Migration regulation preferences and party policy positions

The case of Germany, 2009-2025

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1 Introduction

For most of its post-war history, Germany was the Western European exception: no durable party to the right of the Christian Democrats managed to take root in national politics. While this used to be explained with reference to the country's Nazi past, that era has now been over for some time. The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), founded in 2013 as a Eurosceptic protest, entered the Bundestag in 2017 with 12.6 per cent and has grown substantially since, reaching 20.8 per cent in February 2025. What role did immigration play in that breakthrough? The question matters, we argue, because a number of often discussed answers get it wrong.

One such answer is that immigration was never really the point. Drawing on comparative survey data, Giebler and Estermann (2025) argue that immigration ranks well below other worries – in Germany it is named as a societal threat only about half as often as economic inequality – and that politics' fixation on it is therefore a case of "dysfunctional responsiveness," an elite preoccupation that crowds out weightier problems. It is a sharp argument, and at its own level it is partly right. But it answers a different question from the one that explains the AfD. It compares immigration with other issues at a single recent moment; it says nothing about what

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happened *within* the immigration debate over the fifteen years in which the AfD rose.

That is the question this paper takes up, and it thus employs a longer time perspective. Using data from the German Long-Term Election Study (GLES) between 2009 to 2025, we track two things side by side on one eleven-point scale: what voters wanted on immigration, and where they saw the parties standing. Putting demand and supply on the same ruler turns a noisy debate into a measurable one – and the measurement, we argue, tells quite a clear story.

The story has three parts:

- First, voter preferences never lurched rightward: across the whole period a solid absolute majority – close to two thirds – wanted more restrictive rules, and if anything the liberal position gained ground until 2023.
- Second, the parties made no programmatic offers to that majority. Until 2015 every party, the CSU included, was seen to sit on the permissive side of the average voter. The restriction-minded majority simply had no one to vote for – a representation gap in the precise sense of Patzelt (2017).
- Third, the gap closed at one identifiable moment and through one identifiable actor: after the 2015–16 refugee crisis, the AfD moved sharply toward restriction and became, and stayed, the only party to the right of the average voter.

Read together, these facts point to a conclusion that is both simpler and better supported than what we often hear and read. The AfD did not ride a societal "shift to the right," because there was no such shift: left–right self-placement and the importance voters attach to immigration are more or less flat across the entire period. What changed was not the electorate but the menu of choices available to them. A large, stable, and long-ignored preference finally found a supplier. This is the representation-gap account, and the GLES data make a strong case that it – rather than a story of hardening attitudes or of an artificially inflated issue – is what we are looking at.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section sets out the demand- and supply-side explanations of radical-right success and develops the representation-gap argument, in dialogue with the "dysfunctional responsiveness" thesis. Section 3 describes the data and measures. Sections 4 to 6 present the evidence – voter preferences, perceived party positions, and the gap between them. Section 7 tests, and rejects, the "shift to the right" reading. The conclusion turns to the one genuine surprise in the data, the 2025 jump in restrictive preferences, and to what the argument can and cannot claim.

2 Theory and the representation-gap hypothesis

2.1 Two ways to explain the radical right

Explanations of radical-right success come in two families (Mudde 2007). Demand-side accounts start with voters: economic grievances from globalization and financial crises (Funke et al. 2016), or a cultural backlash by older, less-educated citizens against post-material values (Norris and Inglehart 2019), create a constituency that established parties fail to satisfy. Immigration sits at the centre of this story – it is close to a perfect predictor of radical-right voting in Europe (Ivarsflaten 2008) – and the most persuasive versions route economic anxiety through threats to social status and recognition (Gidron and Hall 2017).

The demand-side family has one stubborn problem: timing. If shifting attitudes drive radical-right breakthroughs, attitudes should shift first. They do not. Across two decades of European survey data, attitudes toward immigration were stable or softening, and German attitudes barely moved even through the 2015–16 refugee crisis (Bartels 2020). Yet radical-right parties can jump from nothing to fifteen or twenty per cent in a couple of elections – far faster than mass opinion changes (Valentim 2024). Stable preferences cannot, by themselves, explain volatile votes.

Supply-side accounts solve the puzzle by looking at parties. As mainstream parties hollowed out (Mair 2013) and converged on a narrow economic consensus (Kitschelt and McGann 1995), competition migrated to the cultural dimension and left an opening on immigration that no establishment party would occupy. Faced with a challenger, mainstream parties can ignore it, attack it, or accommodate it (Meguid 2008); comparatively, they tend to drift toward the radical right on immigration once it starts winning votes (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020). And the theory of normalization explains why the underlying demand stayed invisible for so long: where restrictive views are socially stigmatized, people hide them, so surveys and politicians alike underestimate how many hold them – until a trigger and a credible party bring them into the open (Valentim 2021, 2024). The implication matters for what follows: survey-measured demand for restriction is a floor, not a ceiling.

2.2 Responsiveness and the representation gap

Behind the demand/supply distinction lies a classic question: how well do parties track what voters want (Stimson et al. 1995)? The honest comparative answer is "often badly" – European parties are strikingly unresponsive in their platforms to

shifts in public opinion (O'Grady and Abou-Chadi 2019) – and responsiveness fails altogether when parties cannot read preferences that voters will not state.

When a salient preference goes unrepresented for years, the result is a *representation gap*: a position many citizens hold and no party offers. Patzelt (2017) coined the term for exactly the German case, arguing that the grand-coalition years left restrictive immigration views without a parliamentary voice. The evidence is concrete. AfD voters occupied a quadrant of the political space – culturally conservative, economically centrist – that no other party's electorate had claimed (Schwarzbözl and Fatke 2016); and AfD candidates sit closer to the median citizen on immigration than any other party's, so that the AfD's arrival actually *improved* how well parliament as a whole represented voters on the issue (Kübler and Schäfer 2022). Germany is a local instance of a Europe-wide pattern, in which mainstream parties avoided the very issues – immigration and Europe – that define the new divide (Kriesi 2020).

We adopt this responsiveness frame deliberately. One could object, with Rehfeld (2009), that a party declining to offer a restrictive position is exercising legitimate judgment rather than failing to represent; that is a fair normative point, and we take no side on it. Our claim is empirical: a large preference went unmatched by supply, and that mismatch is what the AfD exploited. We also flag one limit up front - our party measures are perceived positions, not coded manifestos – and return to it in the conclusion.

2.3 The hypothesis — and why it beats the alternatives

The argument yields three concrete expectations for Germany. We should see (i) a stable majority for restriction with no steady rightward drift; (ii) party positions bunched on the permissive side, to the left of the average voter, in the early years; and (iii) the gap closing only when the AfD moves right after 2015. This is a claim about *under-supply within* the immigration issue, and it is the direct rival of the familiar "shift to the right" story – which predicts that preferences themselves moved, and which we can test against left–right self-placement and issue salience.

This is also where we part company, productively, with Giebler and Estermann (2025). Their finding – that immigration is over-weighted relative to other problems – is a claim about salience *across* issues. Ours is a claim about preference and supply *within* one issue. Both can be true at once: immigration can be over-attended compared with economic inequality while, inside the immigration debate, a stable majority for restriction goes unrepresented. The two are not rivals but different questions – and the cross-issue framing simply cannot see the within-issue gap that

drives the AfD. The longitudinal GLES evidence can, and that is the contribution we now make good on.

3 Data and methods

3.1 Data

The evidence comes from the GLES Tracking surveys – repeated snapshots of the German electorate taken since 2009. The backbone is the cumulated 2009–2023 file (GESIS study ZA6832); the February 2025 Tracking wave (ZA10105), fielded just before that month's federal election, brings the series up to the time of the 2025 Bundestag election.[1]

Because these are repeated cross-sections, not a panel, we follow the distribution of opinion over time rather than individuals, and comparisons rely on the GLES keeping question wording and scales constant across waves. Seven dated waves carry the items we need: June 2010, September 2013, May 2014, September 2017, September 2021, April 2023, and February 2025.

3.2 Variables

The design's great virtue is that voters' own views and their reading of the parties are measured on the *same* eleven-point scale, so the two can be laid directly against each other. The 2009–2023 file and the 2025 wave use different names for the same items:

Concept	2009–2023 (ZA6832)	2025 (ZA10105)	Scale
Own position on immigration	`e0124`	`t154`	1 = ease … 6 = keep as is … 11 = restrict
Importance of immigration (salience)	`e0125`	`t155`	1 = very important … 5 = not important
Left–right self-placement	`e0083`	`t24`	1 = left … 11 = right

[1] ZA6832, https://search.gesis.org/research_data/ZA6832; ZA10105, https://search.gesis.org/research_data/ZA10105. The two are independent cross-sectional samples and are treated here as a repeated cross-section, not a panel.

Concept	2009–2023 (ZA6832)	2025 (ZA10105)	Scale
Perceived party positions on immigration	`e0123b--h`	`t153b--h`	1 = ease … 11 = restrict
Fieldwork date	`field_start`	`field_start`	date

The own-position item asks how immigration opportunities for foreigners should be handled, from "made easier" (1) through the status quo (6) to "restricted" (11). The party items ask, on the same scale, where the respondent places each of the seven relevant parties: CDU (`b`), CSU (`c`), SPD (`d`), FDP (`e`), the Greens (`f`), the Left (`g`) and the AfD (`h`). Because demand and supply share one ruler, the representation gap is something we can read straight off the scale.

3.3 Measures, cleaning, and tests

We remove the usual special codes — −99 ("no answer"), −98 ("don't know") and −94 ("not in the sample") — variable by variable; for 2025 the data are cleaned on both the own-position item (`t154`) and the left–right item (`t24`), which reproduces the published 2025 figures exactly.

The analysis is mostly descriptive, and deliberately so: the case is made by the distributions themselves. We report the full eleven-category distribution and, for readability, collapse it into three blocks — easing (1–5), status quo (6) and restriction (7–11). We give both the mean and the median, with the median the more trustworthy summary on a bounded ordinal scale. Party positions are summarized as each party's mean perceived placement per wave, plotted against both the mean and the median voter preference, which together serve as the yardstick for who stands where. Two non-parametric tests back up the eye: a Kruskal–Wallis test for whether the preference distribution shifts across waves, and Kolmogorov–Smirnov tests for the key pairwise comparisons (2017 vs 2025; 2010 vs 2017).

One clarification matters for the argument. The GLES importance item (`e0125`/`t155`) measures how much voters care about immigration in its own right — *within-issue* salience. It does not rank immigration against other problems; that *cross-issue* comparison is what Giebler and Estermann (2025) measure, and it is a different quantity. Our claim lives entirely at the within-issue level, where the GLES is exactly the right instrument.

4 Public preferences on immigration

We begin with demand: what Germans themselves want. The relevant item (e0124, t154 in 2025) asks for the respondent's own view — "What is your opinion on immigration opportunities for foreigners?" — on a scale from 1 ("make it easier") through 6 ("keep as is") to 11 ("restrict").

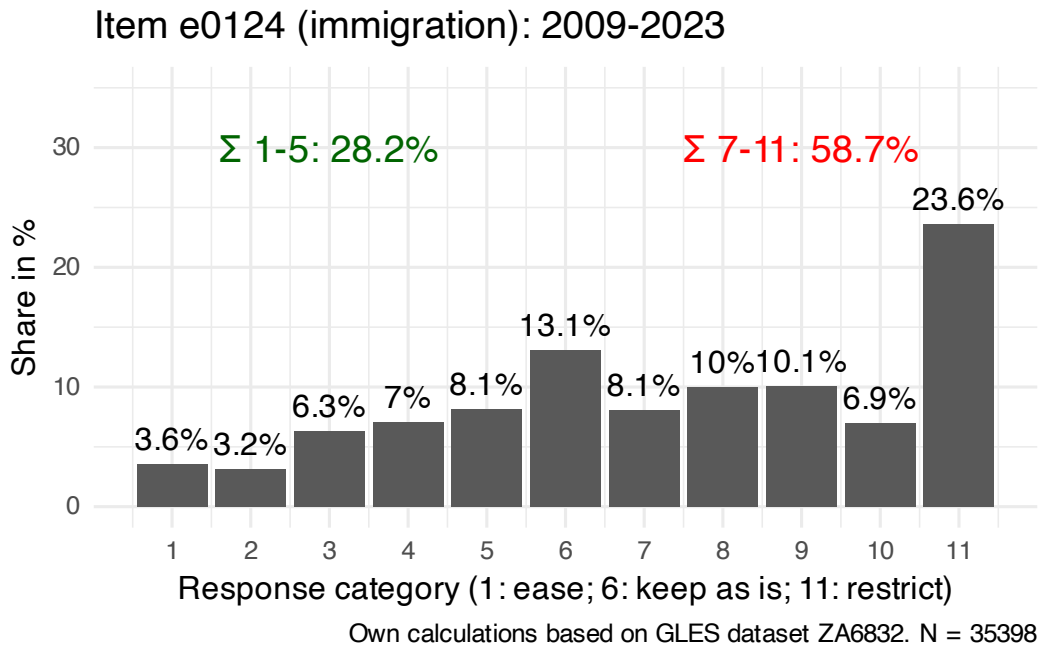

Figure 1: Attitudes toward immigration, 2009-2023

Pool the whole 2009–2023 period and the verdict is lopsided (Figure 1): roughly one third of respondents want easier rules, about two thirds want tighter ones. (The bars are summed into a left "ease" total, 1–5, and a right "restrict" total, 7–11, above the figure to make this plain.) The single most common answer is not somewhere in the middle but the most restrictive option available, position 11, chosen by a full quarter of respondents. Whatever else is true, a clear majority leaned toward restriction throughout.

A fifteen-year average, though, hides the movement that matters, across a period that ran through the euro crisis, the refugee crisis, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The data cover 34 dated waves, from 2009-12-10 to 2023-04-17, with 35398 interviews in all. So we take the waves one at a time.

4.1 How preferences moved — and how they did not

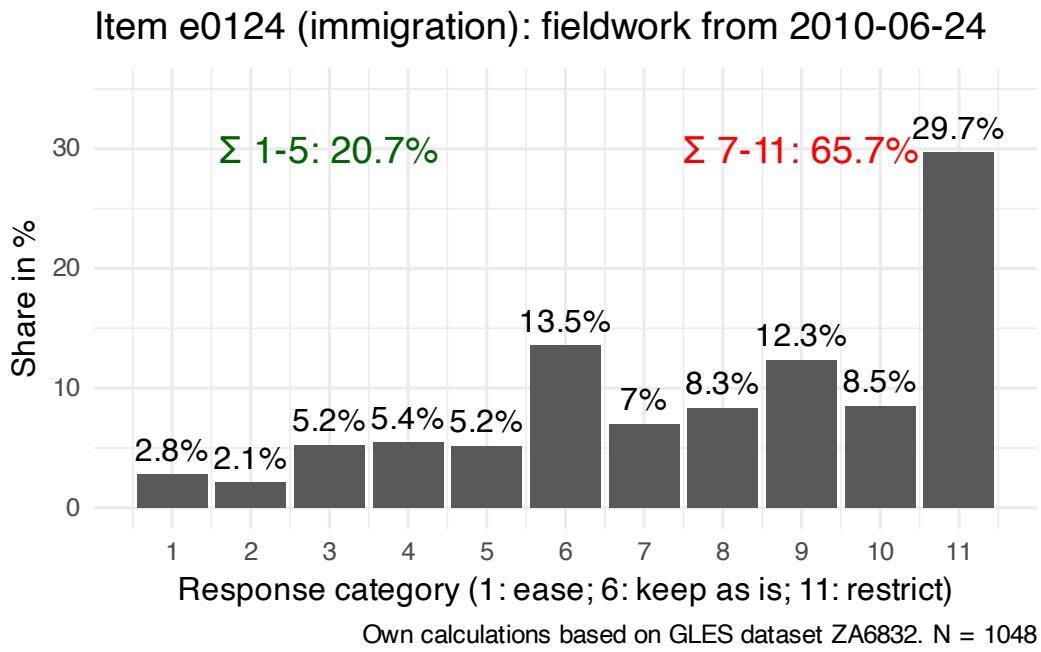

Figure 2: Attitudes toward immigration, 2010

In 2010 the majority for restriction is overwhelming (Figure 2): nearly two thirds (65.7%) want immigration restricted, just a fifth (20.7%) want it eased, and a seventh (13.5%) want no change. This is the starting point — and, tellingly, the high-water mark for restriction sits here, at the beginning, not the end.

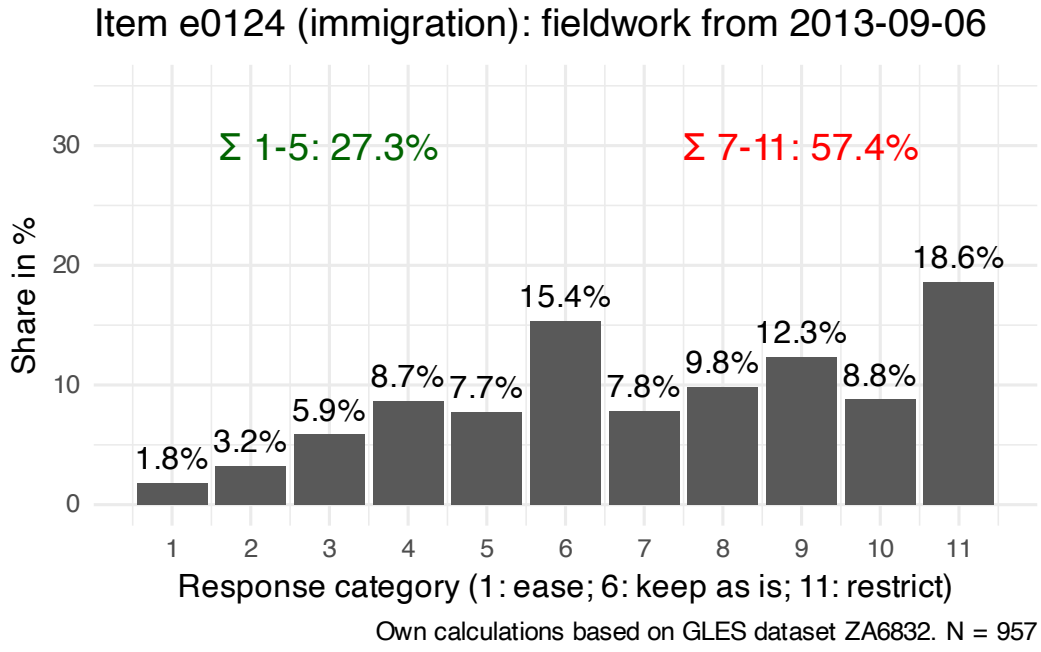

Figure 3: Attitudes toward immigration, 2013

By autumn 2013, with the economic crises fading, opinion has if anything softened — both camps shift seven to eight points toward easing (Figure 3) — though the restrictive majority holds. (The AfD, founded that February as an anti-euro party, just missed the Bundestag with 4.7% in September.)

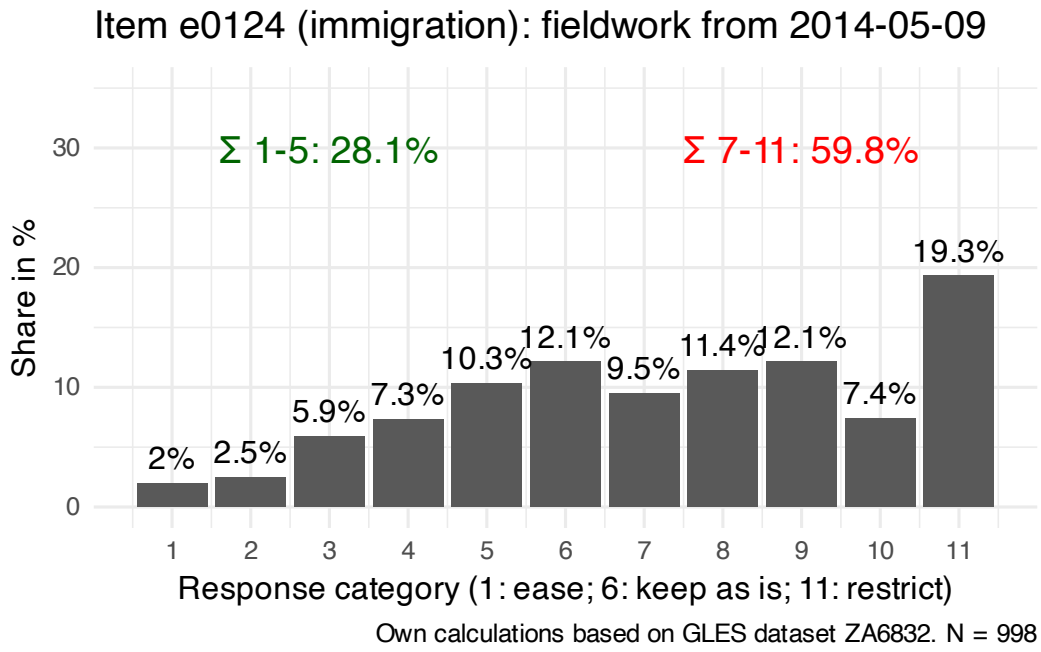

Figure 4: Attitudes toward immigration, 2014

In 2014, after the crises and before the refugee inflows, the pattern is steady (Figure 4): three fifths (59.8%) for restriction, a quarter (28.1%) for easing, an eighth (12.1%) for the status quo.

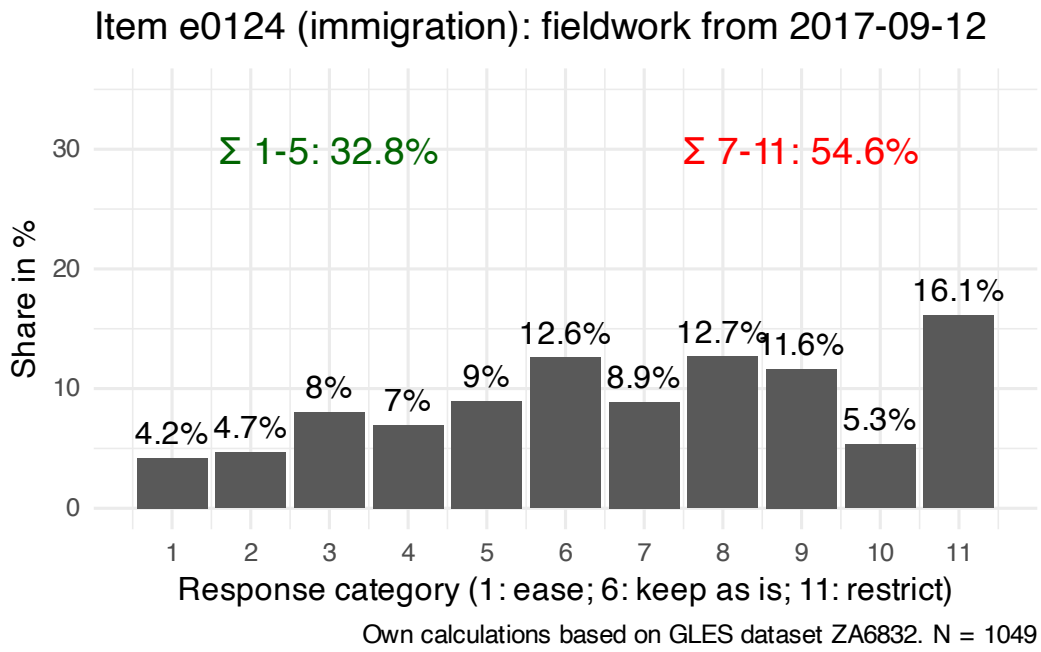

Figure 5: Attitudes toward immigration, 2017

Then comes the result that should give the "shift to the right" thesis pause. After the refugee crisis — the very moment one would expect attitudes to harden — they soften (Figure 5). The restrictive majority shrinks to 54.6%, easing climbs to a third (32.8%), and the extreme position 11 nearly halves, from 29.7% in 2010 to 16.1%. The crisis did not push German voters to the right.

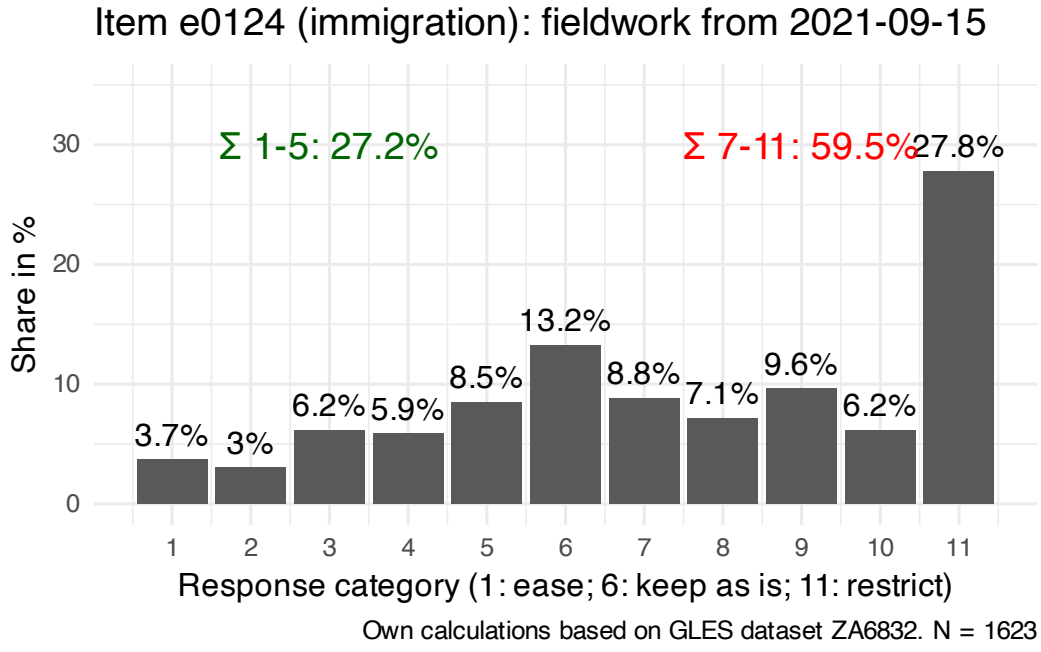

Figure 6: Attitudes toward immigration, 2021

In 2021, mid-pandemic, restriction recovers somewhat (59.5% against 27.2% for easing), with most of the movement concentrated at position 11 (Figure 6).

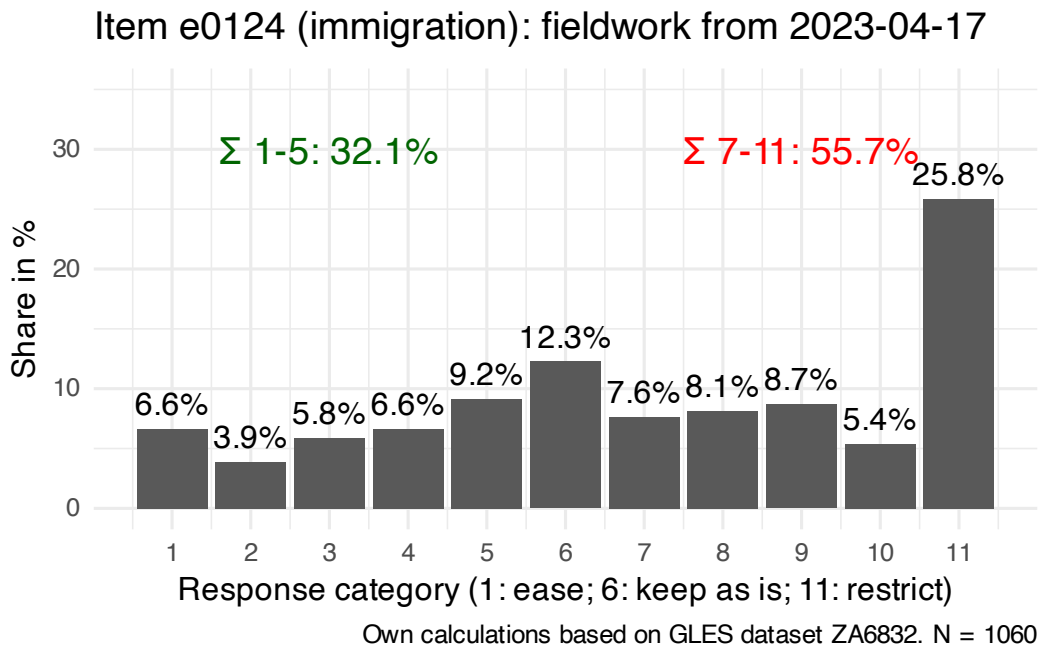

Figure 7: Attitudes toward immigration, 2023

By April 2023, the last point in the cumulated file, opinion has drifted back toward easing again (Figure 7): 55.7% for restriction, a third (32.1%) for easing. Up to here the through-line is unmistakable — a durable restrictive majority that fluctuates but, if anything, eases over time.

The February 2025 wave (ZA10105) carries the story up to the last Bundestag election, using the renamed items t154 and t24, cleaned as before.

Table 1: Preferences on migration rules (aggregated positions)

Time point	Ease (1-5)	Status quo (6)	Restrict (7-11)	Restriction majority (pp.)
2010-06	20.7	13.5	65.7	45.0
2014-05	28.1	12.1	59.8	31.8
2017-09	32.8	12.6	54.6	21.8
2021-09	27.2	13.2	59.5	32.3
2023-04	32.1	12.3	55.7	23.6
2025-02	24.1	9.3	66.6	42.6

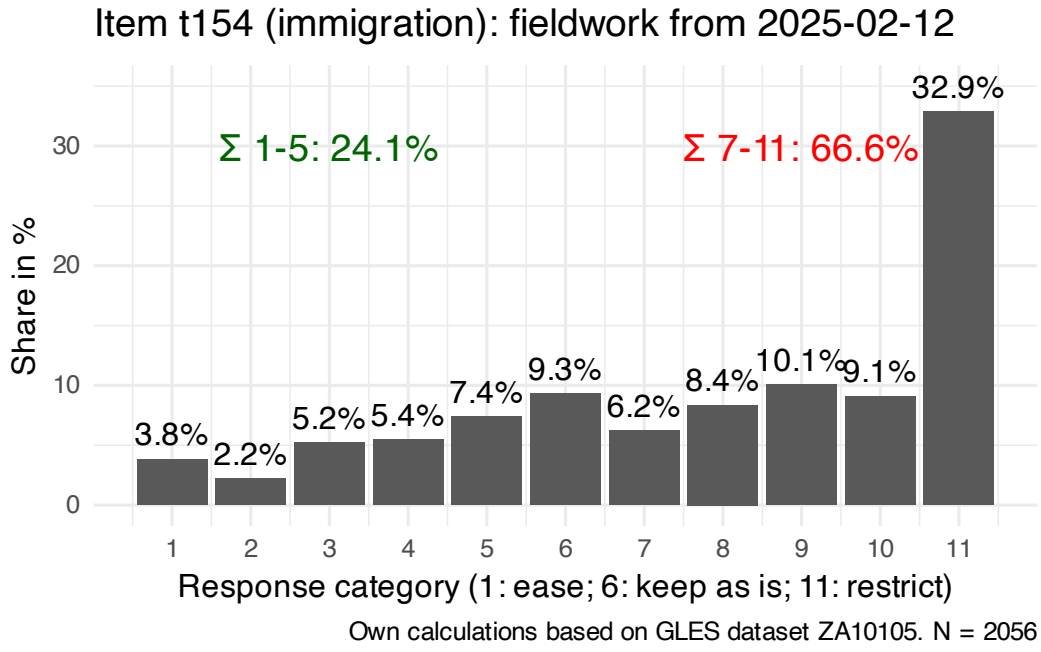

Figure 8: Attitudes toward immigration, 2025

And here, finally, preferences *do* move (Figure 8) — sharply, toward restriction. The status-quo share falls (12.3% to 9.3%), easing drops to its lowest level since 2014 (32.1% to 24.1%), and restriction jumps almost eleven points to 66.6%, with position 11 alone up 7.1 points. We return to this late turn in the conclusion; for now, note that even this jump only brings the restrictive majority back to roughly its 2010 size.

4.2 Continuity and change, in one table

Collapsing the scale into three blocks (Table 1) shows continuity and change at a glance. The continuity is the headline: an absolute majority — at the outset a two-thirds majority — wants restriction at every single wave, while only a fifth to a third ever wants easing. The change is in the margin between the two camps, and it

Table 2: Perceived party positions on immigration at different time points

Time point	CDU	CSU	SPD	FDP	Greens	Left	AfD	Voter mean	Voter med.
2009-2023	6.21	7.44	5.01	6.33	4.17	4.64	9.84	7.32	8
2010-06-24	7.23	7.78	5.56	6.77	4.66	5.63	NA	7.89	9
2013-09-06	6.52	7.34	4.96	6.44	4.03	4.81	7.73	7.28	7
2014-05-09	6.77	7.64	5.08	6.68	4.14	4.86	8.55	7.32	8
2017-09-12	6.01	8.02	4.97	6.52	3.82	4.09	10.49	6.84	7
2021-09-15	6.38	6.85	5.11	6.42	4.10	4.36	9.89	7.46	8
2023-04-17	6.42	6.78	4.77	5.94	4.30	4.93	9.14	7.12	7
2025-02-12	7.55	7.65	5.31	6.44	4.30	4.69	9.54	7.92	9

runs the "wrong" way for a rightward-shift story: the restriction-minus-easing gap narrows from 45 points in 2010 to 21.8 in 2017 before snapping back to 42.5 in 2025 — just shy of where it began. Up to 2023, in other words, German society was if anything drifting slightly toward liberalism on immigration.

The eye is confirmed by the tests. The preference distribution differs significantly across waves (Kruskal–Wallis H = 146.8, $p < 0.001$), and both turning points are highly significant: the late swing toward restriction (2017 to 2025: Kolmogorov–Smirnov D = 0.205, $p < 0.001$) and the earlier drift toward easing (2010 to 2017: D = 0.174, $p < 0.001$). The bottom line bears repeating, because it is the foundation of the whole argument: through 2023 there was no rightward shift in what Germans wanted — if anything the reverse. Preferences alone cannot explain the AfD. For that we have to look at what the parties were offering.

5 Perceived party positions

Now the supply side — not what the parties' manifestos say, but where voters *think* they stand, which is what actually drives the vote. The GLES asks exactly this ("Some want to make immigration easier, others to restrict it. Where do these parties stand?"), party by party, on the same eleven-point scale (variables e0123b–h; t153b–h in 2025).

Table 2 reports each party's mean perceived position wave by wave, alongside the voter preference — both its mean and its median. Listing them together is the point: it turns the distance between what voters want and what the parties offer into a single number on a shared scale. The median is worth a glance, because it cuts the other way from what one might expect: it sits at or above the mean throughout, reaching 9 in 2010 and again in 2025. The reason is the shape of the distribution (Figure 1) — the long easing tail drags the mean down, while the typical (middle)

voter stands further toward restriction. The practical implication matters for the argument that follows: whether we anchor on the mean or the median, the average voter is firmly on the restrictive side, and measuring the representation gap against the mean is the *conservative* choice.

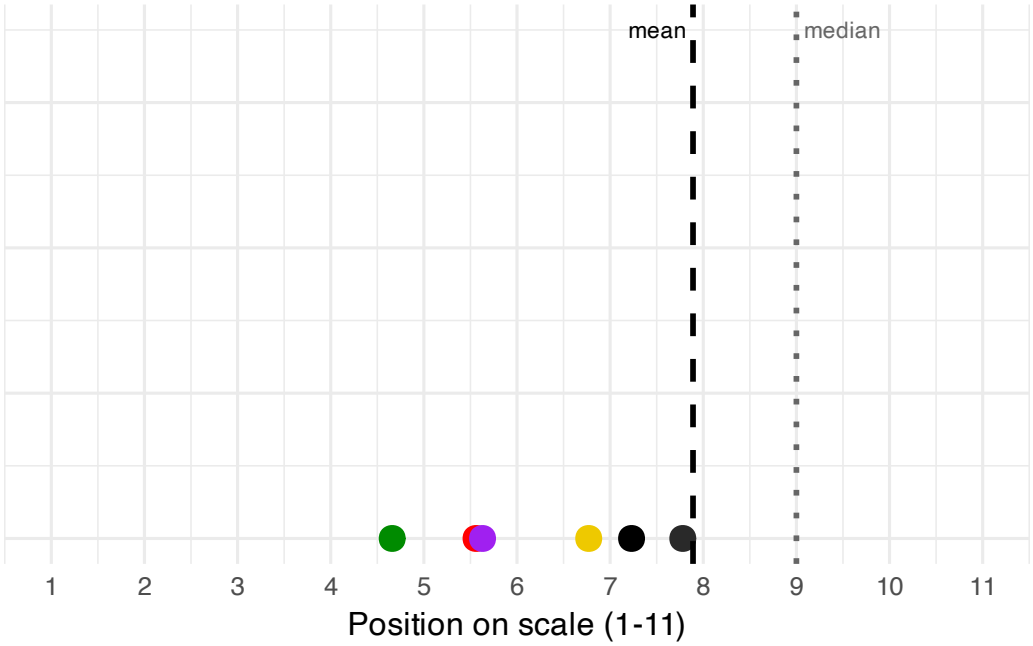

Figure 9: Party positions and mean voter preference, immigration, 2010

The clearest way to see the problem is to plot the parties against the voters. Figure 9 does this for 2010, marking each party's mean position together with the average voter (dashed line) and the median voter (dotted line). The result is stark: the electorate's centre of gravity sits at the restrictive *end* of the entire field of parties — and the median voter, at 9, lies further right still than the mean. Every established party, even the CSU, the most restrictive of them, falls to the left of both. For the majority of voters who wanted something tougher than the average, not one party spoke for them. That empty space to the right of the lines is the representation gap, and in 2010 it was wide — wider, in fact, if one takes the median rather than the mean as the benchmark.

6 The representation gap

Overlaying the two pictures — the distribution of voter preferences and the parties' positions — for each wave shows how the gap opened, persisted, and finally closed.

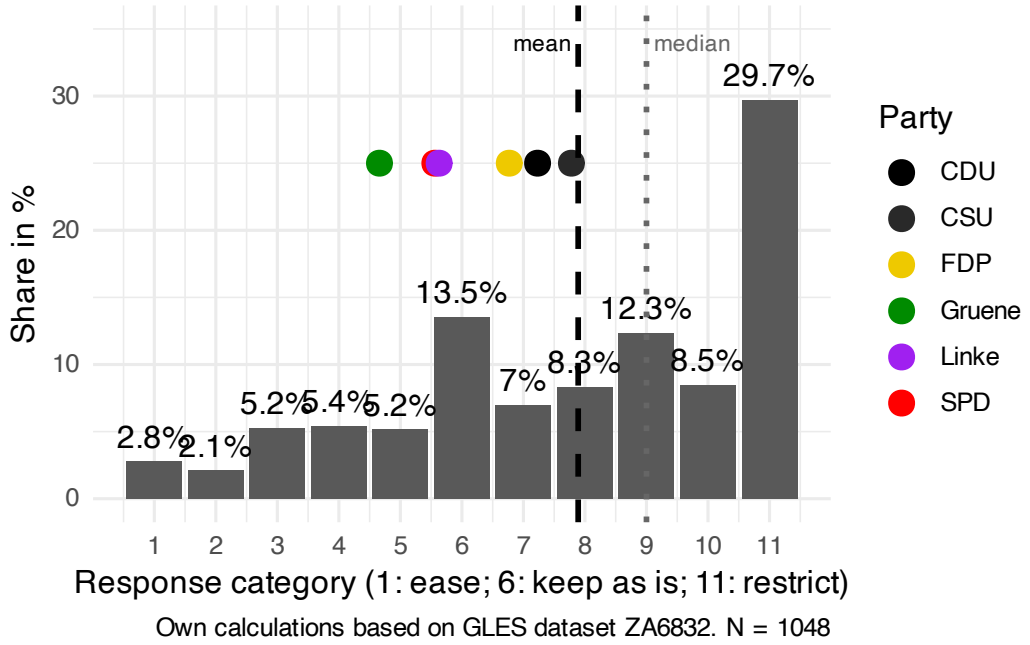

Figure 10: Party positions and distribution of voter preferences, immigration, 2010

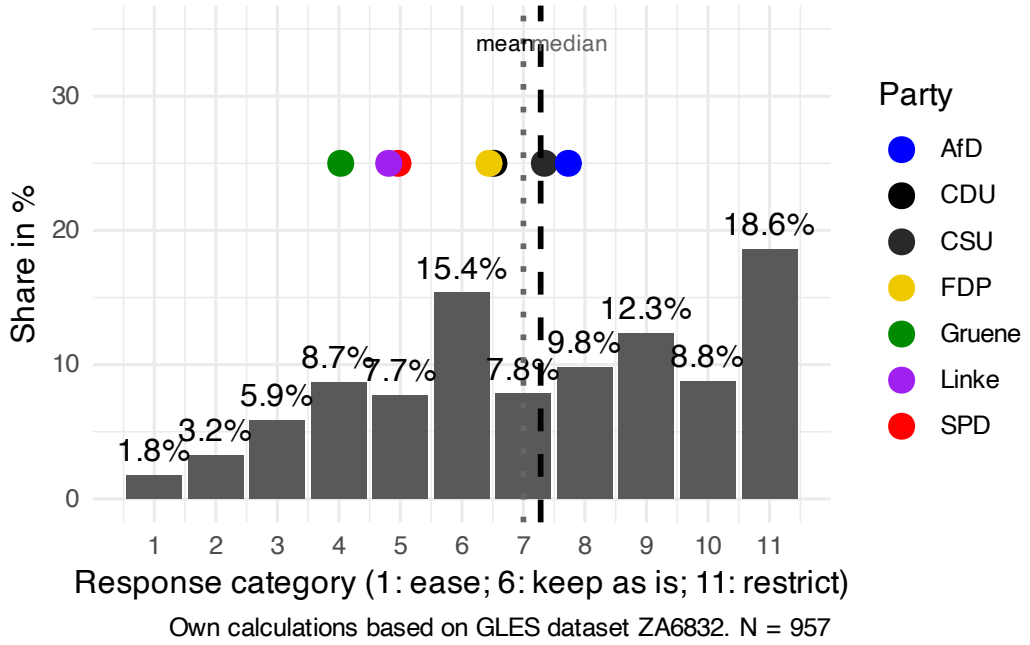

Figure 11: Party positions and distribution of voter preferences, immigration, 2013

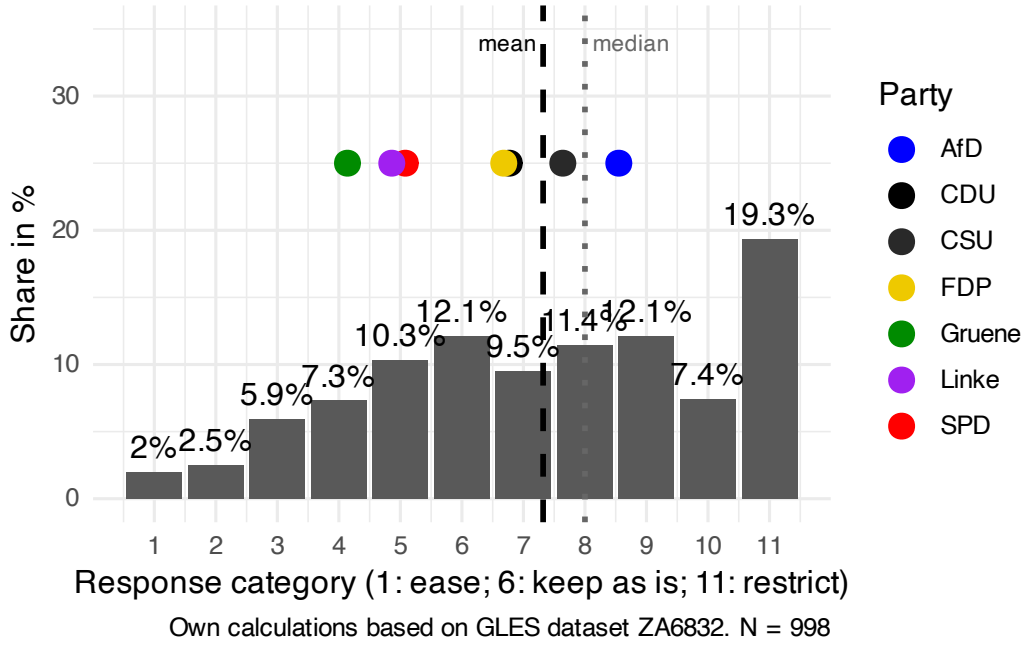

Figure 12: Party positions and distribution of voter preferences, immigration, 2014

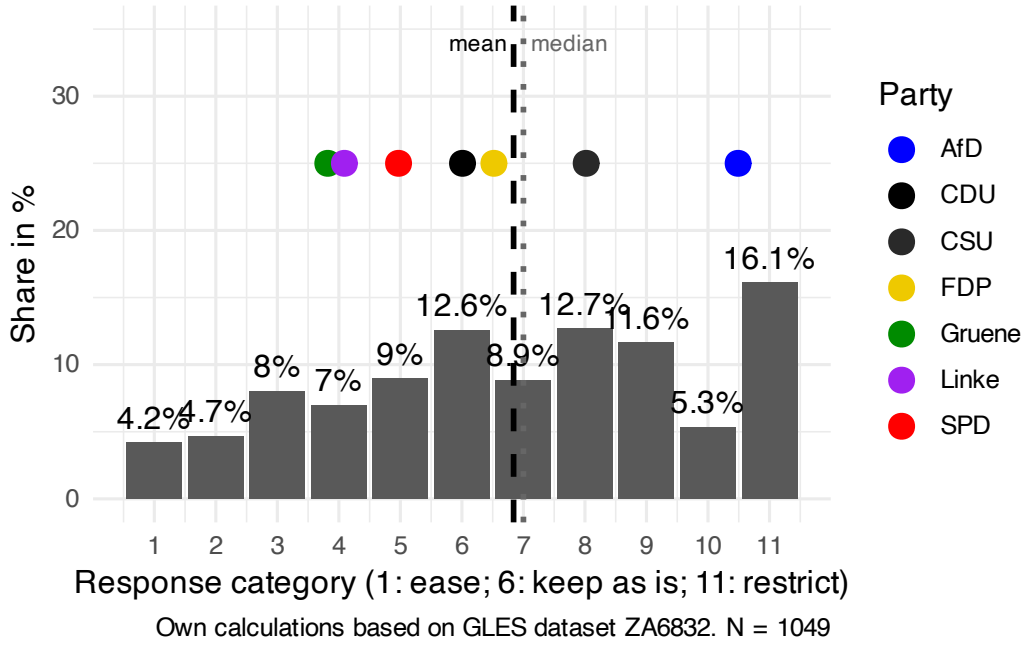

Figure 13: Party positions and distribution of voter preferences, immigration, 2017

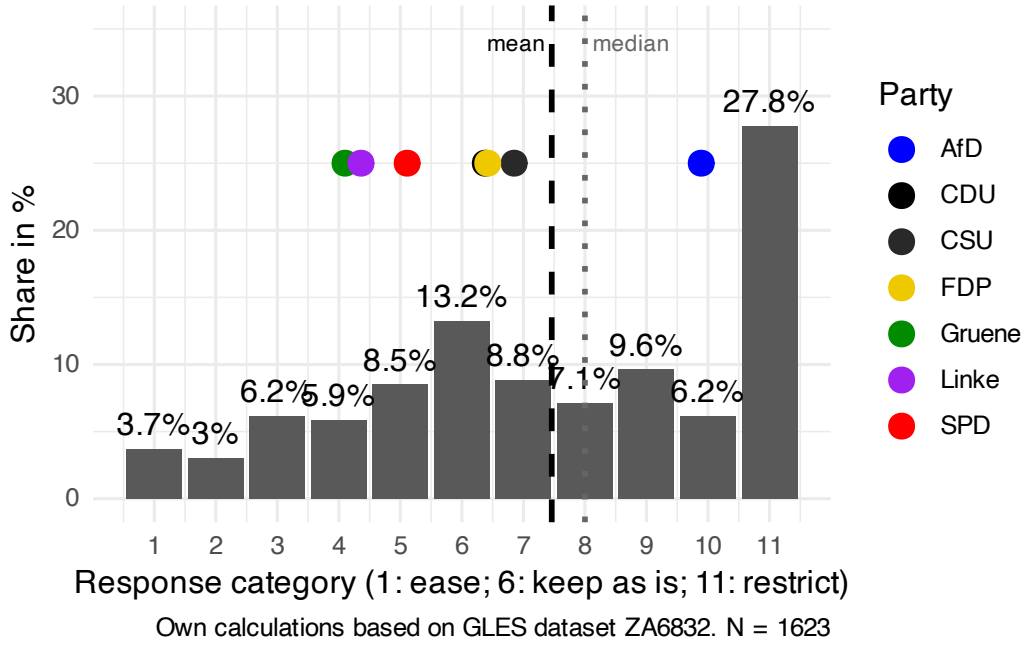

Figure 14: Party positions and distribution of voter preferences, immigration, 2021

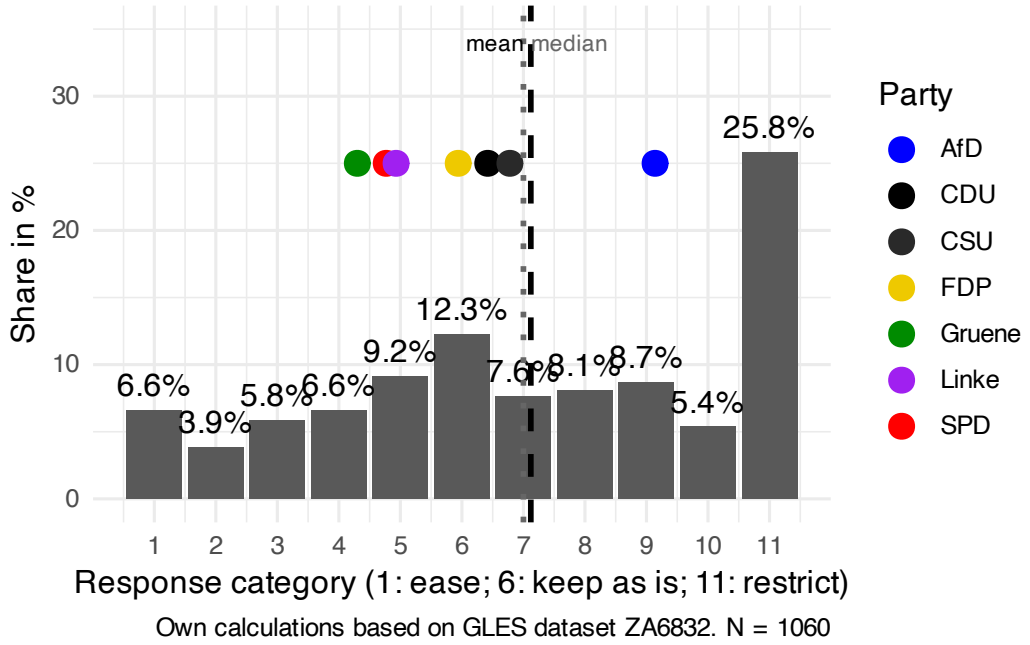

Figure 15: Party positions and distribution of voter preferences, immigration, 2023

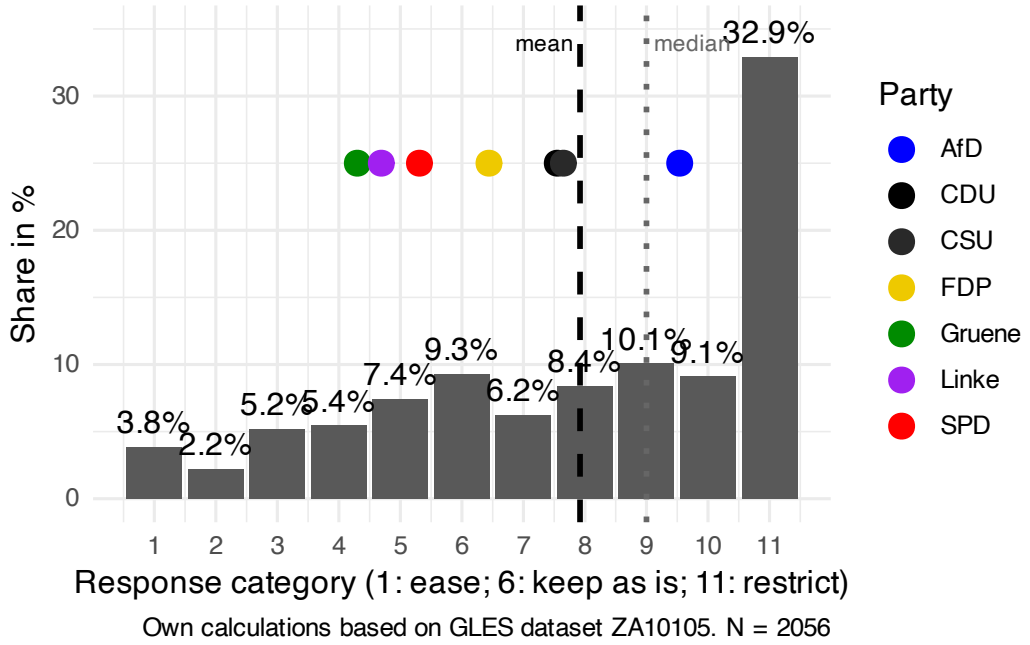

Figure 16: Party positions and distribution of voter preferences, immigration, 2025

The sequence tells the story cleanly. In 2010 (Figure 10) the gap is at its widest: the average voter sits at 7.89 and the median voter further right still at 9, yet the parties are crowded onto the permissive side — the CSU stranded at 7.78, everyone else further left again. Whichever benchmark one uses, for years there is simply no supplier for the restrictive majority.

Then watch the AfD. In 2013 it is an anti-euro party, barely more restrictive than the CSU (7.73); in 2014 it edges out to 8.55. After the refugee crisis it makes its move: by 2017 it has jumped to 10.49 (Figure 13), as far toward restriction as the Greens are toward easing — and, decisively, the first and only party to plant itself to the right of the average voter. That single repositioning closes the gap the establishment had left open for a decade. And it stays closed: in 2021, 2023 and 2025 the AfD remains the lone occupant of the restrictive space.

This is the heart of the argument. The AfD did not have to change minds or manufacture a grievance. It moved to where a large block of voters already was, and where no one else would go. The fit between a long-standing, unmet demand and a single party that finally met it is, we argue, the most economical and most powerful explanation of the AfD's rise on this issue. What it is not is evidence of a society moving right — and the next section shows why that rival reading does not survive contact with the data.

7 Robustness: the "shift to the right" thesis does not hold

If the AfD's rise reflected a rightward turn in German society, we should see it in two places beyond immigration preferences: in how voters place themselves on the left–right scale, and in how much they say immigration matters. Neither shows it.

7.1 Left–right self-placement

The left–right item (e0083; t24 in 2025) asks simply: "Where would you place yourself?", from 1 ("left") to 11 ("right").

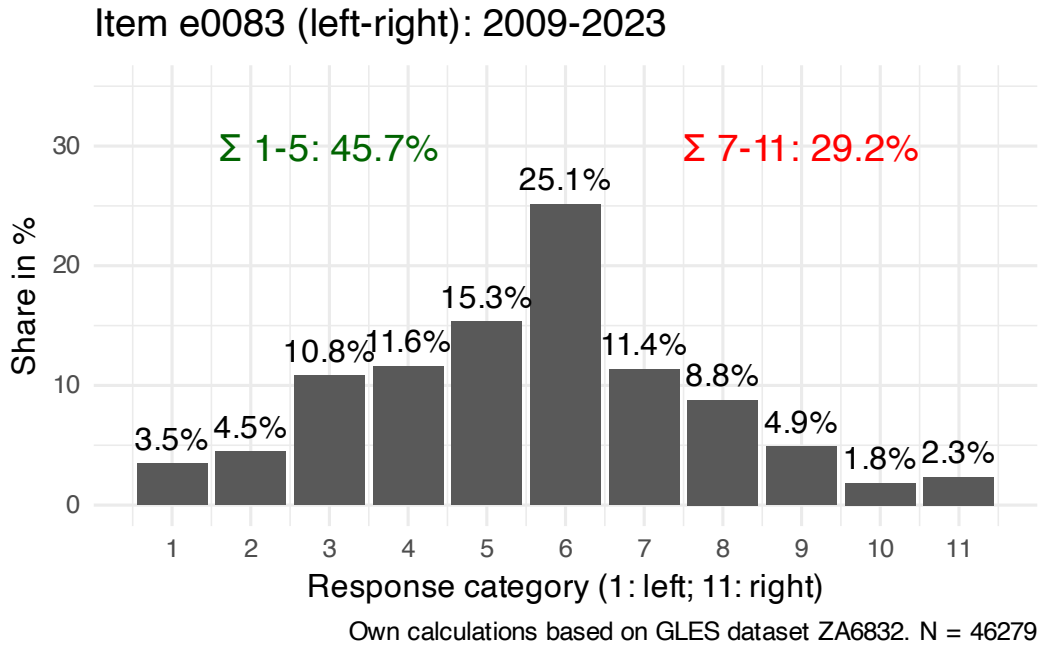

Figure 17: Left-right self-placement, 2009-2023

Over the whole period the distribution leans gently left, with a dominant centre (Figure 17): the left half outweighs the right by about three to two. This is not a right-leaning electorate.

7.1.1 Variation over time

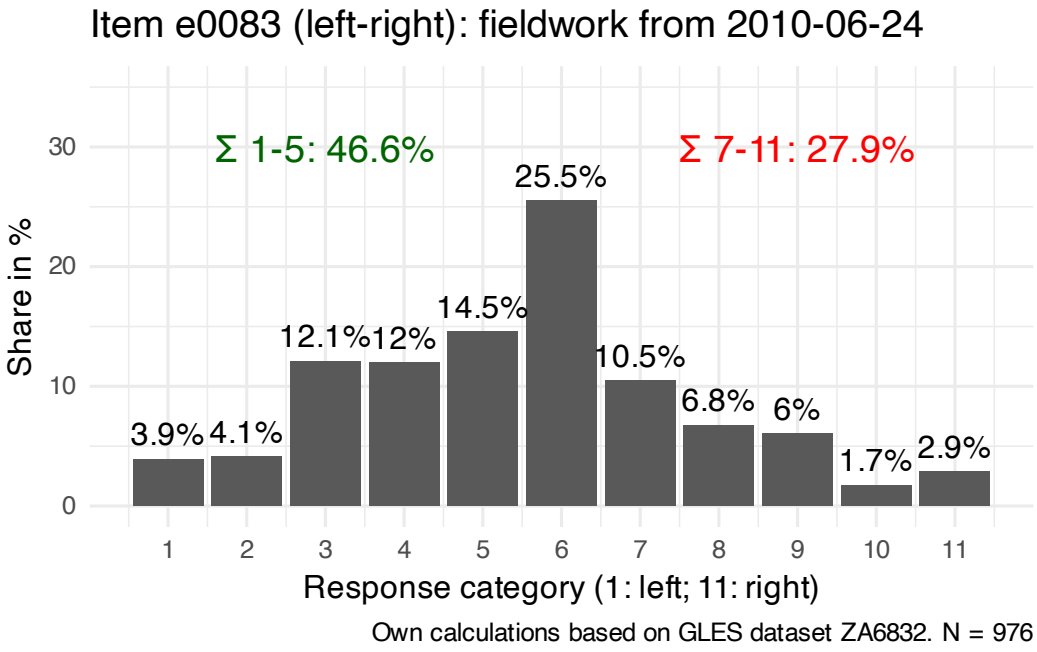

Figure 18: Left-right self-placement, 2010

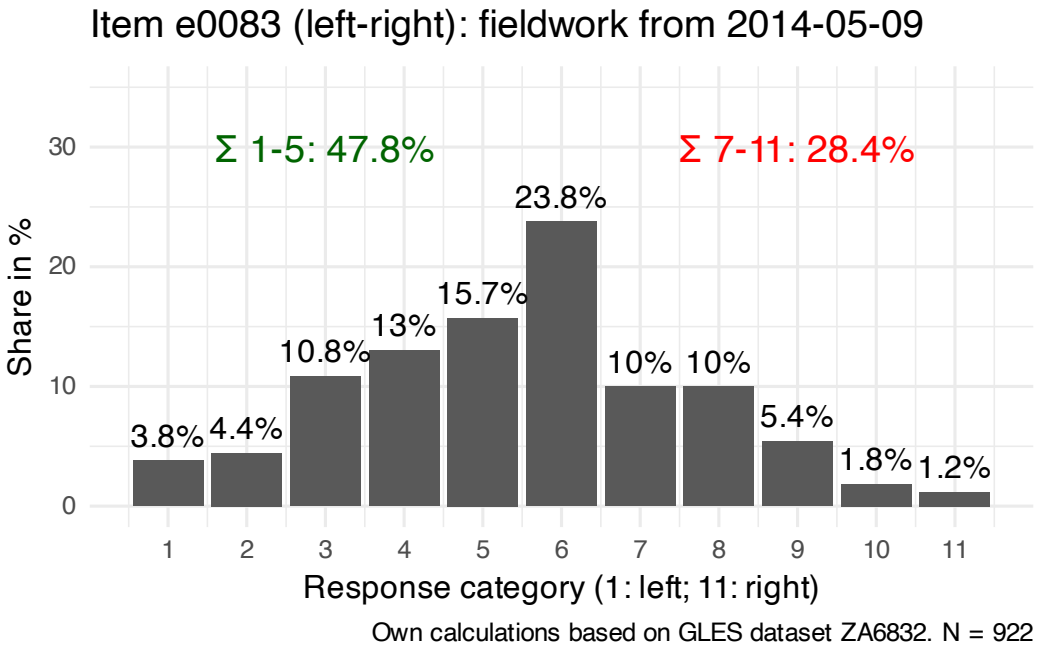

Figure 19: Left-right self-placement, 2014

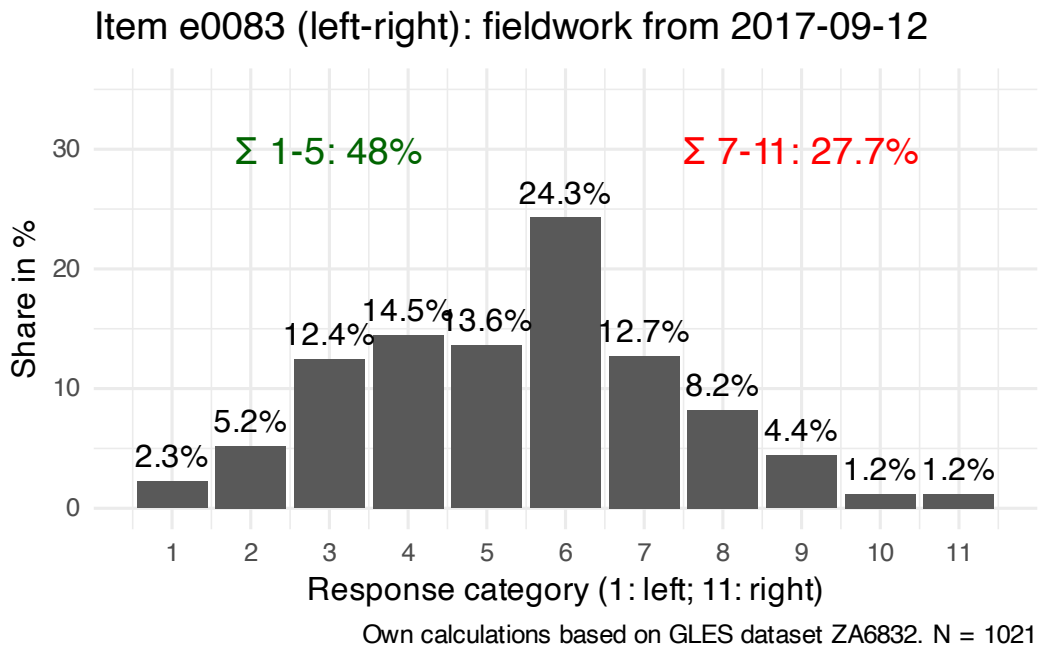

Figure 20: Left-right self-placement, 2017

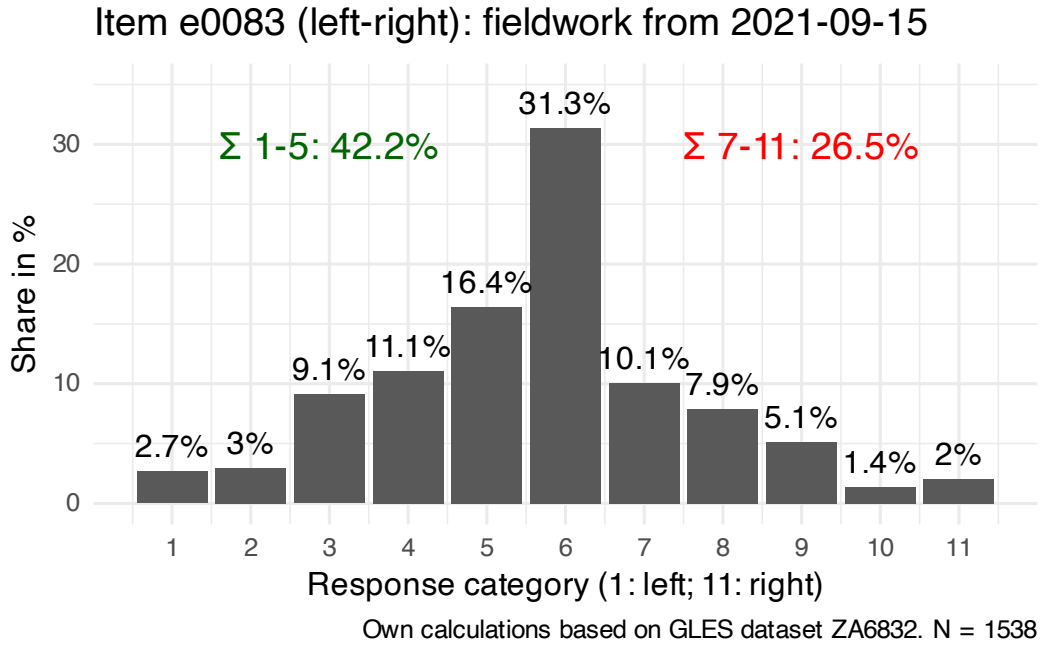

Figure 21: Left-right self-placement, 2021

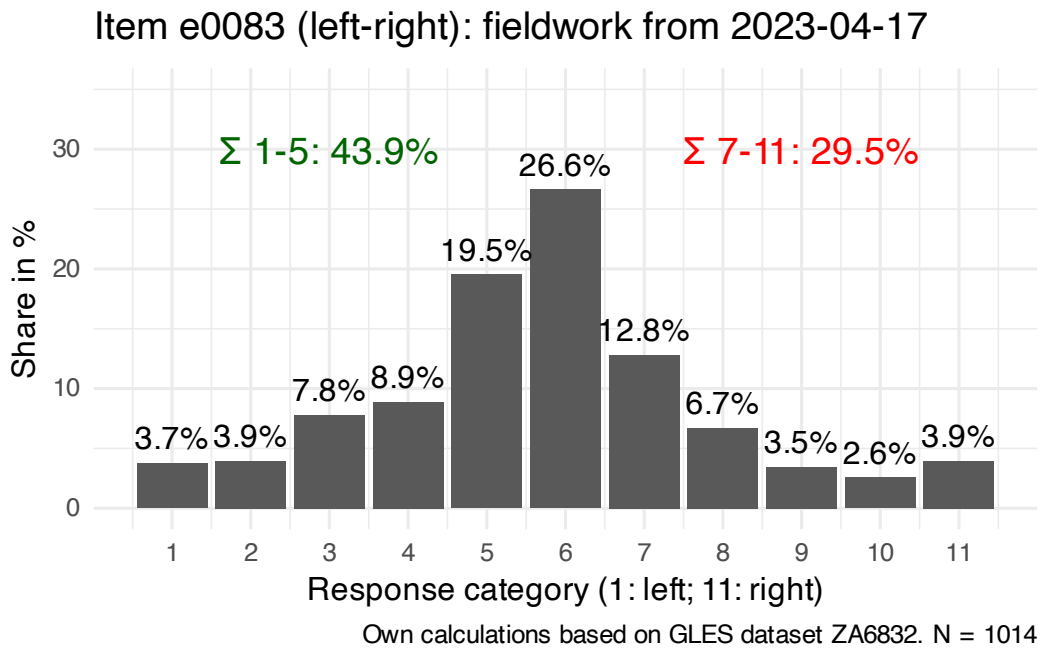

Figure 22: Left-right self-placement, 2023

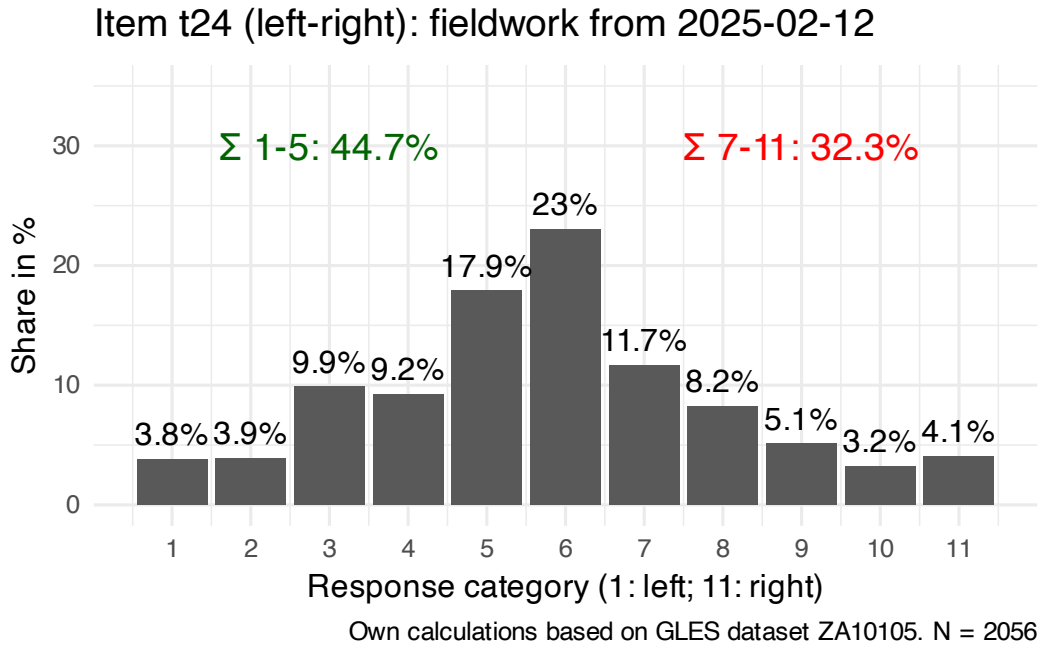

Figure 23: Left-right self-placement, 2025

Wave by wave, the picture barely moves. The centre is always the largest group, the left always clearly larger than the right. February 2025 flattens the distribution only slightly — the centre loses 3.6 points, the left edges up to 44.7% and the right to 32.3% — without changing the basic balance. There is no drift rightward and no rising polarisation, just a stable centre with a mild and persistent left lean.

Table 3: Salience of the immigration issue at different time points

Time point	Mean (e0125/t155)
2010-06-24	2.25
2013-09-06	2.60
2014-05-09	2.42
2017-09-12	2.28
2021-09-15	2.52
2023-04-17	2.43
2025-02-12	2.10

7.2 Issue salience

What about the importance voters place on immigration? The salience item (e0125; t155 in 2025) asks how important the issue is, from 1 ("very important") to 5 ("not important at all").

The answer is steady (Table 3): the values sit between 2.1 and 2.6 throughout — "rather important," with no trend. The only uptick is just before the 2025 election, plausibly driven by the campaign and the attacks of late 2024 and early 2025. Importance, like left–right placement, is essentially flat.

So both candidate signatures of a "shift to the right" are absent. The electorate did not move right, and did not suddenly decide immigration mattered more. The AfD's electoral success is therefore far better explained by the representation gap we have documented — a large restrictive majority that at last found a party — than by any change in the voters themselves.

8 Discussion and conclusion

The case is, we think, clear. For a decade and a half a stable majority of Germans — close to two thirds — wanted more restrictive immigration rules, while every established party, the CSU included, was seen to stand on the permissive side of the average voter. That is a textbook representation gap, and it went unaddressed until the AfD, after the 2015–16 refugee crisis, moved decisively to the restrictive pole and became the only party to occupy it. The robustness checks remove the obvious alternative: there was no rightward shift in left–right identity or in issue salience that could explain the AfD by way of a changing electorate. The most convincing account of the AfD's rise on immigration is not that Germany moved right, but that a durable demand was, at last, supplied.

The single moment that complicates the picture is February 2025, when preferences themselves swing hard toward restriction. We read this not as the belated rightward turn the standard thesis needs — it arrives years after the AfD's breakthrough, not before it — but in one of two ways, very possibly both. It may be a real, perhaps temporary, hardening in a charged pre-election period of intense campaigning and high-profile attacks, consistent with the simultaneous peak in salience. Or it may be the normalization dynamic surfacing: as a restrictive party becomes a fixture and the social cost of saying so falls, preferences that were always there finally show up in the survey. Repeated cross-sections cannot separate the two, and the 2025 figure — from a separate study fielded in an exceptional moment — warrants caution. What it does not do is rescue the rightward-shift story: even after the jump, the restrictive majority is merely back to its 2010 size.

Our argument also sharpens, rather than contradicts, the "dysfunctional responsiveness" thesis of Giebler and Estermann (2025). They are right that, compared with other problems, immigration is over-attended; we are right that, within the immigration issue, a majority preference went under-supplied. These are different measurements at different levels, and both can hold. But only the within-issue, over-time view explains the AfD — and that is precisely the view the cross-issue framing cannot provide. Engaging their argument therefore strengthens ours: an issue can be over-weighted on the public agenda and still contain a real, unrepresented majority that a challenger can ride.

Two limits keep the claim honest. The analysis is correlational: we show that a gap existed and closed as the AfD moved right, not that the gap mechanically caused the party's success, and other forces — the activation of latent demand, the erosion of anti-radical-right norms — plainly run alongside it. And our party measures are perceived positions, not coded manifestos; they capture how voters located the parties, which is the right quantity for an argument about the vote, but not a direct reading of programmatic supply. Neither limit, in our view, dislodges the central finding — not least because if restrictive preferences were understated while saying them was costly, the gap we document is, if anything, an underestimate.

Germany's lesson is then a general one. A radical-right party need not convert a public or invent a grievance to succeed on immigration. It is enough that a large, durable preference go unrepresented until someone agrees to represent it. Whether the 2025 hardening proves lasting, and whether the mainstream parties now accommodate or keep their distance, the coming GLES waves will show.

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