Additionally, research which focuses on shorter time periods covering decisive shifts in media coverage and which employs panel data. Additionally, research employing panel data and focusing on shorter time periods covering decisive shifts in media coverage also seems promising. Such a set-up would allow tracing intra-individual shifts in the relevance of ideological voting.

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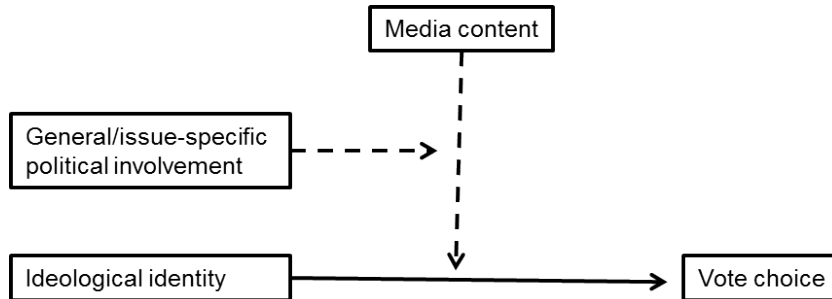
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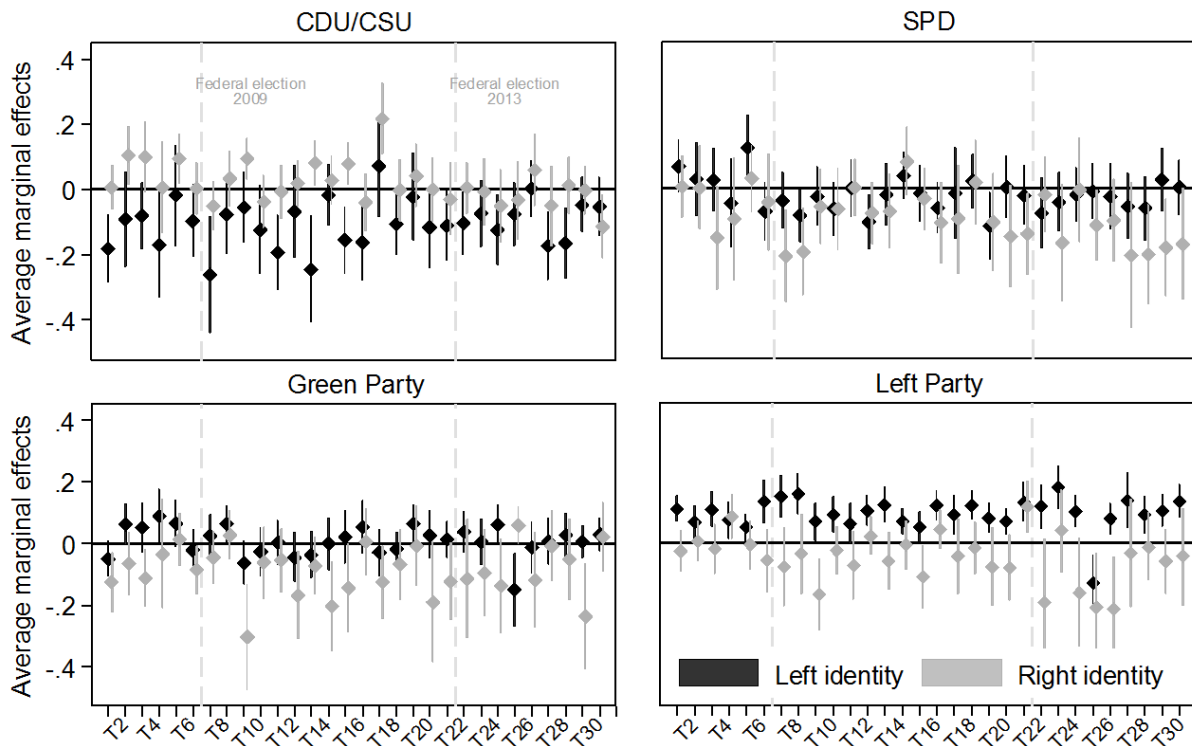
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**Figures and tables, ordered as they appear in the text**

**Figure 1: A causal model of the effect of the media content on ideological voting**

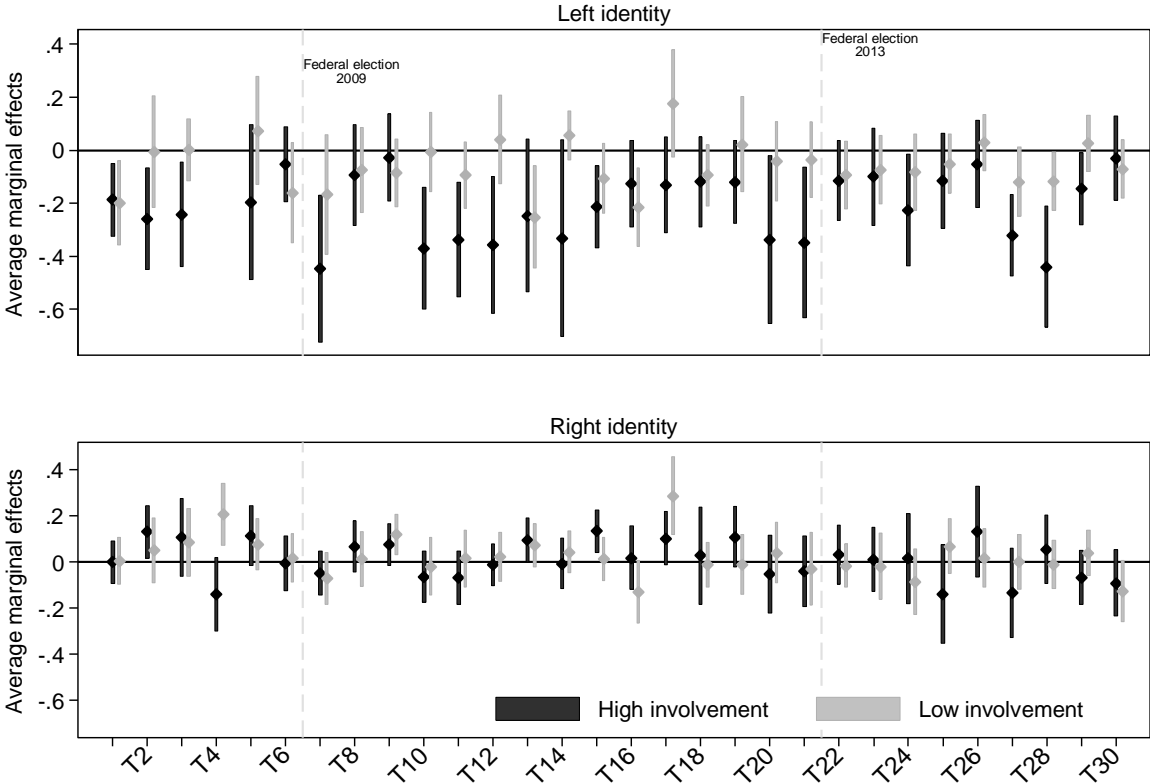


**Figure 2: Ideological voting for the CDU/CSU, SPD, Green Party, and Left Party, 2009-2015**



Notes: Displayed are differences in the predicted probability of voting intentions between citizens without ideological identity and those holding a strong left or right identity, respectively; bars represent 95% confidence intervals; estimations based on binary logistic regression models with partisan identities, age, gender, education and regional descent as additional predictors.

**Figure 3: Ideological voting for the CDU/CSU among the politically involved and uninvolved, 2009-2015**



Notes: Displayed are differences in the predicted probability of voting intentions between citizens without ideological identity and those holding a strong left or right identity, respectively; bars represent 95% confidence intervals; due to insufficient numbers of involved citizens with a left identity and a vote intention for the CDU/CSU, coefficients of left identity were not calculated for July 2009 (T4).

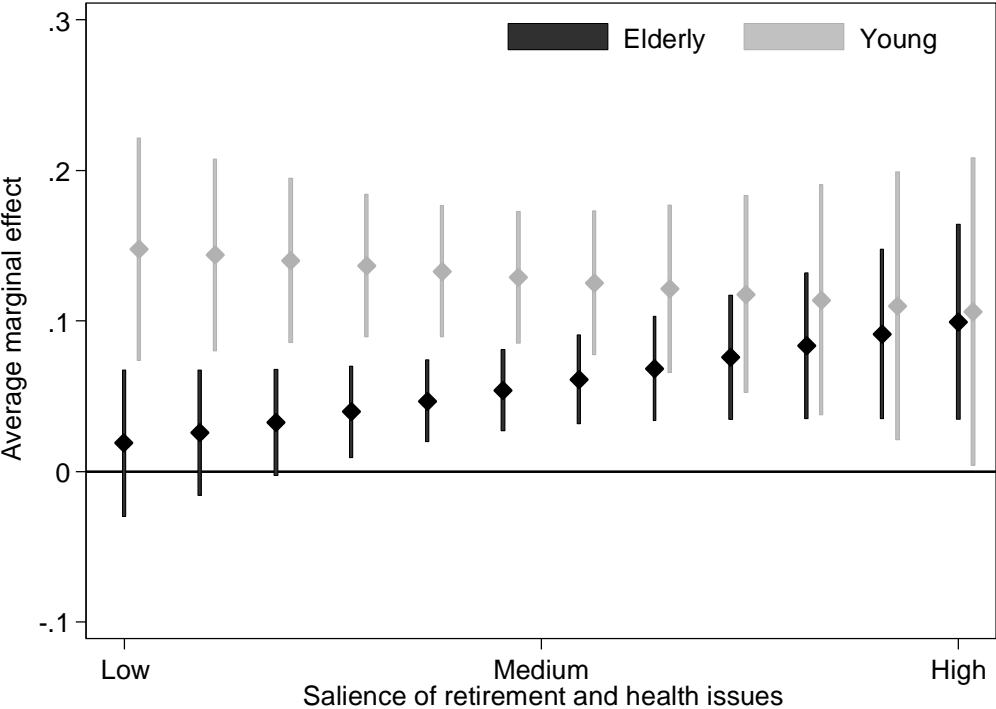


**Table 1: Determinants of the intention to vote for the CDU/CSU, 2009-2015**

	The young (under 50)				The elderly (50 and older)			
	Model 1: RI/RS		Model 2: CLI		Model 3: RI/RS		Model 4: CLI	
Level I								
Ideological identity	0.56	(0.15)	0.55	(0.19)	1.53	(0.27)	1.52	(0.27)
Intercept	-2.23	(0.10)	-2.33	(0.12)	-2.44	(0.15)	-2.43	(0.15)
Level II								
Media salience			0.10	(0.05)			0.05	(0.07)
Cross-level interaction								
Media salience * Ideological identity			0.14	(0.10)			-0.09	(0.17)
Variance components								
Intercept variance	0.11	(0.04)	0.10	(0.04)	0.15	(0.06)	0.12	(0.06)
Slope variance	0.01	(0.02)	0.03	(0.04)	0.57	(0.44)	0.32	(0.48)
Intercept-slope covariance	-0.02	(0.05)	-0.06	(0.05)	-0.13	(0.13)	-0.07	(0.12)
Log-likelihood	-4520		-4516		-1989		-1989	
BIC	9175		9186		4102		4119	
ICC	0.03 (0.01)		0.03 (0.01)		0.05 (0.02)		0.04 (0.02)	
Level I minimum N	585		585		254		254	
Level II N	23		23		23		23	

Notes: Media salience means salience of retirement and health issues in the media; additional controls are party ID dummies, gender, level of education, and regional descent (East vs. West Germany).

**Figure 4: Ideological voting for the CDU/CSU depending on the salience of health and retirement issues (young and elderly population)**



Notes: Displayed are average marginal effects of the left-right ideological self-placement on voting intentions; bars represent 95% confidence intervals; “low salience” represents the minimum salience observed in the time span under consideration; analogously, “high” represents the highest recorded value.