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# The 9/11 conservative shift<sup>\*</sup>

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the causal impact of the 9/11 terror attacks on individual political orientation and political support intensity using the German Socio-Economic Panel 1999-2003. Exploiting survey interview timing in 2001 for identification and controlling for unobserved individual heterogeneity, I find 9/11 to have increased overall political mobilization. While there is no indication of a considerable switch in support between political blocks, the attacks significantly weakened support intensity among left-wing voters and increased the strength of political support among right-wing voters, indicating a shift in conservative direction.

**JEL Classification:** C23; D72; H56

**Keywords:** Political orientation; party support; terrorism; causal inference

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## 1 Introduction

This study contributes to a growing economics literature aiming at an increased understanding of the direct and side effects of terrorism, in particular on political mobilization, voting behavior and political attitudes (see e.g. Echebarria-Echabe and Fernández-Guede, 2006; Gassebner et al., 2008; Bozzoli and Müller, 2011; Montalvo, 2011; Finseraas and Listhaug, 2013). Exploiting 9/11 as a natural experiment, I analyze the impact on political party alignment in a European country not directly targeted by the attacks – Germany. In a difference-in-differences approach, I compare political attitudes of individuals interviewed before and after 9/11 in 2001, relating them to the same respondents’ attitude levels one year prior. To my knowledge, this is the first study investigating this issue in a quasi-experimental setting based on individual panel data.

Two competing theoretical hypotheses are tested: according to the ‘worldview defense’ hypothesis (Greenberg et al., 1992), the terror attacks and the related increase in salience of security threat and mortality may result in the polarization of political views with liberals becoming more liberal and conservatives becoming more conservative. In contrast, the ‘defensive conservatism’ hypothesis (Jost et al., 2003) suggests that a ‘conservative shift’ is a general psychological response to vulnerability salience, even among liberals, due to the core conservative values of authority, stability and order providing a comforting anchor.<sup>1</sup>

Results indicate that while the 9/11 terror attacks increased overall political mobilization, they did not induce switches in political alignment between blocks. However, I find that left-wing supporters react by weakening their support intensity while right-wing supporters increase support strength. This ‘conservative shift’ within political blocks is consistent with the ‘defensive conservatism’ hypothesis.

## 2 Data and Empirical Setup

This analysis is based on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP, 2011), a representative longitudinal survey of private households in Germany. The sample consists of individuals aged 25 or older to ensure that most individuals have completed education. The main estimation employs the survey years 2000 and 2001, common-trend assessment employs an extended period from 1999 to 2003. Outcome variables of interest are binary variables indicating left-wing and right-wing party support respectively. They are based on a combination of two survey questions: *‘Many people in Germany tend towards a particular party in the long term, even if they occasionally vote for another party. Do you tend towards a particular party?’*. If respondents answer yes, they are also asked *‘Which party do you tend towards?’*, which enables me to construct indicators of left-wing and right-wing party affinity.<sup>2</sup> Second, I examine party support intensity, based on a survey question asking respondents with a party affinity to state the extent to which they lean towards that specific party. Answer categories range from 1 (very weakly) to 5 (very strongly). Additionally, I also use the survey question on general interest in politics based on the question *‘Generally speaking, how much are you interested in politics?’* with answers measured on a 4-point scale. Summary statistics are presented in Table A.2 in Appendix.

The identification strategy proposed relies on an interpretation of the 9/11 attacks as a natural experiment. Under the plausible assumption that the attacks were not anticipated, the sample is divided into two groups: one group interviewed post-September 11 in the survey year

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of previous (mainly experimental) evidence, see Nail et al. (2009).

<sup>2</sup> Table A.1 in Appendix describes the variable construction.

2001 (the treatment group) and another group whose 2001 interview took place before September 11 (the control group). The small normalized differences in observable characteristics between these groups (reported in Table A.2 in Appendix) support the notion of exogenous group assignment according to interview timing. Yet, since I cannot exclude group differences in unobservables, I identify causal effects of the 9/11 attacks using a difference-in-differences approach. The SOEP is conducted each year between January and October, which restricts the causal estimation to short-run effects of the 9/11 attacks.

Following Metcalfe et al. (2011), I employ the specification

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1(\text{Year} = 2001)_t + \beta_2[\text{Treat}_i \times (\text{Year} = 2001)_t] + u_i + \epsilon_{it}, \quad (1)$$

where  $Y_{it}$  denotes the stated political orientation (support intensity) of individual  $i$  in survey year  $t$ ,  $(\text{Year} = 2001)_t$  is a dummy representing the year of the attacks,  $\text{Treat}_i$  is a time-invariant dummy variable equal to one if the individual belongs to the treatment group (respondents whose 2001 interview took place after the attacks) and zero otherwise,  $u_i$  is an individual fixed effect<sup>3</sup>, and  $\epsilon_{it}$  is an error term. Parameter  $\beta_2$  is the difference-in-differences estimator of interest.

### 3 Results

Table 1 presents the estimation of specification (1) with respect to political orientation. Figure 1 graphically depicts the results. There has been no considerable shift in political alignment from previous left-wing (LW) supporters towards right-wing (RW) support, or vice versa. Rather, overall political orientation remained stable among individuals with a particular party preference. However, among those who did *not* state a party preference in 2000, there has been a significant increase in party identification, which appears to be similar in magnitude for both right- and left-wing parties. Results shown in Column 7 of Table 1 confirm the finding that the 9/11 terror attacks increased general interest in politics.

*Table 1. Left- and Right-Wing Alignment*

	Dependent variable: LW support=1; Otherwise=0			Dependent variable: RW support=1; Otherwise=0			Dependent variable: Interest in politics (1-5)
	Subsamples			Subsamples			(7)
	2000 no	2000 LW	2000 RW	2000 no	2000 LW	2000 RW	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
Year=2001	0.099*** (0.003)	-0.251*** (0.006)	0.027*** (0.003)	0.073*** (0.003)	0.019*** (0.002)	-0.272*** (0.007)	-0.052*** (0.005)
Year=2001×Treat	0.056* (0.029)	-0.064 (0.049)	0.029 (0.027)	0.057** (0.027)	0.013 (0.019)	-0.062 (0.056)	0.104** (0.045)
<i>N</i>	19,128	9,764	7,432	19,128	9,764	7,432	37,252

Source: SOEP 2000-2001, own calculations.

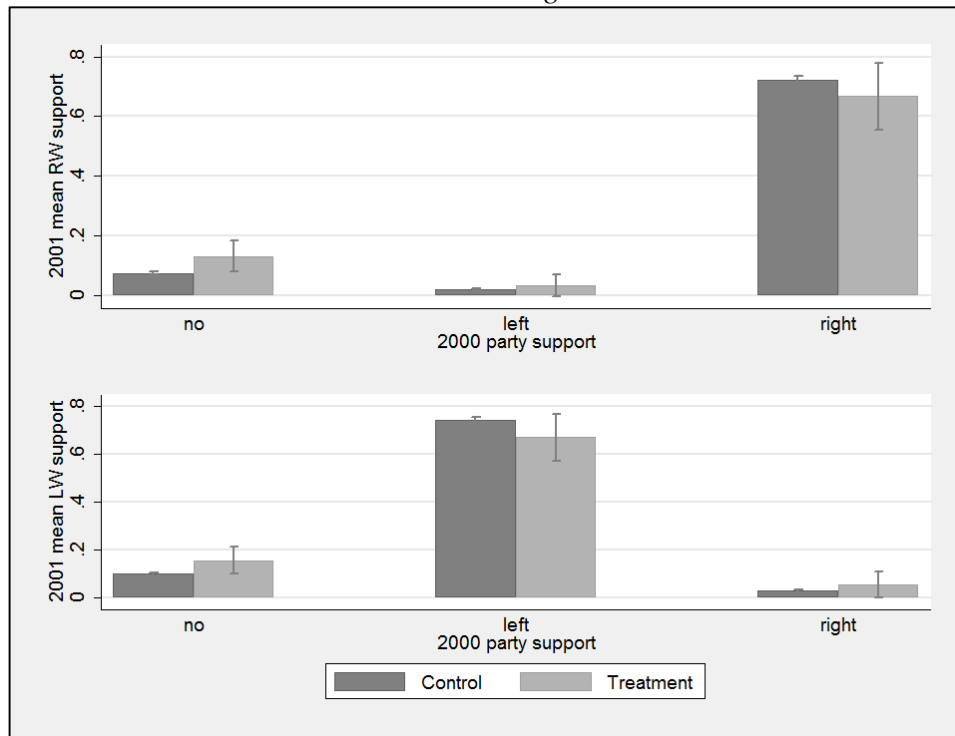
Note: Balanced panel, fixed effects models.  $\text{Treat}=0$  for both years (2000 and 2001) if the 2001 survey interview took place between January 1 and September 10, and  $=1$  if the 2001 interview was between September 12 and October 31. The *Treat* indicator is hence time-invariant. Constant is included.

Although political alignment itself did not change as an effect of the 9/11 attacks, there might still be movements in political opinion, which one cannot detect using simple indicators of left- or right-wing party support. The *strength* of political party support more discerningly captures information about left-wing voters who are tipping into right-wing alignment and vice versa.

<sup>3</sup> Random effects and OLS models yield very similar results (available upon request).

Indeed, additional analysis presented in Table A.3 and A.4 in Appendix supports the notion that individuals whose party support intensity has weakened are more likely to "switch" political alignment in the future. In particular, this is true for left-wing supporters' probability to tip into right-wing alignment. Another advantage of using political support intensity is that it has a stronger within-variation than binary indicators of political alignment, which benefits inference.

*Figure 1. Evidence on Switchers: Share of Right-(Left-)Wing Supporters in 2001 conditional on 2000 Political Alignment*



Source: SOEP 2000-2001, own calculations.

Indeed, results presented in Table 2 show a 'conservative shift' *within* the group of individuals conceiving themselves as leftist, in that their left-wing support weakened significantly due to the 9/11 terror attacks. Support intensity decreased by 0.35 points on the 5-point party-support scale. This corresponds to about 80 percent of one within-standard deviation in party support intensity. The strength of right-wing support among individuals who align with right-wing parties increased (by about 53 percent of a within-standard deviation), yet the increase is only weakly significant (at the ten-percent level).

*Table 2. Strength of Left- and Right-Wing Support*

	LW-Supporters		RW-Supporters	
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Strength of LW support (1-5)		Strength of RW support (1-5)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Year=2001	-0.010 (0.013)	-0.012 (0.014)	-0.030* (0.016)	-0.031* (0.017)
Year=2001×Treat	-0.350*** (0.098)	-0.362*** (0.099)	0.230* (0.134)	0.245* (0.136)
Individual controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
Federal state dummies (16)	No	Yes	No	Yes
N	6,008	5,982	4,286	4,264

*Source:* SOEP 2000-2001, own calculations.

*Note:* Balanced panel, fixed effects models. See notes to Table 1. Individual controls include age (4 categories), education (3 categories), employment status (6 categories), marital status (4 categories), net household income (log) and a constant.

A causal interpretation of the above results relies on the usual common-trend assumption underlying the difference-in-difference approach. Table 3 reports an assessment of this assumption by incorporating two years before and two years after the attacks in the analysis. The fact that survey year/treatment group interactions show up statistically significant only in the year of the attacks and in none of the years before or after 2001 ultimately supports the assumption of parallel trends of treatment and control groups in absence of the 9/11 attacks. In fact, before and after 2001, the treatment status is a ‘placebo’. Only in 2001, the groups actually differ in their treatment status. The finding of significant group differences only in 2001 hence shows that underlying differential trends are unlikely to have driven the results.

*Table 3. Assessing the Common Trend Assumption*

	LW-Supporters		RW-Supporters	
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>		<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Strength of LW support (1-5)		Strength of RW support (1-5)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Year=1999	0.040*** (0.015)	0.045*** (0.016)	0.183*** (0.018)	0.179*** (0.019)
Year=2001	-0.014 (0.013)	-0.008 (0.013)	-0.023 (0.015)	-0.021 (0.016)
Year=2002	-0.018 (0.014)	-0.017 (0.014)	0.088*** (0.016)	0.086*** (0.017)
Year=2003	-0.094*** (0.014)	-0.095*** (0.015)	0.164*** (0.016)	0.161*** (0.017)
Year=1999×Treat	-0.267 (0.248)	-0.268 (0.250)	-0.107 (0.173)	-0.158 (0.168)
Year=2001×Treat	-0.333*** (0.093)	-0.411*** (0.102)	0.225* (0.132)	0.223* (0.134)
Year=2002×Treat	0.020 (0.120)	0.025 (0.120)	-0.019 (0.165)	-0.034 (0.164)
Year=2003×Treat	0.014 (0.096)	0.028 (0.097)	-0.125 (0.167)	-0.130 (0.168)
Interview month dummies (11)	No	Yes	No	Yes
Federal state dummies (16)	No	Yes	No	Yes
N	15,864	15,864	12,107	12,107

*Source:* SOEP 1999-2003, own calculations.

*Note:* Fixed effects models. 2000 is reference year. See notes to Table 1. Constant included.

## 4 Concluding Remarks

This study uses within-individual variation combined with the fact that some survey respondents were interviewed pre- and some post-9/11 to causally identify the implications of a terror shock on political mobilization, orientation and support intensity. I find that 9/11 increased overall political interest. While there is no evidence on individuals switching between political blocks, I find that left-wing supporters react to the attacks by decreasing support intensity while right-wing supporters react by increasing strength of support.

The finding of left-wing supporters weakening support intensity rather than strengthening it is consistent with the predictions of the “defensive conservatism” hypothesis, which states that political conservatism generally serves a defensive function to manage uncertainty and threat.

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## Appendix

*Table A.1. Variable Description: Left- and Right-Wing Alignment*

LW support	RW support
Social Democratic Party (SPD)	Christian Democratic Union (CDU)
Unity '90 (Bündnis '90) / Green Party	Christian Social Union (CSU)
Linke PDS / WASG	Free Democratic Party (FDP)
	DVU / Republicans / NPD

*Table A.2. Summary Statistics*

	Treated (2001 interview took place post-9/11)			Control (2001 interview took place pre-9/11)			Normalized Difference
	mean	sd	N	mean	sd	N	
Interest in politics (1-5)	2.367	0.832	693	2.293	0.800	37,519	-0.063
No party support	0.499	0.500	688	0.540	0.498	36,982	0.059
LW party support	0.281	0.450	688	0.262	0.440	36,982	-0.030
RW party support	0.221	0.415	688	0.198	0.399	36,982	-0.040
Strength of party support (1-5)	3.359	0.731	298	3.404	0.742	15,343	0.043
Male	0.501	0.500	694	0.478	0.500	37,609	-0.033
Age 25-34	0.195	0.396	694	0.194	0.395	37,609	-0.001
Age 35-44	0.261	0.439	694	0.247	0.431	37,609	-0.023
Age 45-54	0.219	0.414	694	0.191	0.393	37,609	-0.049
Age 55 or more	0.326	0.469	694	0.368	0.482	37,609	0.064
Lower than secondary degree	0.026	0.160	684	0.022	0.147	37,136	-0.019
Secondary degree	0.775	0.418	684	0.801	0.399	37,136	0.046
Tertiary degree	0.199	0.399	684	0.176	0.381	37,136	-0.041
Full-time employed	0.458	0.499	694	0.442	0.497	37,609	-0.023
Unemployed	0.131	0.338	694	0.127	0.333	37,609	-0.009
Other employment	0.170	0.376	694	0.145	0.352	37,609	-0.049
Retired	0.215	0.411	694	0.255	0.436	37,609	0.067
Maternity leave	0.013	0.113	694	0.020	0.141	37,609	0.041
In education	0.013	0.113	694	0.011	0.104	37,609	-0.013
Married	0.693	0.462	694	0.701	0.458	37,602	0.013
Single	0.166	0.372	694	0.139	0.346	37,602	-0.053
Divorced/separated	0.088	0.283	694	0.088	0.283	37,602	-0.001
Widowed	0.053	0.225	694	0.072	0.259	37,602	0.055
Net household income (log)	7.650	0.541	694	7.623	0.491	37,608	-0.036

Source: SOEP 2000-2001, own calculations.

Notes: “Normalized Difference” is the difference in average covariate values, normalized by the standard deviation of these covariates:  $(\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_0) / \sqrt{S_1^2 + S_0^2}$ , where  $\bar{X}_1$  and  $\bar{X}_2$  are the covariate means for the treatment and control subsamples and  $S_1$  and  $S_0$  the standard deviations. As a rule-of-thumb, normalized differences exceeding 0.25 are substantial (Imbens and Wooldridge, 2009).

*Table A.3. Delayed Political Switching Analysis - Sample*

t-2	t-1	t	Y	N
RW	RW	LW	Y=1	324
RW	RW	RW	Y=0	15,931
LW	LW	RW	Y=1	295
LW	LW	LW	Y=0	20,367

*Source:* SOEP 1984-2000, own calculations.

*Notes:* Sample consists of individuals who state a left- or right-wing party preference in three consecutive waves and do not “switch” alignment from t-2 to t-1.

*Table A.4. Delayed Political Switching Analysis - Results*

<i>Dependent variable: switch in political alignment between t-1 and t</i>			
	All	LW- Supporters	RW- Supporters
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Change in support intensity from t-2 to t-1:			
<i>No change (ref.)</i>			
Decrease	0.0035** (0.0017)	0.0045** (0.0022)	0.0023 (0.0027)
Increase	0.0004 (0.0017)	0.0026 (0.0022)	-0.0025 (0.0027)
<i>N</i>	36,917	20,691	16,226

*Source:* SOEP 1984-2000, own calculations.

*Notes:* Sample consists of individuals who state a left- or right-wing party preference in three consecutive waves and do not “switch” alignment from t-2 to t-1. Constant term included.