

Migration regulation preferences and party policy positions: The case of Germany, 2009-2025

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Workshop MI05: Far Right Politics and Electoral Consequences of
Immigration

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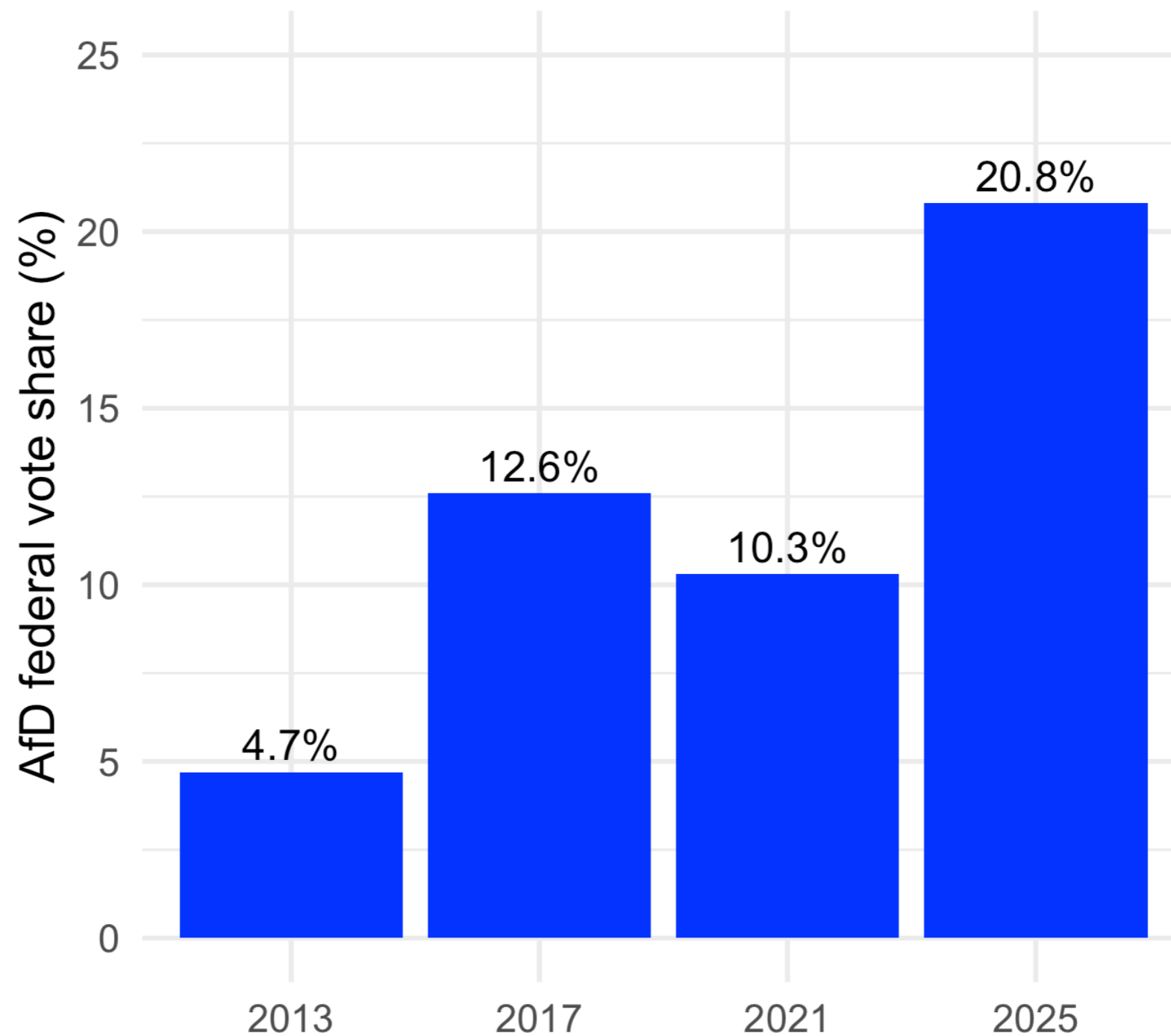
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Questions and outline

- Why the rise of the AfD? And what has migration to do with it?
- What can GLES survey data tell us about it?
- My claim in a nutshell:
 - Two popular explanations (shift to the right and rising issue salience) miss the point
 - We need to look at what parties **offered**, *not* what voters **wanted**

AfD: Germany's exception is over



Two families of explanations

Demand side

- Economic grievances; cultural backlash (Norris/Inglehart 2019)
- Anti-elite sentiment
- Status threat (Gidron/Hall 2017)
- Immigration grievances (Ivarsflaten 2008)

Supply side

- Mainstream parties converge and hollow out (Mair 2013; Kitschelt and MacGann 1995)
- A salient preference is left unrepresented (representation gap) (Patzelt 2017)

Demand theory has a timing problem in Germany:

- attitudes were stable or softening through 2015–16 ([Bartels 2020](#));
- votes jumped far faster than opinion ([Valentim 2024](#)).
- The AfD sits closest to the median citizen on migration ([Kübler and Schäfer 2022](#)).

My argument – three points

A claim about **under-supply *within* the immigration issue:**

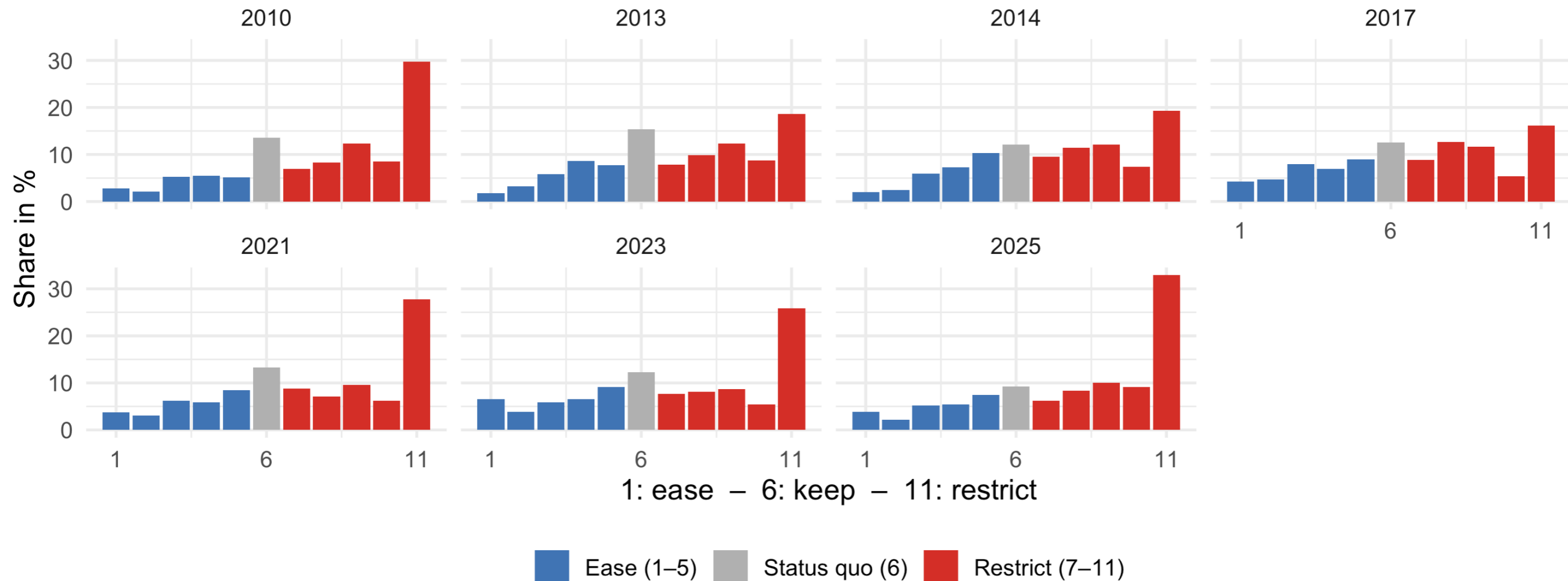
1. **A stable majority for restriction** — no steady rightward drift.
2. Party positions **bunched on the permissive side**, left of the average voter, early on.
3. The gap **closes only when the AfD moves right after 2015.**

On data and method

- **GLES Tracking** — repeated cross-sections since 2009: cumulated file ZA6832 (2009–2023) + the February 2025 wave ZA10105.
- Seven dated waves: 2010, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2023, 2025.
- Voters' **own view** and their **reading of each party** sit on the **same 11-point scale** (1 = ease ... 6 = keep ... 11 = restrict).

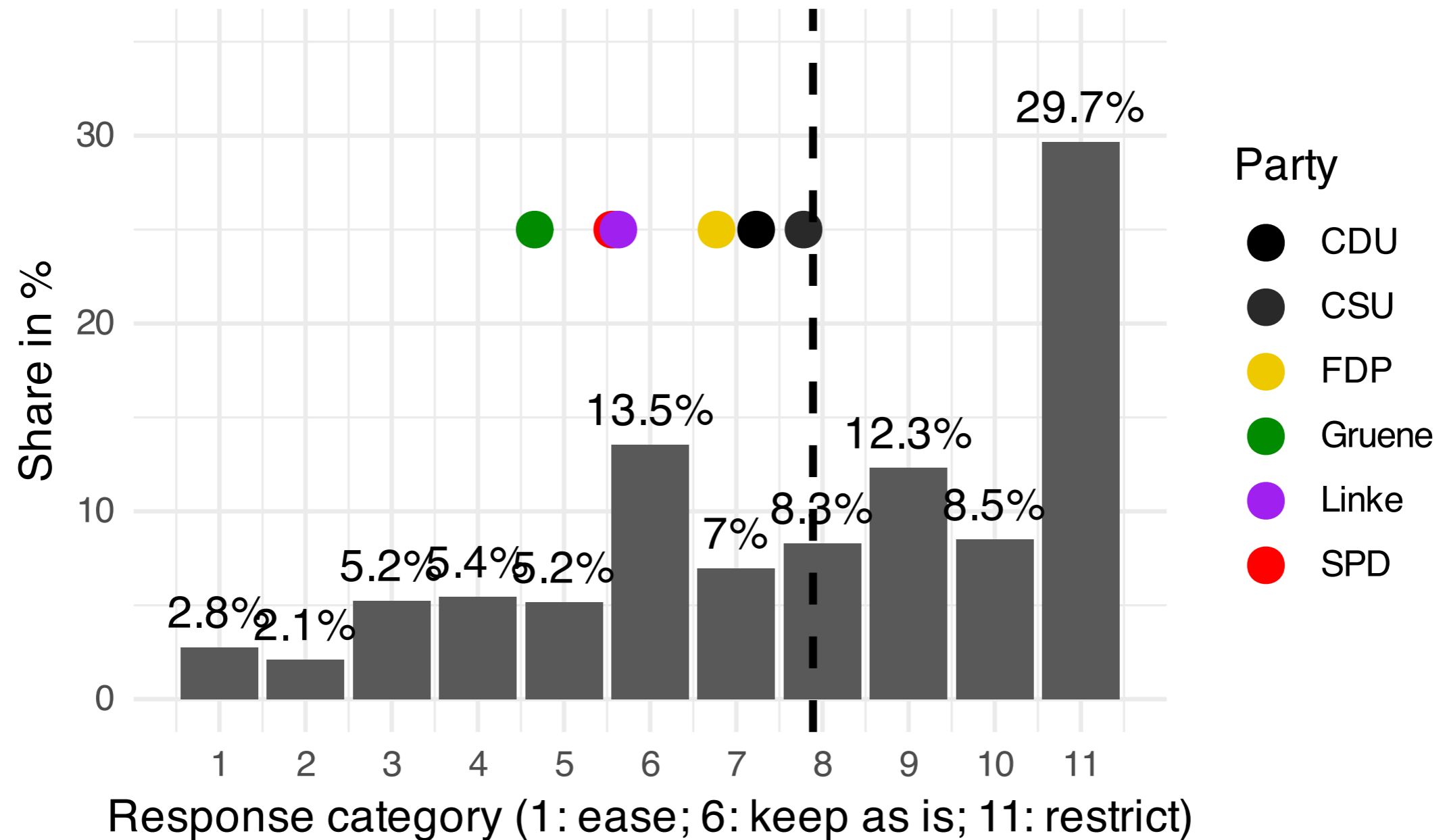
→ The representation gap is read straight off the scale.

Demand: preferences barely move



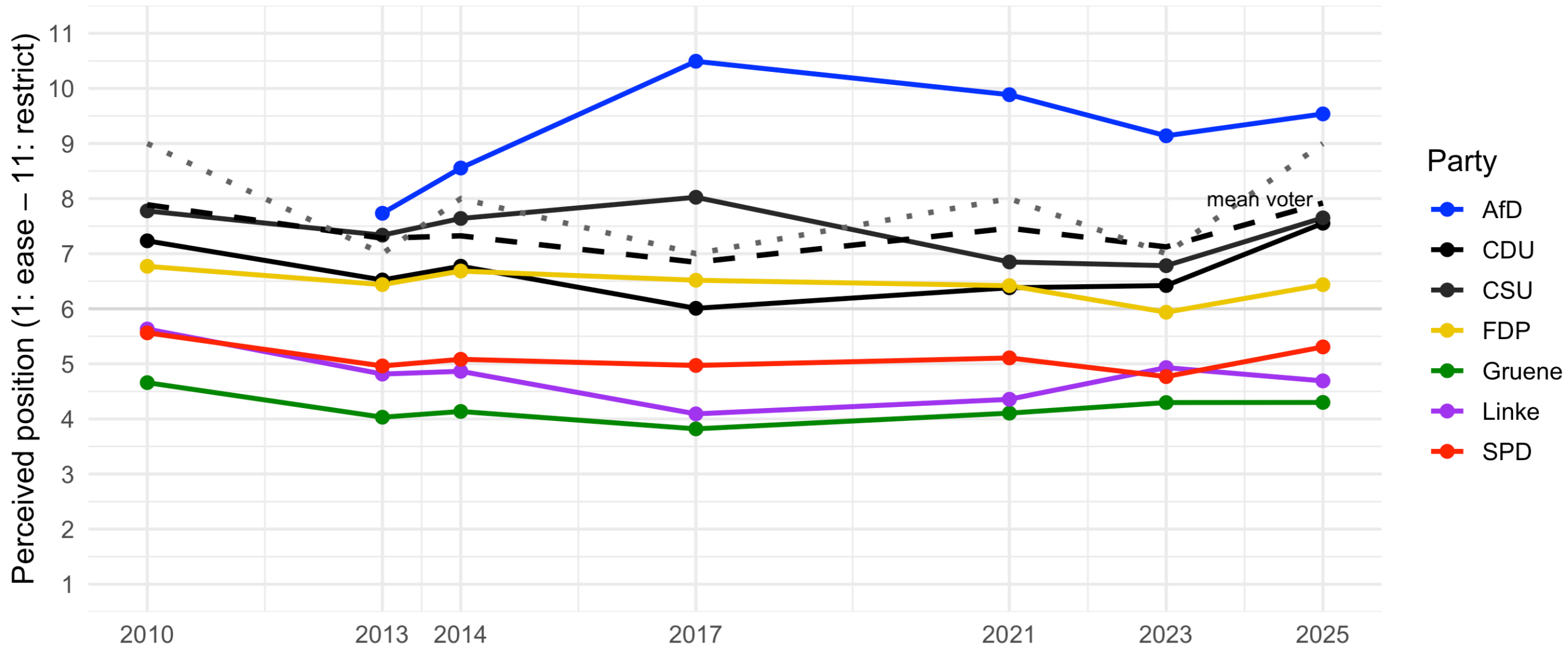
A durable **restrictive majority** at every wave. The restriction margin **narrows** 45 → 22 pp (2010→2017), then returns in stages to 42 in 2025 — **just shy of where it began**.

Supply: Established parties don't offer restriction



Own calculations based on GLES dataset ZA6832. N = 1048

Then one party moves. The voters don't.

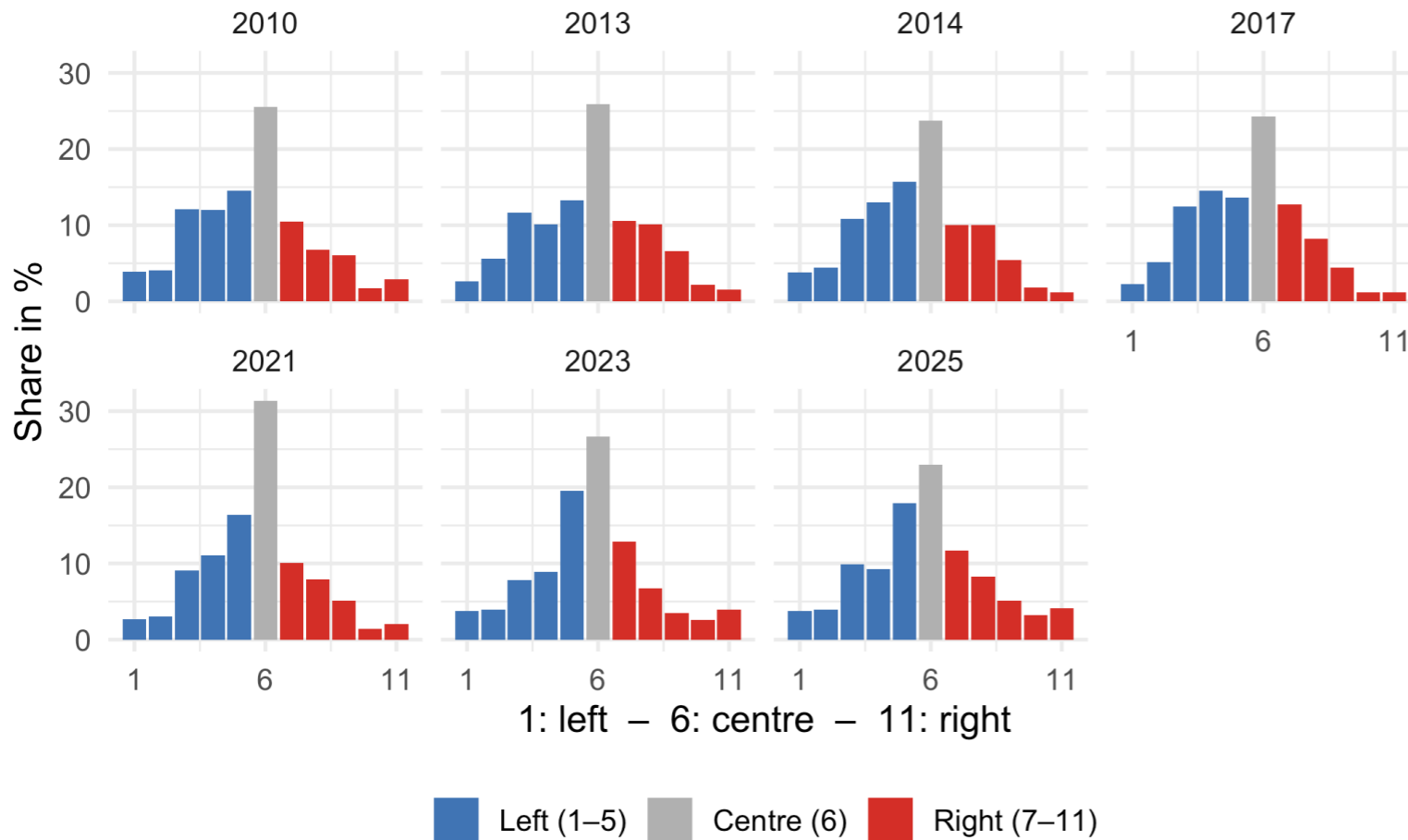


The AfD jumps from ~7.7 (2013) to 10.5 (2017) — the **only party right of the mean voter** (dashed). Every other party, and the voter line, stay flat.

Testing the alternative explanation: What about the “shift to the right”?



Left-right and salience are both flat



Year	Salience (1=high...5=low)
2010	2.25
2013	2.60
2014	2.42
2017	2.28
2021	2.52
2023	2.43
2025	2.10

Left-right self-placement:
dominant centre, left > right
(~3:2), no drift – incl. 2025.

Salience sits at 2.1–2.6
throughout – no trend; only a
late-2025 bump.

Conclusion – What the data show

- For **15 years**, ~two thirds of Germans wanted **more restriction**; every established party, the CSU included, was seen on the **permissive side** of the average voter.
- A textbook **representation gap** – unaddressed until the **AfD moved to the restrictive pole after 2015–16** and became its sole occupant.
- **No** rightward shift in left–right identity or salience to explain it via a changing electorate.

→ **The dynamic was in the *supply* — the menu of choices — *not* in voter preferences!**

→ **Not a “Rechtsruck”, nor a hardening on migration — but the years-long neglect of an existing, stable majority preference by the established parties.**
A gap the AfD, and only the AfD, moved to fill.

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Thank you!