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The “Free Voters”: A Decent Alternative for Conservatives?

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Abstract The Free Voters (*Freie Wähler*) party is becoming a more serious competitor in the German party system. It gained parliamentary representation in the Rhineland Palatine in 2021 and has been governing with the Christian Social Union in Bavaria since 2018. In addition, the Free Voters party now holds two of the 96 German parliamentary member positions in the European Parliament and is, at the federal level, the extraparliamentary opposition party with the greatest number of votes. Nevertheless, there has, to date, been no analysis examining people’s motives for voting for the Free Voters or exploring their future openness to voting for the party. This article addresses this oversight by identifying factors, based on population-representative data from the 2021 *Bundestag* elections, that favour openness and voting for this increasingly influential party. Our analysis shows that a more general dissatisfaction with democratic outputs, a conservative attitude, and low perceptions of spatial distance from the political positions of the Free Voters have significant positive effects.

Keywords Free Voters · German politics · Party competition · German federal election 2021 · Voter potentials

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Die Freien Wähler: Eine anständige Alternative für Konservative?

Zusammenfassung Die Freien Wähler entwickeln sich zu einem ernstzunehmenden Konkurrenten im deutschen Parteiensystem. Sie sind 2021 in den rheinland-pfälzischen Landtag eingezogen und regieren seit 2018 gemeinsam mit der CSU in Bayern. Zudem stellen die Freien Wähler mittlerweile zwei der 96 deutschen Abgeordneten im Europäischen Parlament und sind auf Bundesebene die stimmenstärkste außerparlamentarische Oppositionspartei. Dennoch gibt es bisher keine Analyse, die die Motive der Wähler:innen für die Wahl der Freien Wähler oder eine mögliche zukünftige Bereitschaft, die Partei zu wählen, untersucht. Dieser Artikel behebt dieses Defizit, indem er auf der Grundlage von bevölkerungsrepräsentativen Daten zur Bundestagswahl 2021 Faktoren identifiziert, die die Offenheit und die Stimmabgabe für diese zunehmend einflussreiche Partei begünstigen. Unsere Analyse zeigt, dass eine allgemeinere Unzufriedenheit mit der demokratischen Performanz, eine konservative Grundhaltung sowie eine geringe wahrgenommene räumliche Distanz zu den politischen Positionen der Freien Wähler positive Effekte haben.

Schlüsselwörter Freie Wähler · Deutsche Politik · Parteienwettbewerb · Bundestagswahl 2021 · Wählerpotenziale

1 The Free Voters: A Serious Competitor in the German Party System?

With the Free Voters (*Freie Wähler*), a small party is gradually establishing itself and increasingly achieving electoral success, although it still plays a subordinate role at the national level. In Germany, in particular, the party system has proven to be extremely stable for decades, with structural changes occurring only rarely (Franzmann et al. 2020)—not an easy starting point for the establishment of the Free Voters. Nevertheless, the emergence of the Alternative for Germany party (*Alternative für Deutschland*; AfD) in 2013 shows that these former realities are also changing (Arzheimer 2015; Wurthmann et al. 2021). Christian Democrats in Germany, as in many other countries, have recently found themselves in a much more decisive struggle about their future’s agenda, which will also decide the future of this party family (Wiliarty 2021). An increasing shift of Christian Democratic Union (*Christlich-Demokratische Union*; CDU) and Christian Social Union (*Christlich-Soziale Union*; CSU) to the left concerning socioeconomic issues (Dilling 2018) and the softening of its migration-critical stance, particularly in the 2015 decision to take in Syrian refugees, resulted in significant losses of votes for the party (Stecker and Debus 2019). Conservatives were alienated from the Christian Democrats (Hertner 2022) while the AfD has, in the meantime, become even more radicalised and is now being monitored in parts by the German Office for the Protection of the Constitution for antidemocratic aspirations (Tuovinen 2023). Thus, there might be a group of German conservative voters who feel alienated by the CDU/CSU but for whom voting for a far-right radical party like the AfD is not an option—and for these “decent conservatives”, the Free Voters could be an option.

In recent years, the Free Voters have become a serious competitor to the established parties that might be able to address these voters. Since the 1990s, the Free Voters’ participation in state elections has been increasing. They now have parliamentary representation in two states and have achieved significant vote shares in several states since the 2000s (Morlok et al. 2012, p. 11). In 2008, they first succeeded in entering a state parliament in the Bavarian state election, and, since 2018, they have been involved in governing there as the junior partner of the CSU. The success of the Free Voters in Bavaria is largely based on their ability to win over voters who have turned away from the Christian Socialists. The Free Voters in Bavaria have already achieved what may yet be following at the federal level.

In addition to that, in Rhineland-Palatinate, the Free Voters entered the state parliament for the first time in 2021¹ and were capable of winning two of the 96 German seats in the 2019 European elections. After the Free Voters contested the German federal election for the first time in 2013, immediately reaching more than 1% of the electoral votes, they remained at this level in the next federal election in 2017. In the 2021 federal election, they achieved 2.4% of the electoral votes and thus became the strongest extraparliamentary opposition in Germany (Bundeswahlleiter 2021, p. 9). In the lead-up to this election, commentators even contemplated whether the party might succeed in entering the *Bundestag*. Even though the party was unsuccessful, if any of the new smaller parties are to enter the *Bundestag* in the next election, it seems most likely to be the Free Voters—possibly at the expense of the CDU/CSU.

Despite the decades of success of the Free Voters and their broad establishment in German local politics (Angenendt 2021a, p. 638), previous studies on the Free Voters have mainly focused on the characteristics of their members and the party’s organisation (Walther and Angenendt 2018, 2021). Thus far, there is only one study analysing the voter potentials of the Free Voters, and not only was it published a decade ago, it was also limited to the state of Baden-Württemberg (Faas and Blumenberg 2012, p. 194). Given the growing success of the Free Voters, it is essential to identify related voter potentials that may become even more significant in the future. Our basic assumption, which is also the starting point for the previous *Länder* studies, is that the Free Voters are particularly attractive to liberal-conservative voters who are also, to some extent, dissatisfied with the daily outputs of democracy. The latter aspect distinguishes them from classic supporters of established centre-right parties such as the Free Democratic Party (*Freie Demokratische Partei*; FDP) and the CDU/CSU. They find themselves in an ideological niche where they directly compete with their democratic rivals, the CDU/CSU and FDP, and the radical right AfD. Thus, for voters of the CDU/CSU and FDP, the Free Voters offer themselves as a decent alternative that is less radical than the AfD.

To test our assumptions, we drew on survey data collected in the run-up to the 2021 federal election. For the first time, such data were collected in the context of a national election survey that not only included individually assumed party positions

¹ The Brandenburg Citizens’ Movement/Free Voters (BVB/Free Voters), which entered the Brandenburg state parliament for the first time in 2019, is a distinct party, despite their almost identical name (Oeltzen 2018, p. 191).

of the Free Voters but also allowed the party's voter potential to be determined more concretely.

2 The Free Voters in the German Political System

2.1 The Formation and Rise of the Free Voters at the Local and Regional Levels

The Free Voters have been an established part of the local political party system in Germany since the founding of the Federal Republic (Haller 1979; Holtkamp and Eimer 2006; Morlok et al. 2012; Wehling and Stortz 2018). Their origins lie in local politics, where they have succeeded for decades, particularly in the southern states of Rhineland-Palatinate, Baden-Württemberg, and Bavaria (Holtmann 2012, pp. 26–27; Kranenpohl 2013; Reiser et al. 2008). In local politics, they do not contest local elections as a political party but rather as independent local lists, making them distinctive in the local political landscape (Reiser 2012, p. 80). Their status as an independent local list was their unique selling point for a long time (Welsh 2012). Unlike established nationwide parties, the Free Voters initially ran only in local and/or (to a limited extent) regional elections (Breitenfellner 2012) but not at the federal level. Unlike other independent local lists, the Free Voters run for office not only in one city but almost everywhere in Germany.

To represent the concerns of the Free Voters' independent local lists in the higher levels of the political system, interest groups were formed at the state and federal levels (Walther and Angenendt 2021, pp. 318–320). They aim to articulate the interests of their independent local lists in state and/or federal politics and increase public awareness of the Free Voters' independent local lists through public relations (Stortz 2009, pp. 73–75; Wehling and Stortz 2018). The first state associations (*Landesverbände*) were founded in the 1950s, followed by the federal association (*Bundesverband*) in 1965. They are exclusively composed of independent local lists as legal entities (Angenendt 2021b, pp. 231–233), which conflicts with the requirements of the German party law regarding individual membership and running for office in federal elections (Morlok 2013; Morlok and Merten 2011; Roßner 2012). However, the Free Voters' formation of state and federal associations was a first attempt to expand their political influence beyond the local level.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the Free Voters have been running more frequently in state elections (Behnke 2012, p. 112; Morlok et al. 2012, p. 11). Primarily in the southern states, greater success has been achieved (Walther and Angenendt 2021). In Bavaria, they first entered the state parliament in 2008 and have been a junior partner in a coalition with the CSU since 2018. In Rhineland-Palatinate, they first entered the state parliament in 2021. Stimulated by their success in the 2008 Bavarian state election (Schultze and Grasnack 2009), the political party of the Free Voters was established in 2009 in time to run in the upcoming federal election. Since 2014, the Free Voters have been represented in the European Parliament.

However, the Free Voters are still a hybrid actor, characterised by a double organisational structure (Welsh 2012): On the one side, there are the Free Voters'

independent local lists with their related interest groups, and on the other side is the political party of the Free Voters, which manifests in various forms of membership. Therefore, the Free Voters are the epitome of a political bottom-up organisation in Germany: Starting out by running in local elections, then expanding to regional ones, they eventually formed themselves into a political party to also participate in federal elections.

The core of the Free Voters’ brand in local politics is their self-presentation as a nonpolitical, independent, and citizen-oriented alternative to the nationwide established parties (Angenendt 2021b, pp. 231–233; Weitzker 2008, pp. 34–35). Therefore, in their political communication, the Free Voters distance themselves from the party model: They criticise political parties for being alienated from citizens and their ideologies, and instead emphasise their own proximity to citizens and their commitment to local issues (Haller 1979; Lütjen 2012). The demarcation from political ideologies is also reflected in their name, as Free Voters implies ideologically unbound voters, as well as in the widespread negative attitudes of their members towards the established parties (Walther and Angenendt 2018, pp. 334–335).

Their political style fits well with the perception of local politics as a place for nonideological pragmatic decision-making, where parties are seen as unnecessary for effective local governance (von Arnim 1988; Holtkamp 2007, p. 367; Naßmacher 1996; Wehling 1991; Wollmann 2002). Recent studies, however, show that the Free Voters and other independent local lists do position themselves politically in local party competition, just as the local branches of the nationwide established parties do (Egner et al. 2013, p. 77; Gross and Jankowski 2020a, b). The Free Voters’ independent local lists are programmatically anchored in the conservative political spectrum (Walther and Angenendt 2018, pp. 342–444), which means they are less apolitical than one would expect based on their self-presentation. Newer studies also show that the anti-establishment rhetoric of independent local lists (Angenendt 2018) appeals to dissatisfied and populist voters on election day (Juen et al. 2021) and that they compete with populist parties like the AfD (Jankowski et al. 2022a).

However, the Free Voters are not more successful at the local level than other independent local lists (Angenendt 2021b, pp. 274–281). One reason may be that the presence of different subdivisions of Free Voters hampers electoral success. In some municipalities, the local branches of the Free Voters party compete with the Free Voters’ independent local lists. For voters, this likely leads to confusion about who the “true” Free Voters are on the ballot paper (Deutschlandfunk Kultur 2019). Furthermore, the Free Voters have become a generic term for the spectrum of independent local lists, which may undermine their unique selling point as a party-independent alternative.

2.2 The Free Voters on the Federal Stage: Policy Positions and Attitudes Towards Established Parties

The Free Voters’ positioning in the federal policy space and how their antiparty stance in local politics manifests in federal politics is demonstrated by the current state of research on the Free Voters party at the federal level. On the national stage, the Free Voters are trying to replicate their successful local recipe and present

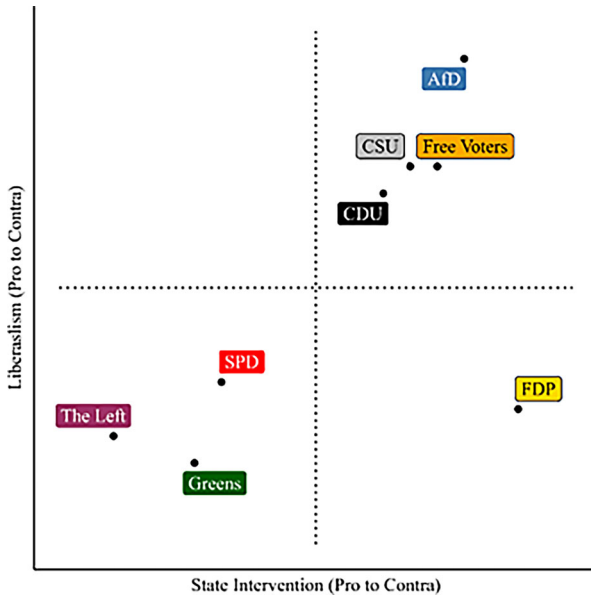


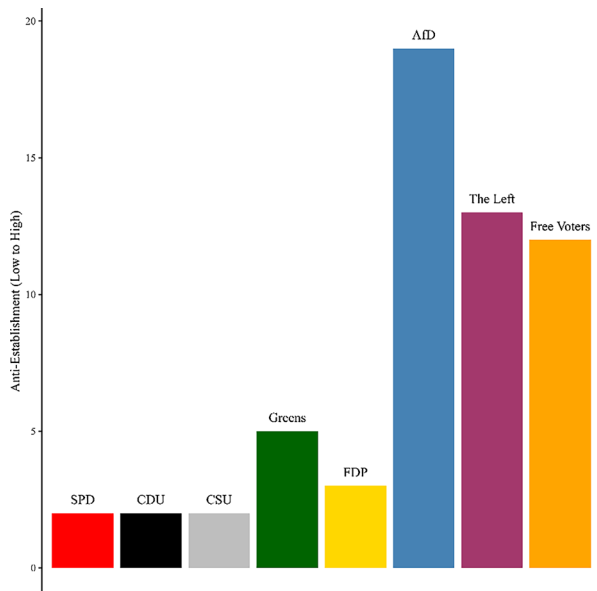
Fig. 1 Political landscape of Germany based on expert medians. For the state interventionism dimension, the experts were asked to locate the parties on a conflict dimension between (1) *tax increases/more public services* and (2) *tax cuts/fewer public services*. Initially, they were presented with the following statement: *In economic policy, there is a conflict between the following positions: Support for tax increases to improve public services versus support for cuts in public services to enable tax cuts. In your opinion, what is the position of the parties on this?* For the liberalism dimension, the experts were first presented with the following statement: *There is opposition between the following positions in this policy field: Support for a liberal policy on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia versus opposition to a liberal policy on issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia. In your opinion, what is the position of the parties on this?* The experts should then situate the parties on a conflict line between (1) *for a liberal policy* and (2) *against a liberal policy on these issues*. AfD Alternative for Germany, CDU Christian Democratic Union, CSU Christian Social Union, FDP Free Democratic Party, SPD Social Democratic Party. (Source: Jankowski et al. 2022b; authors' own presentation and calculation)

themselves as a rational, nonpolitical, and citizen-oriented party. Compared to the Free Voters and independent local lists at the local and regional levels, there is little information and research available about the Free Voters party in federal politics. Despite the Free Voters' increasing success, no previous analyses have examined the determinants of vote choices in favour of the party. Therefore, we first examine how the party is positioned politically to determine what may make them appealing to voters from an ideological perspective.²

Figure 1 shows how the Free Voters party is positioned in a two-dimensional political landscape based on the economic and cultural dimensions of party competition (Marks et al. 2006). The positions are based on the medians of the expert

² Placing the Free Voters within a multidimensional political space is difficult. Regarding international expert surveys, most projects focus on parties that won at least one seat in the last national election. As the Free Voters did not achieve this, established projects such as the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) have not included the party.

Fig. 2 Antiestablishment positions based on expert medians. *AfD* Alternative for Germany, *CDU* Christian Democratic Union, *CSU* Christian Social Union, *FDP* Free Democratic Party, *SPD* Social Democratic Party. (Source: Jankowski et al. 2022b; authors’ own presentation and calculation)



placements from the Open Expert Survey (Jankowski et al. 2022b). The Free Voters are located in the top-right quadrant, holding centre-right and moderate conservative economic positions. They are positioned very close to the CDU and CSU in both dimensions and are only slightly more right-leaning in economic terms than the CSU and slightly more liberal in cultural terms. In economic terms, they are also relatively close to the AfD, but the latter is positioned much more conservatively than the Free Voters. The Free Voters are thus located in an already contested space. This could be a factor in why the party has not been successful in federal elections.

The Free Voters may benefit from the brand’s recognition and the connected antiestablishment image in federal elections. For this reason, the party of the Free Voters also adopts a clear anti-establishment stance, denying the political elites’ ability to adequately represent the population, as depicted in Fig. 2. While no other party is as antiestablishment oriented as the far-right AfD, the Free Voters are quite antiestablishmentarian, to a similar extent as The Left (Fig. 2).

An initial analysis of the electoral potential of the Free Voters in the 2011 state election in Baden-Württemberg supports this argument (Faas and Blumenberg 2012, pp. 193–194): Voters who are dissatisfied with the established parties and who possess a conservative political attitude are (potentially) more likely to vote for the Free Voters. On the other hand, a preference for pragmatic political decision-making does not exert any significant effect on potential voters (Faas and Blumenberg 2012). Thus, the results indicate that the party’s practical approach may be promising in local politics but not necessarily in higher levels of politics.

3 Determinants of Vote Choice for Free Voters

Voting behaviour has been analysed from different perspectives. The microsociological approach states that direct social interaction in the social environment is relevant for voting behaviour (Lazarsfeld et al. 1944). In contrast, the macrosociological approach considers factors such as religious affiliation or class membership as formative for voting (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). The sociopsychological model relies primarily on long-term factors such as party identity and short-term factors, namely issue and candidate orientation (Campbell et al. 1960), to explain individual voting behaviour. However, these approaches are of little use as explanatory variables for the Free Voters. No sociostructurally determined factor could be identified for this party that would be sufficiently influential in applying the sociological explanatory models mentioned for the Free Voters (Faas and Blumenberg 2012, p. 189). In the case of the sociopsychological model, on the other hand, the problem arises that if one follows the theoretical logic of the so-called funnel of causality (Campbell et al. 1960), this approach could certainly be understood as being based on structural conditions. If one ignored this contextual path dependency, party identification, issue, and candidate orientation would remain as starting points.

Contrary to the original model-theoretical approach, in which party identification occurs prior to orientation to issues and candidates, studies show that orientation to the latter aspects can also positively promote party attachment (Dassonneville et al. 2023). This is particularly true when spatial distances between individuals and the party positions they assume are considered (Wurthmann 2023; Dalton et al. 2011). However, the fact that such an approach, based on spatial assumptions, can also be effective for electoral decisions is not a novelty but has been a common explanatory approach for decades (Downs 1957; Stokes 1963). It is also far less presuppositional for an initial substantive approach since the orientation towards candidates presupposes sufficient familiarity with these persons. This is not the case with the political personnel of the Free Voters, whose political staff are not well-known.

For this reason, from a theoretical perspective, we have identified three potential determinants of the decision to vote for the Free Voters: (1) a conservative political attitude, (2) low programmatic distance from the Free Voters, and (3) a negative attitude towards political parties and dissatisfaction with how democracy functions.

We generally follow the assumption that voters' political orientation should influence their vote choice. The Free Voters tend to be positioned in the conservative political spectrum, with a liberal economic policy stance, as discussed and illustrated in Fig. 1. We expect that mainly people with a right-leaning orientation are willing to vote for the Free Voters. Here we differentiate between the economic and cultural dimensions of party competition (Marks et al. 2006).

H1a Voters who lean right in the economic dimension are more likely to vote for the Free Voters.

H1b Voters who lean right in the cultural dimension are more likely to vote for the Free Voters.

Hypotheses 1a and 1b imply that the electoral decision will favour the Free Voters if the political orientation of the voters points in the same direction as the actual positioning of the Free Voters. What remains unconsidered, however, is where the voters locate the party in the political space and how far their position is from the perception of the party’s position. According to this, the decisive factor is not the mere location of voters in the right or conservative political spectrum but whether the Free Voters are programmatically closer to the political position of the voters than other parties, whether from the left or the right. Following the proximity model of party competition, which postulates that voters maximise their electoral utility by voting for the party that is closest to their personal assumed political position (Downs 1957), we, therefore, tested the additional hypothesis that the distance between voters’ political position and the perceived position of the Free Voters determines vote choice:

H2a The greater the proximity between the position of the Free Voters and voters on the economic dimension, the greater the potential to vote for the Free Voters in federal elections.

H2b The greater the proximity between the position of the Free Voters and voters on the cultural dimension, the greater the potential to vote for the Free Voters.

Current research indicates that members of the Free Voters are dissatisfied with the established parties, that this dissatisfaction is reflected in the hybrid organisational structure of the Free Voters, and that dissatisfaction with the established parties on the demand side is a relevant voting factor (Walther and Angenendt 2021; Faas and Blumenberg 2012). In the past, the federal party leader Hubert Aiwanger caused public outrage when he criticised the COVID-19 protection measures instituted in 2021 (ZEIT Online 2021) and demanded that all “decent citizens” be equipped with a knife with which to defend themselves against criminals (Süddeutsche Zeitung 2019). Whether this antiestablishment appeal pays off electorally for the Free Voters is an open question because, with their claim to be a “decent alternative” (the title of their 2017 federal election manifesto) to the established parties, they walk a fine line. On the one hand, they want to distinguish themselves from the radical right populist party, the AfD, but on the other hand, they are also attempting to reach dissatisfied voters. Shift analysis for the two states where the Free Voters have managed to enter parliament, Bavaria and Rhineland-Palatinate, show that the party has successfully won over former CDU/CSU, FDP, and, to a lesser extent, Social Democratic Party (SPD) voters. However, comparing these two states exposes some differences. The Free Voters won over former AfD voters in the Rhineland-Palatinate (2021). In contrast, in Bavaria (2018), where the AfD is more established, the Free Voters lost votes to the AfD. Instead, the Free Voters won over former nonvoters in the Bavarian elections (Infratest dimap 2018, 2021).

It is anything but a foregone conclusion that the Free Voters' formula for success in local politics can easily be transferred to federal politics. According to the thesis of second-order elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980), voters are more likely to cast "protest" votes in local elections than federal ones, with the result that the established parties have greater competition from the independent local lists who benefit from voters' distrust in the established parties (see Jankowski et al. 2022a; Angenendt 2018, 2023). Thus, the conditions of party competition in higher-level politics differ from those in local politics. Based on the discussion in the previous section, the Free Voters could also appeal to this "protest" potential at the federal level. The AfD, which could be classified as a primary protest party in its early years, has transformed itself into a far-right party. On the one hand, the AfD is now too established and profiled in its political agenda to speak of pure protest voting behaviour (Angenendt and Brause forthcoming, pp. 4–5; Wurthmann et al. 2021). On the other hand, voting behaviour favouring the AfD is determined by hostility towards foreigners, strong Euroscepticism, and stark antielitist positions and is under intelligence surveillance on suspicion of antidemocratic aspirations (Hansen and Olsen 2022). Thus, the AfD is now too radical for "decent" protest voters—an electoral niche that may be opened for the Free Voters.

In our empirical analysis, we examine how political dissatisfaction determines the voting decision in favour of the Free Voters. In so doing, we differentiate between satisfaction with the established parties and general dissatisfaction with how democracy functions in Germany. While democratic satisfaction explicitly refers to the generalised output performance of democratic governance, the parties' assessment corresponds to a specific indicator for measuring political support, thus, satisfaction with specific actors (Norris 2011). Reinl and Schäfer (2021) provide evidence that those two factors are independent from one another and that voters of AfD and The Left support their parties as strongly as voters of other parties despite being more dissatisfied with how democracy works. In front of this, we expect differentiated measurement results, and we derive the following assumptions:

H3a The more satisfied an individual is with one of the established parties, the less likely they are to vote for the Free Voters.

H3b The more dissatisfied voters are with how democracy functions, the greater their potential to vote for the Free Voters.

4 Research Design

Data and Variables The data used for the analysis were collected in the run-up to the 2021 federal election. For this purpose, we used the online access panel of the market research institute Respondi,³ which boasts 100,000 registered members.

³ The data collection for this article was financially supported by the Fritz Thyssen Stiftung (Az. 20.21.0.008PO). These data were collected as part of a project by Stefan Marschall and L. Constantin Wurthmann at the Heinrich Heine University in Düsseldorf.

The data collection took place between 9 August and 14 August and included respondents between 18 and 74 years old at the time of the survey. A quota sample was drawn to recruit respondents to match the German population’s representative characteristics as closely as possible. Only marginal deviations can be observed, in direct comparison to the census data (see Online Appendix, Table A.1). A total of 2270 interviews were completed. Of these, 64 respondents have been excluded from the analysis because they stated they were not eligible to vote or did not know whether they were allowed to vote. Accordingly, 2206 cases remain for analysis. However, this number of cases was reduced to 824 respondents in the further course of the analysis, as we excluded all individuals from the analyses who did not provide any information on the content of at least one of the indicators used, e.g., “don’t know” or “no information”.

Dependent Variables Two dependent variables were used for the modelling of the analysis. A dichotomous variable was used to measure individual voting preferences. The primary basis for this measure was the general question about which party the respondents intended to vote for in the 2021 German federal election. However, we also asked whether respondents could imagine voting for another party as a second-choice option. The data set only contains 43 out of 2206 respondents who indicated an intention to vote for the Free Voters, resulting in an extremely small sample size, which corresponds to the voter share in the 2021 federal election. We have therefore decided to create a new variable combining both of these answers to a narrow potential indicator. Suppose the second-choice option is included, which represents a total of 106 respondents to define the narrower voter potential. In that case, a total of 149 respondents remain, on the basis of which more reliable analyses can be conducted. For the new variable, voting for the Free Voters, all those who indicated that they intended to vote for the Free Voters or who indicated that the Free Voters were their second choice were coded as (1).⁴ Those who did not meet these two conditions were coded (0). We turned to the propensity to vote (PTV) for the Free Voters as a second variable to identify a broader electoral potential. Here, the respondents were asked how likely they thought it was, generally speaking, that they would vote for a particular party—in this case, the Free Voters. They were asked to rate their response for various parties on a scale from (1) *very unlikely* to (11) *very likely*. The PTV offers an alternative perspective and is especially useful for analysing small-party voting, as the coefficients in discrete choice models can be biased (van der Eijk et al. 2006).

Independent Variables In order to measure the participants’ ideological positions, respondents were presented with scales on which to indicate their positions. They were then presented with a list of parties, including the Free Voters, which they were asked to position on the same ideological scales. The first scale was used to measure positions on the socioeconomic cleavage, which ranged from (1) *The*

⁴ Moreover, all individuals who stated that the Free Voters were without any alternative as second choice were also coded with (1).

government should play an active role in the economy to (11) *The government should not intervene in the market at all*, using the labels recommended by Downs (1957).

In order to cover the sociocultural conflict dimension, the respondents were presented with an introduction explaining that while the conservative pole emphasises traditional values, progressiveness reflects openness to alternative lifestyles. They were then asked to position themselves on a scale ranging from (1) *progressive* to (11) *conservative*. The respondents' self-positioning was included in the analyses as a subjective component. In the second stage of the analysis, the respondents' assessments of the Free Voters' position were compared to their self-positioning to determine an objective ideological distance. The ideological distances derived from this comparison were coded from 0 to 10. In order to capture the respondents' satisfaction with democracy, they were asked how satisfied they were with the way the political system works in Germany today. They expressed their attitude on a scale from (1) *not at all satisfied* to (11) *fully satisfied*.

Regarding party dissatisfaction, we used party ratings that were asked on a scale from -5 to +5. To measure party satisfaction, we then took the highest rating that a respondent gave to any other parties represented in parliament (e.g., if someone evaluated all parties with 0 and one party with 1, this variable takes the value 1).

Controls Age, education level, and gender of respondents are considered to have an effect significant enough that it warranted including them as control variables in the analysis. The ages of the respondents were recorded with an entry in a free field. To report their sex, the respondents chose between (0) *male* and (1) *female*. The respondents' level of schooling was measured by a scale ranging from (1) *left school without a diploma* to (5) *left school with a high school diploma*.

Previous research has demonstrated that independent local lists are particularly successful in rural areas with smaller populations (Angenendt 2021b, pp. 272–273; Reiser et al. 2008). Due to the strong local political anchoring of the Free Voters' independent local lists, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Free Voters are more likely to be elected where they are successful in local elections. For this reason and because this factor is also capable of influencing an individual's ideological stances, we decided to use the respondents' place of residence as a further control variable. The respondents chose the option that most accurately described their place of residence from the following list: (1) *large city*, (2) *outskirts or suburbs of a large city*, (3) *medium-sized or small town*, (4) *rural village*, and (5) *single homestead or a detached house in the countryside*. Categories (4) and (5) were then—due to the low number of cases of single homestead or detached houses—combined into a new category, (4) *rural*. The other categories remained unchanged, and *large cities* was used as the reference category.

We also decided to include perceived individual and national economic situations, using a scale ranging from (1) *very bad* to (5) *very good*. After all, satisfaction with democracy in Germany and satisfaction with the parties represented in parliament are performance-based indicators that depict the effectiveness of the democratic political system (Norris 2011). In contrast, however, it seems all the more relevant to include the individually perceived sense of legitimacy (Lipset 1981) as a control variable, which allows us to measure genuine opposition to democracy distinct from

performance-based disappointment. Therefore, the respondents were asked to state how important it was for them to live in a democratically governed country. They could answer this on a scale from (1) *not important at all* to (11) *definitely important*.

Method As the first step of the analysis, we calculated several nested linear regression models to identify factors influencing the PTV. We aimed to gain a more differentiated view of whether satisfaction with the established parties and democracy show independent effects that might not be visible in joint modelling. All models were constructed in such a way that we were able to use sociodemographic variables, an assessment of the subjective and national economic situation, and individual positions and distance measures on the socioeconomic and sociocultural dimensions for the calculations. In our democracy model, we examined the respondents’ general satisfaction with democracy and the perceived importance of being governed democratically. In the party satisfaction model, we replaced these democracy variables with the party satisfaction indicator we calculated. Then, in the full model, we used the three variables to create a combined model. We chose this model structure because only nested regression models can show whether and in what combination the selected independent variables gain or lose significance.

In order to examine the narrow voter potential of the Free Voters, we calculated the average marginal effects of voting for the Free Voters. In the modelling, we proceeded analogously to the linear regression models in such a way that the first model again followed the design of the democracy model, the second model followed the party satisfaction model, and the third model followed the full model.

Within the analytical framework, we only included responses that answered all the questions used for the analysis. This reduced the number of responses included in the analysis to 824. One of the reasons for the significant number of responses dropped is that many respondents could not adequately classify the Free Voters on the two ideological dimensions used for the measures. On the one hand, this is not surprising, as voters have less information about the Free Voters because it is a more minor party. On the other hand, it is a generally well-known problem that voters cannot correctly position the parties that we also see in our data set. Even for core policies, up to one third of the voters cannot correctly position parties (Schultz 2014, p. 55). Placing parties, therefore, depends highly on the available information (Banducci et al. 2017, p. 585), which is a disadvantage per se for smaller parties. However, because we aimed to analyse the proximity between voters and parties, we had no choice but to exclude those who did not position the party. In addition, all individuals who answered “don’t know” to one of the items used here or refused to answer were excluded from the analysis.

5 Empirical Results

In the following, we present the results of the descriptive and multivariate analyses. The latter follows the modelling presented in this section. In the descriptive analysis, we only discuss the dependent variables with a view to better understanding the group we are analysing.

Descriptives The present analysis is based on a total number of 824 respondents. Of these, 109 respondents said they either vote for the Free Voters or consider them their second-choice party. This corresponds to a share of 13.2%. Conversely, 86.8% of our respondents did not fulfil any of the conditions mentioned.

The results are different when it comes to the classification of the individual eligibility of the Free Voters as measured by the 11-point PTV question. On a scale from 1 to 11, 65.6% of the respondents considered it unlikely (scale points 1–5) that they would ever vote for the Free Voters. A total of 10.2% of respondents placed themselves at the scale's midpoint, at a value of 6. However, 24.2% of

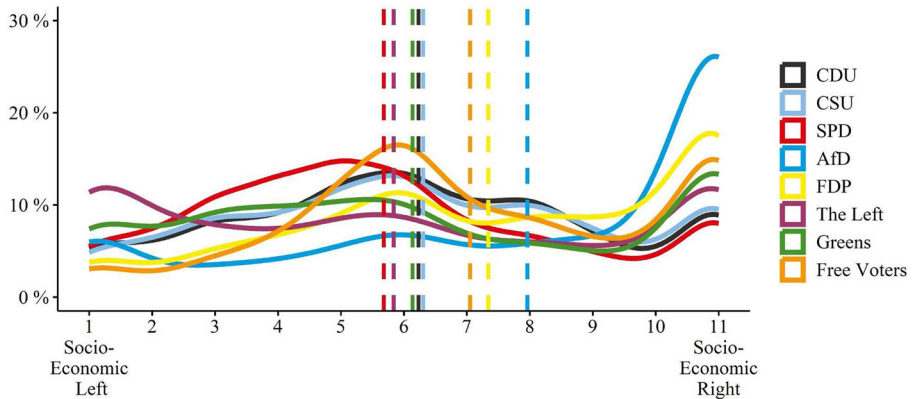


Fig. 3 Assumed party positions on the socioeconomic dimension. The *x-axis* shows the socioeconomic conflict line, while the *y-axis* describes the percentage frequency of mentions. The *dashed vertical lines* correspond to the respondents' average of the assumed party positions. $N=824$. *AfD* Alternative for Germany, *CDU* Christian Democratic Union, *CSU* Christian Social Union, *FDP* Free Democratic Party, *SPD* Social Democratic Party

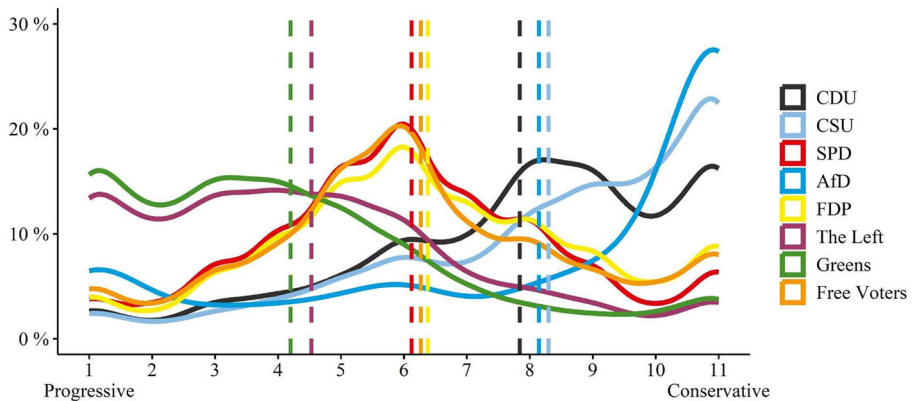


Fig. 4 Assumed party positions on the sociocultural dimension. The *x-axis* shows the sociocultural conflict line, while the *y-axis* describes the percentage frequency of mentions. The *dashed vertical lines* correspond to the respondents' average of the assumed party positions. $N=824$. *AfD* Alternative for Germany, *CDU* Christian Democratic Union, *CSU* Christian Social Union, *FDP* Free Democratic Party, *SPD* Social Democratic Party

respondents considered the Free Voters an electable alternative in principle, ranking themselves between 7 and 11 points on the scale. The overall PTV average is 4.15 (95% Confidence Interval [CI]: 3.95, 4.35) scale points. This indicates that the Free Voters’ potential is much higher than the combined first/second vote choice.

Since the central assumption of this paper is that the spatial position of the Free Voters is of decisive relevance for their success and the competition they face with other parties, it seems helpful to go into this in more detail. When respondents were asked about the socioeconomic and sociocultural dimensions of the parties represented in the *Bundestag* and the Free Voters, interesting insights were gained. On the one hand, our survey data on the socioeconomic conflict line indicate that no party is located in the very left socioeconomic spectrum. The SPD and The Left are located, on average, slightly to the left of the centre, and the Greens, CDU, and CSU, on average, slightly to the right of the centre. The Free Voters, as well as the more economically liberal parties FDP and AfD, are, on average, placed on the socioeconomic right (Fig. 3).

One reason for the narrow range of these average positions may be the increasing focus on sociocultural issues in party competition (Franzmann et al. 2020), which contributes to uncertainties in party positioning (Schultze 2014; Banducci et al. 2017). Another reason may be the increasing ideological convergence of mainstream parties (Spoon and Klüver 2019). This conflict dimension can also observe greater differences in average party positioning. The Left and the Greens are classified as more progressive forces, while the AfD, CDU, and CSU are to be positioned as more conservative (see Fig. 4). It is interesting to note that the Free Voters are positioned more moderately by the respondents than by the party experts (see Fig. 1).

Multivariates As previously discussed, our primary motivation was identifying which factors may contribute to the Free Voters being elected or perceived as an electable alternative. To this end, we present the calculation results of the average marginal effects models that explain voting for the Free Voters. We then discuss respondent’s PTV in favour of the Free Voters.

In the democracy model, which includes the variables on satisfaction with and the importance of democracy, we found that lower satisfaction with democracy does increase the probability that a person will vote for the Free Voters. The average marginal effect is 1.5, meaning that the self-reported probability of voting for the Free Voters increases, on average, by 1.5 percentage points and is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$). While a socioculturally conservative stance ($p < 0.05$) increases the corresponding probability by an average of one percentage point, no significant effect is observable for the liberal socioeconomic position of the respondents. However, a voter’s perceived distance from the Free Voters significantly affects both dimensions. The greater the perceived distance, the less likely the Free Voters will be elected. However, the effect on the sociocultural dimension is, on average, -2.27 percentage points ($p < 0.001$) larger than the effect on the socioeconomic axis, which is -1.13 percentage points ($p < 0.05$).

In addition to the same control and ideology variables, the party satisfaction model includes the party satisfaction variable. It shows that the probability of voting for the Free Voters decreases by 3.16 percentage points when the most favourable evaluation

for one of the parties currently represented in parliament is considered ($p < 0.000$). Accordingly, those voters who see the established parties as a viable choice vote for them accordingly. Analogous to the democracy model, a more socioculturally conservative stance has a statistically significant effect ($p < 0.01$), just as a more socioeconomically liberal position continues to have an insignificant effect on the probability of voting the Free Voters. Furthermore, the probability decreases with a greater perceived distance between individuals and the party on the sociocultural dimension. The corresponding effect is -1.89 percentage points ($p < 0.001$). The socioeconomic distance to the Free Voters, in turn, has no significant effect.

Finally, the full model includes variables related to democracy and satisfaction with the parties. While satisfaction with democracy lowers the probability of voting for the Free Voters by 1.30 percentage points ($p < 0.01$) on average, the effect is considerably larger with -2.84 percentage points ($p < 0.001$) with regard to party satisfaction. A more conservative attitude is equally relevant for vote selection with an increased probability of, on average, 0.99 percentage points ($p < 0.05$). Furthermore, the individual's perceived distance from the party's position on socioeconomic issues ($p < 0.05$) is relevant for this. However, the sociocultural dimension ($p < 0.001$) has an even stronger effect. The effect is measured at -1.95 percentage points for the sociocultural and -1.02 percentage points for the socioeconomic conflict dimension (Fig. 5).

However, the question remains whether these conclusions hold when considering a continuous measurement of the Free Voter's potential. Figure 6 shows the

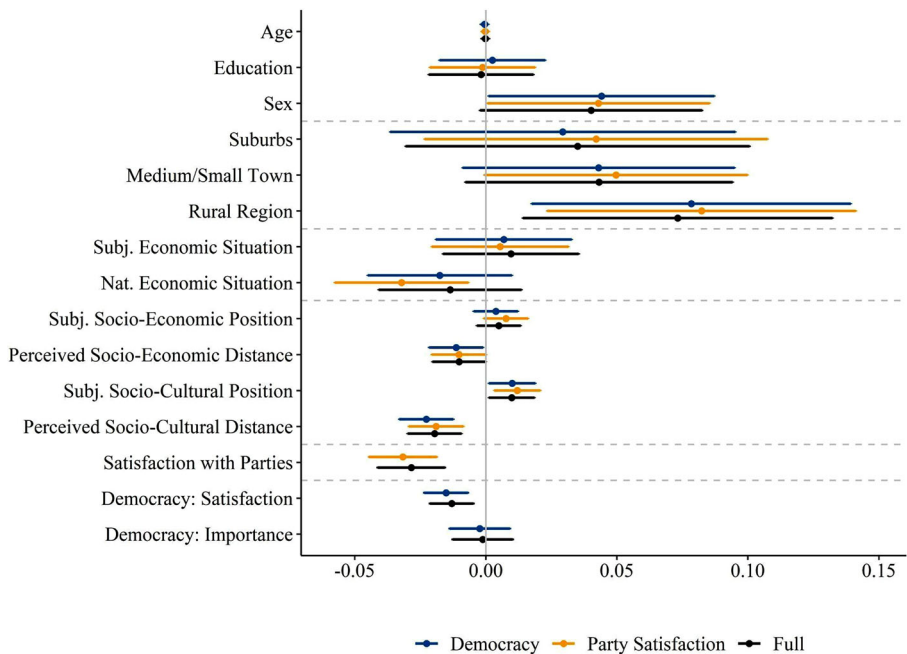


Fig. 5 Voting for the Free Voters 2021. Points (+95% CI) present average marginal effects, the change in probability to vote for the Free Voters

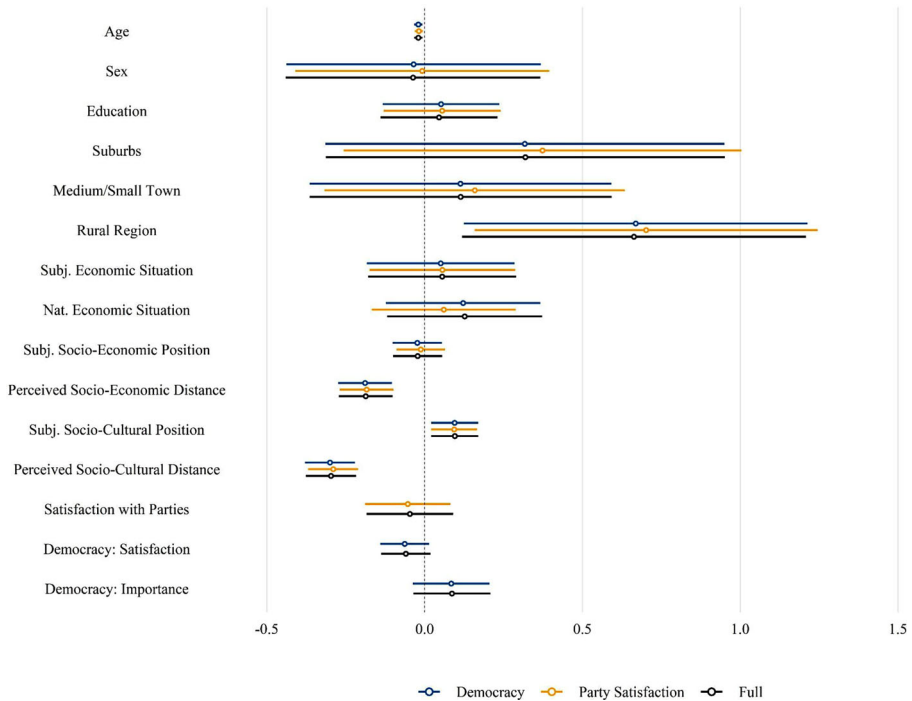


Fig. 6 Propensity to vote for the Free Voters. Points (+95% CI) present the standardised point estimation

regression results of three models using the PTV for the Free Voters as a dependent variable.

As the basic design of the models is identical, we discuss the corresponding models first and then examine the specifications of each model. Concerning the PTV, the previously observed conclusions seem to apply in part. To improve the comparability of the models, we describe the results by comparing the specific predictors across all models, which explains the rising PTV for the Free Voters. Across the model comparisons, we find that neither general party satisfaction nor dissatisfaction with democracy can be identified as sufficient factors to influence PTV in favour of the Free Voters significantly. Nor does self-positioning on the socioeconomic cleavage have a significant influence. In contrast, a more conservative position on the sociocultural cleavage significantly influences the PTV for the Free Voters ($p < 0.05$). However, as in the average marginal effect models, there are significant effects regarding the individually perceived distance to the party positions ($p < 0.001$). In the PTV model, the distance from the sociocultural conflict line is a more relevant predictor (Fig. 6).⁵

In summary, our analysis shows that while satisfaction with the established parties already represented in parliament has a negative effect on the likelihood that someone will vote for the Free Voters, it does not significantly influence the likelihood

⁵ See Online Appendix Table A.2 and Table A.3 for full details related to the graphs.

of the Free Voters being perceived as a viable alternative. Thus, satisfaction with the established parties does only affect the Free Voters' narrow electoral potential. Accordingly, our first hypothesis, H3a, must be rejected for the broader potential. Dissatisfaction with democracy has a statistically significant effect on the narrow but not the broad potential. Accordingly, we find partial evidence for H3b. Regarding the subjective positioning of the two most important cleavages, we find a consistent statistically significant effect for the cultural (H1b) but not the economic cleavage (H1a). Thus, we find evidence that the cultural cleavage is more important than the economic, as well as coherent effects for the perceived distance between one's self-positioning and the party's perceived position in both dimensions. The smaller the distance, the greater the broader and narrower electoral potentials of the Free Voters. This constitutes preliminary evidence for hypotheses H2a and H2b.

One of our central concerns is identifying a possible ideological niche for the Free Voters in the German party system. Socioeconomically and socioculturally, the party is positioned in a quadrant already occupied by the CDU, the CSU, the FDP, and the AfD. Suppose the model for determining propensity to vote is applied identically to the CDU/CSU, the FDP, and the AfD—this also means that we use the perceived

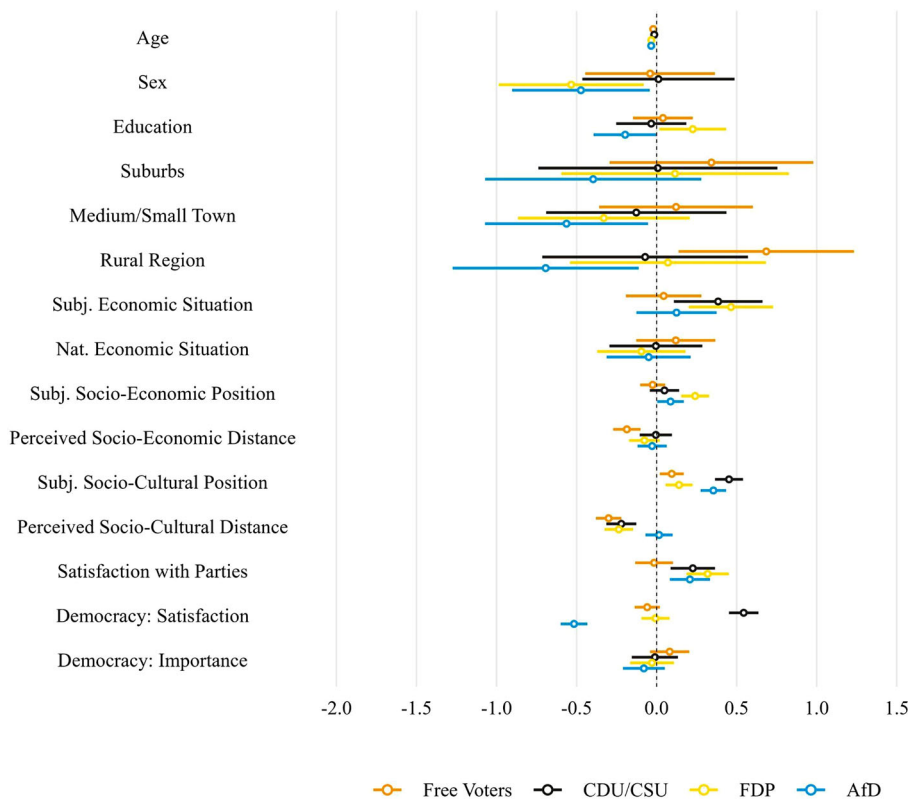


Fig. 7 Propensity to vote for Free Voters, *CDU/CSU* Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union, *FDP* Free Democratic Party, or *AfD* Alternative for Germany. Points (+95% CI) present the standardised point estimation

distance to the Free Voters in all models. In that case, further results underline how competitive this area is. At the same time, an electoral gap can also be observed. All four models in Fig. 7 share that subjective socioeconomic self-positioning only increases the propensity to vote for the economic liberal exponents, the FDP and the AfD, but not for the CDU/CSU—as is the case with the Free Voters. In the case of subjective location on the sociocultural axis, the coefficients for the CDU/CSU and the AfD are particularly strong; those for the FDP are comparable to those of the Free Voters. While an increased socioeconomic distance between the individual self-positioning and the perceived position of the Free Voters only significantly lowers the propensity to vote for the Free Voters, the sociocultural distance to the Free Voters also leads to a lower propensity to vote for the CDU/CSU and the FDP.

Concerning satisfaction with the parties represented in the *Bundestag*, there are significant positive effects for the CDU/CSU, the FDP, and the AfD. For the Free Voters, as already described, this does not play a significant role concerning the propensity to vote. Finally, the satisfaction with democracy shows clearly that individuals who are satisfied with democracy are more willing to vote for the CDU/CSU. In contrast, the opposite effect is true for the AfD. We do not find statistically significant effects for the FDP or the Free Voters (Fig. 7).

The Free Voters party can indeed be understood as an *alternative for the decent conservatives*: conservative because the party appeals to the conservative voters, and decent because they lie precisely in the conservative space between the democracy-dissatisfied who turn to the radical right AfD and the democracy-satisfied who turn to the CDU/CSU. In addition to that, except for a rural place of residence, clear sociodemographic overlaps with the voters of the CDU/CSU and the FDP can be observed. While, subjectively, the socioeconomically more liberal positions have a significantly positive effect on the PTV in favour of the AfD and the FDP, this is an insignificant predictor concerning the CDU/CSU and the Free Voters. The sociocultural position plays a role for all the additionally examined parties and the Free Voters since they all benefit from more conservative positions. What is particularly interesting here, however, is that a perceived increasing sociocultural distance between the respondents and the Free Voters increases the probability not only for the Free Voters but also for the CDU/CSU and the FDP. For the AfD, on the other hand, no significant effect can be observed.

This highlights both a potential electoral niche and a dilemma: The voters dissatisfied with democracy in Germany are associated with the AfD, while those who are satisfied vote for the CDU/CSU. The space in between for the Free Voters may be relatively small and is also contested by the FDP. Not surprisingly, high party satisfaction leads to a higher likelihood of voting for the Free Voters' competitors. All in all, the Free Voters thus primarily serve a spectrum in which sufficient overlaps can be observed, above all with the potential of the CDU/CSU and the FDP and to a lesser extent also with the AfD.

Accordingly, the Free Voters could fill a gap in the political space for moderate conservatives who do not feel represented by the CDU/CSU as a conservative party or by the liberal FDP but do not consider the far-right AfD, who are positioned much more radically, an electable alternative. Thus, our results indicate that the electoral success of the Free Voters is currently based on a relatively small electoral niche for

conservatively oriented individuals. However, this does not mean that the party will not be able to broaden its profile in the long term.

Finally, we checked the robustness of our results for our broad and narrow potentials with modified calculations, and party satisfaction modelled only as satisfaction with the AfD to be able to check for an AfD-led influence on the results.

Due to the generally very negative assessment of the AfD, we combined all negative categories into one expression. The neutral ratings remained as one category. For the positive ratings, we combined rather positive ratings (+1 to +3) and very positive ratings (+4 and +5) into single categories due to the relatively small number of cases. This additional robustness check supports our main conclusions. Higher satisfaction with only the AfD does not change these results (see Online Appendix, Fig. A1 and Fig. A2).

6 Conclusion

The Free Voters have established themselves in several state parliaments recently. Their vote share in federal and European elections has constantly increased. Moreover, the party entered a state government in 2018 for the first time. Since then, they have governed Bavaria with the CSU. While research on the members and organisation of the Free Voters is painting an increasingly differentiated picture, the potential of the Free Voters on the national level has not yet been analysed in detail.

One reason for this is that the typical nationwide polls focus on voter choice and ignore the electoral potential. In contrast, in this article, we have focused on the broad and narrow electoral potentials of the Free Voters. For the narrower potential, we used a combined measurement of the voting decision for the Free Voters in the 2021 German federal election, supplemented by respondents who consider the party their second choice. In this way, we identified a group of people who provided an approximate description of the party's narrower potential. In addition, we used the PTV to elicit an indication of the party's broader potential that captured the general electability from an individual perspective. This procedure was well suited to testing our hypotheses related to our main research question of whether the Free Voters party is a "decent alternative" for conservative voters.

Overall, some conclusions hold both for the narrower and broader voting potential. In both cases, the voter potential is more significant in the conservative spectrum. In addition, it is shown that a greater distance between the individual and their assumed party position on the socioeconomic and sociocultural axes significantly negatively affects the likelihood that they will vote for the party. Finally, the electability of the Free Voters is rated higher by people who live in rural regions. However, a robust effect of dissatisfaction with democracy is only associated with the narrower voting potential. Once the variables related to the importance of and satisfaction with democracy are controlled for, general party satisfaction has no effect.

The Free Voters thus remain in a conservative niche. As shown by the shift analysis of the two states where the Free Voters are in parliament, their greatest potential lies with former CDU/CSU voters. However, that also means that the success of the Free Voters is also partially dependent on the evaluation of the Christian Democrats.

While the AfD is a competing alternative for more radical dissatisfied CDU/CSU voters, they do also have secondary potential among conservative SPD and FDP voters. However, we have also shown here that potential CDU/CSU voters do not turn out to be dissatisfied with democracy.

Nevertheless, the Free Voters can only appeal to the “moderately” dissatisfied CDU/CSU voters, as those who are strongly dissatisfied will likely switch to the AfD. Our results, therefore, fit well with the Free Voters’ self-description as the “decent alternative.” All in all, this poses a dilemma for the party, as this niche is also contested by the FDP and is a possible explanation for why the party has not won any seats at the national level. Shortly, the niche may be too small for future success.

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Conflict of interest L. C. Wurthmann, M. Angenendt and J.P. Thomeczek declare that they have no competing interests.

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