Housing and Voting in Germany
Multi-Level Evidence for the Association between
House Prices and Housing Tenure and Party Outcomes,
1980–2017

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Abstract

Traditional predictors of election outcomes in Germany are increasingly losing their explanatory power. Rather than new cultural divides, this paper introduces the idea of housing cleavages, i.e., homeownership versus tenancy and high-price versus low-price areas, drawing on macro data for electoral districts and urban neighborhoods from the last three elections (2009–2017) in combination with Immoscout24 ad price data and microdata from the ALLBUS survey (1980–2016). Although, due to its low homeownership rate and conservative house price development, Germany represents a least-likely case for housing to be of importance, we find housing effects beyond traditional predictors. Generally, we find that high house prices, house price increases, and homeownership are positively associated with voting for center-right parties and voter turnout, while social tenancy is associated with votes for the left, but these effects weaken over time due to *embourgeoisement* effects. Beyond this expected left-right distinction between tenants and wealthier homeowners, we also find outliers along two other dimensions. First, there are center-periphery effects that housing can better capture than simple geographical divisions; second, house prices contain a populist dimension, for example when skyrocketing rents increase votes for the urban left or regions where house prices lag behind benefit the AfD. The paper argues against the more causal self-interest and socialization theories of the influence of housing on voting and instead suggests considering housing as an important socioeconomic proxy to explain political outcomes.

Keywords: ALLBUS, Germany, homeownership, voter turnout, voting

Zusammenfassung

Traditionelle Modelle zum Wahlverhalten haben in Deutschland in den letzten Jahren an Erklärungskraft verloren. In diesem Papier beziehen wir daher Wohnungsmarktvariablen, das heißt Wohneigentum versus Miete und teure versus günstige Wohngebiete, in die Erklärung politischer Outcomes mit ein, um deren Erklärungsgehalt zu verbessern. Mithilfe von Makrodaten von Wahlbezirken und Stadtvierteln der letzten drei Bundestagswahlen, Immobilienscout24-Preisdaten und dem ALLBUS (1980–2016) zeigt das Papier, dass Wohnungsvariablen selbst im dafür wenig prädestinierten Fall Deutschlands mit seiner niedrigen Wohneigentumsquote und der konservativen Hauspreisentwicklung Erklärungskraft haben. Im Detail stellen wir fest, dass Wohneigentum, hohe und steigende Hauspreise eher positiv mit der Wahl bürgerlich-rechter Parteien und hoher Wahlbeteiligung zusammenhängen, während Wohnen in einer Sozialwohnung mit der Wahl linker Parteien assoziiert ist. Diese Effekte nehmen über die Zeit allerdings ab *(embourgeoisement)*. Jenseits dieser Assoziation von Miete und Eigentum mit Wahlverhalten auf einer Links-rechts-Dimension finden wir aber systematische Ausreißer: Wohnen enthält eine Zentrum-Peripherie-Dimension und eine Populismusdimension, etwa wenn explodierende Mieten die urbane Linke stärken oder abgehängte Hauspreisregionen die AfD. Das Papier argumentiert gegen kausale Theorien ökonomischen Wählens oder Sozialisationstheorien, schließt aber, dass Wohnungsvariablen zukünftig ein wichtiger sozioökonomischer Proxy in Erklärungen von Wahlverhalten sein sollten.

Schlagwörter: ALLBUS, Deutschland, Wahlbeteiligung, Wählen, Wohneigentum

Contents

Housing and Voting in Germany: Multi-Level Evidence for the Association between House Prices and Housing Tenure and Party Outcomes, 1980–2017

1 Introduction

Election forecasting in Germany is having a hard time nowadays. Conventional predictors of people's voting behavior, such as income class, religion, or gender, are becoming less and less reliable. New cleavage lines confound the old electoral patterns and even the party system. Some consider the increasing number of non-voters to be a silent group of left-wing voters (Schäfer 2012), others see the traditional economic left-right dimension as having been outpaced by a new populist versus establishment dimension or the new identity politics. Yet others speak of a comeback or the appearance of an urban-rural divide (Rodden 2019), with some seeing the political economy of export versus state-debt-driven regimes as a new important cleavage line (Manow 2018).

In this paper, we revive a more conventional view on voting behavior by testing how where and in which form people live can help us to understand electoral outcomes. While international studies of how housing affects voting have been receiving growing attention in light of the housing and geographic patterns of the recent populist votes (Adler and Ansell 2019), the last general study linking housing and voting in (West) Germany dates back to the 1980s (Häußermann and Küchler 1993). Housing can affect voting behavior in a multitude of ways: through housing tenure (homeownership versus private or social tenancy), house and rent prices and their wealth effects, and housing form and location (suburban family houses versus city apartments) with the accompanying geographical and lifestyle effects. It can affect political preferences, party choice, and voter turnout.

The potentially diverse range of influences can be organized into three broad arguments. The dominant argument in virtually all studies is economic voting, where house prices and rents affect household voting through household budgets. Less prominent are socialization arguments, according to which the housing environment affects household voting through slow changes in cultural attitudes. Whereas these two views attribute distinct causal effects to housing – channeled either through economic self-interest or socialization – a third view sees housing simply as a crucial socioeconomic proxy that cannot be reduced to other socioeconomic dimensions and brings the advantage of local specificity. Both economic voting and socialization arguments are perennially haunted by selection effects. Did richer and more conservative people decide to buy better-performing single-family houses, or did these houses make them more welfare independent and more conservative? To date, and due to the high data requirements of individual-level panel data about both housing and political behavior, no convinc-

ing evidence against mere selection effects has been presented. Currently, this is not even possible in the German data world. What this paper shows, however, is that even in Germany's distinctive housing regime, housing is of importance as a crucial socio-economic proxy to explain new voting patterns in cases where traditional explanatory factors fail to explain variance.

The idea that housing is of importance in voting might be surprising per se as Germany represents a *least-likely case*. The low homeownership rate, which is currently at 45 percent, could easily result in tenure differences being subsumed by income or social status differences, and the conservative house price development with a real stagnation of prices between 1970 and the 2000s could easily offset any house price effects. To investigate the political effects of housing on voting in Germany, this article combines a macro-level analysis of 284 electoral districts and all neighborhoods in 25 major cities for the last three federal elections (2009, 2013, 2017) with a micro-level analysis of the stacked cross-sectional ALLBUS survey data between 1980 and 2016. We also draw on price and rent data from millions of adverts on the online platform Immoscout24 for the more recent time period since 2008.

Our results generally support the idea that, beyond the traditional predictors, housing tenure and prices are of importance for party choice and voter turnout on all levels of analysis. More specifically, we find confirmatory evidence for the fact that housing reflects a left-right cleavage: homeowners and areas with high house or rent prices are associated with votes for conservative parties and more self-reported right-leaning attitudes. However, findings also deviate from this conventional expectation in three important ways. First, we find a weakening of this left-right cleavage over time: there is an *embourgeoisement* of voters of left parties, and tenants become more likely to vote for the CDU. Second, there are center-periphery and urban-rural effects that can be better captured by housing than by simple geographical divisions. Finally, house prices contain a populist dimension, for example, when skyrocketing rents increase vote levels for the left or when regions where house prices lag behind benefit the AfD. It is important to note that increasing house prices might not only result in a shift to the right due to a potential housing wealth mechanism, but that the correlated rising rent prices could also turn the voting tenants to the left. Besides calling for the addition of the housing dimension to the standard set of control variables used by traditional explanations of voting outcomes, the paper alerts the literature on housing and voting to the neglected dimension of rent prices and the inclusion of social housing as a form of tenure. It also rejects economic voting and socialization theories when accounting for the mechanisms behind the association between homeownership and conservatism.

After providing a summary of existing literature, we present the data and methodological strategy used. In the results section, we present evidence by moving from the level of electoral districts down to city neighborhoods and finally to micro-level analyses. On the micro level, we also perform four mechanism tests. To enhance readability, the main text only comprises a descriptive and graphic presentation of our results, while

all detailed result tables can be found in the online appendix (http://www.mpifg.de/pu/mpifg_dp/2020/dp20-6_appendix.pdf). Our discussion and conclusion argue against causal theories of housing and voting but invite researchers to use housing as an important socioeconomic proxy.

2 Literature review

The default explanation for political attitudes and voting behavior has historically been individuals' economic or class position (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). The economic version of the explanation (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2011) rather relies on the idea that being in the same economic position is shorthand for saying that rational voters are influenced by the same situational parameters – economic circumstances, income, or wealth – and maximize utility through corresponding voting behavior. The Meltzer-Richard theorem, for example, posits that a lower position in the income distribution increases the probability of voters supporting policies expanding the role of the government (Meltzer and Richard 1981). Besides these class-based explanations and depending on the electoral and party system, religious affiliation has traditionally been another strong explanatory variable used to explain voting behavior (Manow 2008; Manow and van Kersbergen 2009). What is more, the political voting literature has also focused on the so-called gender gap, i.e., the fact that, until the 1960s, women tended to show more conservative attitudes and voting behavior, while a tendency, albeit country dependent, towards more left-oriented attitudes has been observed ever since (Emmenegger and Manow 2014; Inglehart and Norris 2000). As with other demographic factors, lifecycle effects, i.e., increasing age, have been shown to have an even stronger impact than income on attitudes concerning government intervention (Busemeyer, Goerres, and Weschle 2009).

Housing, particularly its different tenure forms, has long been suspected of influencing political behavior, such as in the suggestion that homeowners share conservative attitudes or that homeowning produces this effect. If we include rural landownership, then a predecessor of this suspicion has motivated historical land distributions to deserving veterans, which aimed at pacifying men entitled to recompense due to military service and were undertaken throughout history, from successful military rulers in the Roman Republic to American politicians after the War of Independence, the Civil War, or World War II. The idea not only underpinned the military welfare state, however, but emerged as a reaction to the social unrest, urbanization, and pauperism caused by the incipient industrialization of the early nineteenth century. Sending urban pauperized workers back into rural areas to make them landowners was seen as a panacea against the modern evils associated with cities and industries (Raymond 1968). In the late nineteenth century, a modified version of this position was taken up in reformers' and conservative parties' programs: urban workers were to be resettled in small suburban owner-occupied houses with gardens, a largely utopian ideal that nonetheless pervaded

conservative party positions and continued to be relevant into the twentieth century. It was precisely this conservative position that Friedrich Engels famously decried in his "Housing Questions," fearing that homeowning workers would abandon the early labor and union movement (Engels [1872-3] 1973). Making workers into "housing capitalists" would not solve the social question because housing investments were risky, beyond the means of poor workers, and would not solve the more serious exploitation of labor in the production system. Conservatives, in turn, often objected to the public housing supported by left-wing parties because it had the reputation – as in Red Vienna, for instance – of creating permanent left-wing voters.

In modern political science, the importance of housing in the prediction of attitudes and voting behavior goes back to a British debate, starting in the late 1970s, that reflected the growing importance of homeownership in the UK as the pertinence of traditional class or religious alignments dwindled (Dunleavy 1979; Johnston 1987). At the same time, the British Conservative government's right-to-buy housing policy, giving sitting tenants of council houses the opportunity to buy their housing units at favorable costs, meant a massive transfer of property ownership from public to private hands and has been considered a successful case of establishing a policy-feedback loop (Pierson 1989). Purchasers of council houses were shown to be more conservative in their voting behavior and attitudes than non-purchasers (Williams, Sewel, and Twine 1987). Over recent decades, a number of studies focused more narrowly on the political attitude or political behavior impact of homeownership and their findings are summarized in Table 1.

The overarching argument encapsulating most of these studies is *economic voting* theory. It is the specific economic situation of homeowners and private or social tenants that makes them adopt certain political attitudes and vote for certain political parties. According to this view, homeowners are more likely to participate in elections because they are not as residentially mobile and have higher stakes in local or national stability. Furthermore, they are also more likely to vote for conservative parties supporting welfare retrenchment and homeownership for a variety of potential reasons.

First, homeowners, especially at younger ages, have large burdens of mortgage debt. Their average housing costs (maintenance, taxes, interest, and amortization) are often high relative to income. With a given budget, by simple zero-sum game logic, fewer resources are available for alternative budget items. Thus, *ceteris paribus*, fewer resources are available for monetary savings, for having and educating children, for leisure activities, or for contributions to the state. Authors have particularly focused their attention on the last of these trade-off relationships. Homeowners are hypothesized to be against higher taxes and for more inflation and lower interest rates. Yet, micro-level analyses supporting these macro findings are still scarce. On the country level, a negative relationship between homeownership or mortgage levels and social security spending has indeed been found (Conley and Gifford 2006, 71; Kemeny 1981; Prasad 2012, 229f.). If homeowners tend to vote conservative, this could establish a link that might explain why homeownership countries have developed lower levels of public welfare provision

Table 1   Literature on the link between housing and voting

Study	Data	Explanandum	Main findings
Saunders 1990	3 case studies of 1980s' UK cities	Voting behavior	No linear trend between homeownership and conservative voting behavior
Häußermann and Küchler 1993	Germany in the 1980s, ALLBUS 1992	Voting for conservative parties	Distinct positive effect of homeownership
Verberg 2000	Canada 1984, National Election Study	Political involvement and attitudes	Homeowners vote more often, are politically more active, and are more conservative on many issues; mortgaged homeowners less so
Scheve and Slaughter 2001	US 1993, National Election Studies	Trade policy preferences	Homeowners in manufacturing areas prefer trade barriers to protect house prices
Ansell 2012	29 countries, 2009, International Social Survey Program	Redistribution preferences	The higher the average house price equity, the lower a country's average redistribution preferences
Foucault, Nadeau, and Lewis-Beck 2013	French 2007 election data	Conservative voting and self-positioning	Higher asset values drive conservatism Risky asset dominance favors conservatism
Ansell 2014	US 2000–2004, American National UK 2006 British Social Attitudes Surveys; UK 1991–2006 British Household Panel Survey	Social insurance and redistribution preferences	Higher housing prices lead to more conservative preferences, particularly among right-wing voters Right-wing parties react to higher house prices by cutting back social spending
André, Dewilde, and Luijkx 2015	18 European countries plus US, 2004, European social survey	Voter turnout	Homeowners tend to vote more often in national elections, particularly in market-based housing regimes; this is mostly caused by selection effects
André and Dewilde 2016	24 European countries in 2004, European Value Survey	Attitudes on redistribution	Positive effect of homeownership in all but 8 countries Younger homeowners are less supportive of redistributions
Lux and Mau 2018	Germany, 1997–2002, SOEP	Attitudes towards government or markets	Homeowners tend to be more skeptical of states and less skeptical of markets than tenants, increasingly so over time
Davidsson 2018	Sweden, 2012, SOM survey	Left-right orientation	Homeowners are more likely to report a right orientation, particularly among more leftist income-class groups
Larsen et al. 2019	Denmark, 2002–2011, registry data and survey	Support for incumbent government on local level	House price increases lead to greater support for incumbents, measured on the local level Mechanism works not through ideology or ownership but through perception of performance of local economy
Adler and Ansell 2019	UK, USA, France micro areas, 2016–17	Populist vote	Levels and change in house prices are conditionally associated with the vote for Trump, Brexit, and the FN

or why the extension of homeownership is accompanied by a retrenchment of welfare. The missing link would be homeowners who vote for parties that are against further social spending and encourage more homeownership possibly to generate an increasing number of new constituencies. One way of testing what we call the "financial burden

mechanism" is to find out if owner-occupier households with higher mortgages display stronger conservatism and a stronger dislike for taxes.

A second reason why homeowners might prefer conservative parties is the latter's promise of homeownership subsidies. This pocketbook or political feedback effect (Jacobs 2007; Jordan 2013) could also explain why social tenants tend to vote for left-wing parties, an effect understudied in the literature. Our coding of all German party manifestos suggests that the social housing/homeownership divide has indeed been traditionally correlated with a left-right or SPD/CDU divide in German politics (Kohl 2018). These effects of housing tenure on voting could be amplified by the observation that there is a higher voter turnout among homeowners, while residents of neighborhoods with social housing estates tend to abstain from voting (André, Dewilde, and Luijkx 2015; Schäfer 2015).

Third, particularly in times of rising house prices, homeownership might produce wealth effects on voting behavior. For instance, for almost all presidential and legislative elections from 1978 onwards in France (Capdevielle and Dupoirier 1981; Le Hay and Sineau 2010; Nadeau et al. 2014), the UK, and the US (Lewis-Beck and Nadeau 2011), a positive effect of wealth on conservative voting has been repeatedly shown. Given that in many of the observed households housing made up the lion's share of wealth, these studies – whose wealth indicator is often only very approximate, not treating owner-occupied real estate as a separate category, for instance – can be considered indirect evidence of the effect of homeownership on voting. One crucial factor in determining housing wealth is prices and their annual changes. Some more recent studies use better available price data to show that house prices – not necessarily homeownership per se – make homeowners less in favor of public welfare or parties defending it.

Besides economic voting arguments, *socialization arguments*, which tend to predominate in qualitative studies, also try to make sense of why housing tenure or form could produce different political views and behavior. It is not conscious economic reasoning, influenced by the first buy or rising prices, that is the cause of shifting homeowner preferences, but rather a slow socialization process in which the changed social and urban environment results in a gradual shift in worldview and political behavior. A large body of mainly American, often critical literature[1] on living in the suburbs supports this view. Ever since studies on the "Organization Man" were published in the 1950s (Whyte [1956] 2002), suburbs have been identified as a built environment that induces inhabitants to live a particular lifestyle associated with its own specific political attitudes. Jim Kemeny also associated specific homeowner attitudes with the privatized and automobile-based style of living produced in suburban environments (Kemeny 1992).

Geographically, suburbanites live at the urban periphery in functionally separate dwellings. Although the German suburban periphery contains larger social housing estates, 85 percent of people in our sample stating that they live in suburban areas in cities do

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1   See, for instance, Hayden (2003), Jackson (1987).

so in single-family houses. This implies several things. First, the low density of these settlements often makes public transport less efficient, so residents strongly rely on private cars rather than on the public transport that still connects housing estates to inner cities. Indeed, a strong negative correlation can be found between the density of cities and the extent of private car use (Newman and Kenworthy 1991). The use of private cars tends to predispose households to opt against public transport spending, and a similar trade-off logic can be applied when it comes to support for other public amenities in the cities, once the neighborhood can afford more exclusive and geographically closer private settings. Second, neighborhoods made up of similar building structures predetermine the homogeneity of their residents with regard to income, social status, etc. Due to physical proximity, common local schools, and other shared institutions of socialization, suburbanites mostly find themselves among other suburbanites with similar attitudes and life problems.

These two views – the economic voting and the socialization argument – both share the idea that factors arising after or associated with the purchase of a home make a difference to political preferences. In this sense, they differ from the selection effect hypothesis, which considers factors existing *prior to* the purchase of their first home as a common cause of both homeownership and conservatism. A final argument denies that housing itself has any causal effect because it is strongly determined by other socioeconomic factors. This is not to say that including housing parameters in an explanation of voting behavior is of no value. Housing is still a crucial socioeconomic proxy that bundles many other unobservable factors and goes beyond the traditional explanatory factors. However, this *social proxy view* of housing tends to retreat from strong causal assertions.

3   Data and method

Analyzing the link between housing and voting in Germany encounters two major data limitations. On the housing side, for a long time detailed price-level information has been unavailable in Germany on the aggregate level, let alone on the level of individual surveys. Germany particularly lacks the population registry data that researchers could rely on in the Scandinavian countries or the Netherlands. We are also not aware of any housing-context data that could be added to georeferenced individuals from survey data. Other large social science surveys such as the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) provide fairly detailed information about the respondents' financial and economic situation, often including estimates of housing wealth and indicators of ownership, but do not contain continuous appropriate measurements of political preferences and behavior. The German Microcensus or the Survey of Income and Expenditure (EVS) contain a good amount of detail about housing but almost no political variables (partly for legal reasons).

With regards to these political variables, by contrast, typical instruments of political science research such as the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), for instance, cover the typical measurements but fail to capture a respondent's detailed housing situation. Germany particularly lacks a panel dataset that connects changes in a household's housing situation with changes in political attitudes. This restricts our analysis to the only two feasible analyses in the German case, namely the analysis of aggregate election outcomes and house prices and rents on various levels of aggregation from different datasets and the analysis of stacked cross sections of the ALLBUS longitudinal file.

Macro- and micro-area data

For aggregate data of house prices and rents, we use ad prices from Immobilienscout24, Germany's major online exchange for houses and apartments to buy or rent (Bauer et al. 2013; Boelmann et al. 2019a; 2019b).[2] The individual ads are first cleaned of outliers.[3] Then, square meter rents and prices are calculated. In a second step, median prices are calculated on different levels of aggregation. The median is used to avoid the influence of expensive outliers with long offering periods. The respective aggregate-level units on election-district level are based on shapefiles provided by the Federal Returning Officer *(Bundeswahlleiter)*. The aggregation on the neighborhood level is based on Immobilienscout's own neighborhood descriptions as shapefiles from public sources are currently not publicly available over time for many cities. Microdata are merged with price data on the level of the German districts *(Kreise)* as of 2015.

As house price data are not representative on a fine-grained level before 2007, we use election results from 2009, 2013, and 2017, as reported for election districts by the Federal Returning Officer. There are currently 284 districts covering the whole of Germany, thus providing a regional depth that includes both urban and rural districts.[4] All control

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2   The company was founded in 1998 and the first data were available from 2000. Representativeness on the city or lower levels cannot be provided prior to 2007, however. Users pay to post offers on Immoscout, depending on the duration and the type of the offer. Immoscout only offers ad prices, not final prices. There is evidence that the asking prices tend to be lower than final prices (Dinkel and Kurzrock 2012). Not all housing offers are put online and not all online offers are listed on Immoscout – the company reported around a 50 percent market share during the reporting period. The data cover four market segments: apartments for purchase and rent and houses for purchase and rent. All four amount to around 100 million ads. The coverage for cities is better than for rural regions (Kholodilin and Mense 2012, 5).

3   Apartments and houses are only considered in the price range of 5,000 to 5,000,000 euros and in the living-space range of 10 to 400 square meters. Apartments for rent are only considered when in the rent range of 10 to 20,000 euros. Cases missing these variables or time or locational variables are dropped.

4   There are 299 electoral districts in total. The longitudinal perspective applied in this article, however, only allows us to include districts that remained unchanged between the 2009 and 2017 federal elections. Fifteen districts were subject to redistricting as a consequence of population shifts and were therefore excluded from the analysis.

variables on the election-district level are provided by the Federal Returning Officer and should account for differences in the socioeconomic structure between electoral districts. As the data provided by the Federal Returning Officer are subject to change from election to election, we only include variables that were available for all three elections in our sample. We include the logarithmized population, the number of municipalities, and the surface area of the district. While the first variable is more or less constant across districts, the latter two distinguish between urban and more rural electoral districts. In addition, we control for students' average educational achievement (share of students leaving school with a university entrance qualification and with a lower-level qualification), the unemployment rate, the number of people receiving unemployment benefits, the share of the population over the age of 60, the homeownership rate, and whether a district lies in eastern Germany. The specifications on the electoral-district level include year dummies to control for time trends and election-specific effects.

In addition, 25 German municipalities have published (selective) neighborhood-level election results since 2009, which we use for a separate analysis of urban micro areas. City neighborhoods are not election districts per se, but election results on the level of the smallest unit *(Stimmbezirke)* are aggregated by cities' statistics departments on the neighborhood administrative level for at least one of the three elections. Neighborhoods evolve historically and often correspond with a local identity. Among the 53 largest cities reported in the *Innerstädtische Raumbeobachtung* data (IRB 2016),[5] such neighborhood units have an average size of 7,745 inhabitants and 3.8 km² but can range from just a few inhabitants to more than 100,000.

As control variables, we use IRB data for the respective years: a categorical variable describing the neighborhoods' location, the logarithmized population, the population share of those older than 60, the unemployment rate, the female-to-male ratio, and the share of foreigners. To approximate house ownership on this level, we use the single-family house share as it strongly correlates with owner-occupied use. The variables make up a compromise between availability and the controls typically used. We also use an OLS estimator with year and city-specific dummies to control for unobserved heterogeneity (e.g. being a city with a long SPD tradition).

Individual-level data

For our micro-level analysis, we use the ALLBUS dataset, a biennial survey with a focus on the political attitudes and behavior of a representative cross section of about 3,000 German

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5 Innerstädtische Raumbeobachtung (IRB) des Bundesinstituts für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung (BBSR) (Urban observatory of the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development). Data sources: City statistics of IRB cities and statistics of the Bundesagentur für Arbeit (Federal Employment Agency).

residents per survey (Terwey 2000).[6] ALLBUS is a unique source of variables about political behavior and attitudes. We use the regional use file (Gesis 2018) to merge microdata with house prices and rents since 2004 on the district *(Kreis)* level. We first use the latest available pooled cross-sectional dataset covering the years from 1980 to 2016 (Gesis 2019).

To build our dependent variable, we mainly rely on the intended party choice for the federal election, where SPD, CDU, FDP, and Greens are covered throughout the whole period, while PDS/Die Linke and AfD votes are only available in later surveys. We ignore other smaller parties. We use the variable "intention to vote at the next election" rather than "what party did you vote for during the last election" because the former is more extensively covered and reflects party preference at the time of the survey parallel to other individual characteristics surveyed at the same time. The intention to vote for one of these parties represents our dependent variable in several binomial logistic regressions. As one alternative, we also conduct linear regressions with an alternative operationalization by studying people's self-reported left-right attitude. Second, we use the intention to go to the polls as an additional dependent variable. The turnout variable is available with reference to the preceding election and is coded as a dummy with 1 indicating the intention to vote. Here, once again, we conducted binary logistic regressions. Turnout is usually overreported because survey respondents consider non-voting to be socially less accepted (Elsässer, Rademacher, and Schäfer 2015). However, we do not know of any distortion along the tenure variables of interest here.

As the main independent variable, we code the reported housing tenure into owner-occupiers and social and private tenants. As control variables, we use age, different education groups, reported churchgoing, gender, logarithmized income, and size of the administrative community to cover the rural-urban dimension. These variables allow for high coverage throughout surveys. We also include period dummies for four different decades and interact them with the dominant explanatory variables to reveal time trends. The east-west divide in Germany is also controlled for, as, for historic reasons, regions of the former GDR still have systematically lower homeownership rates and different voting patterns (Topfstedt 1999). In addition, the appendix reports separate regressions for eastern Germany. The data have been weighted with the east-west weight to account for the overrepresentation of respondents from eastern Germany in the sample. Finally, we control for the German *Länder* given their regionally different housing traditions and for big cities. Table 2 summarizes the operationalization of variables.

To test the aforementioned mechanisms, i.e., the socialization and financial burden mechanism, we also conduct regressions including the duration of residence, the housing form (urban apartment versus suburban single-family houses), the extent of mort-

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6   As in all datasets, the variables in the ALLBUS time series contain missing values. The number of missing values does not, however, amount to more than one third of all cases for each of our variables. The party choice variable, specifically, contains 14,097 missing cases compared to 47,097 valid cases.

Table 2   Variable operationalization

Variable name	Data format	Coding and operationalization
Party choice	Binary	SPD; CDU/CSU; Greens; PDS/Linke; FDP; AfD
Leftright	Cardinal	0–10, left to right political orientation (self-assessment of respondents)
Turnout	Binary	Voted in last federal election: No = 0, Yes = 1
Tenure	Ordinal	= 3 if social rental, = 2 if owner-occupier, = 1 if private rental
Form	Binary	= 1 if a person lives in an owner-occupied house, = 0 if a person lives in an owner-occupied apartment
Age	Numeric	Years of age
Gender	Binary	= 1 female, = 0 male
Education	Ordinal	= 1 if basic, = 2 if lower secondary, = 3 if upper secondary, = 4 if post-secondary, = 5 if tertiary education
Income	Numeric	Logarithmized income
Class	Binary	= 1 if self-reported lower class, = 2 if middle class, = 3 if upper class
Church	Ordinal	0 = more than once a week, 1 = one time per week, 2 = 1–3 times a month, 4 = several times a year, 5 = rarely, 6 = never
Urban	Binary	= 0 if (up to 1,999, 2,000–4,999, 5,000–19,999, 20,000–49,999, 50,000–99,999), = 1 if 100,000–499,999, 500,000 or more inhabitants
East	Binary	= 1 if person lives on territory of the former GDR, = 0 otherwise
Duration	Numeric	Years of residence at the same place
Period	Ordinal	1 = 1980s, 2 = 1990s, 3 = 2000s, 4 = 2010s
Laender	Cardinal	= 0 if North Rhine-Westphalia (reference), 1 = Schleswig-Holstein, 2 = Hamburg, 3 = Lower Saxony, 4 = Bremen, 5 = Hesse, 6 = Rhineland-Palatinate, 7 = Baden-Württemberg, 8 = Bavaria, 9 = Saarland, 10 = Former West Berlin, 11 = Former East Berlin, 12 = Brandenburg, 13 = Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, 14 = Saxony, 15 = Saxony-Anhalt, 16 = Thuringia
Mortgage	Cardinal	Net wealth: 0 = 100,000–249,999 Euro, 1 = overindebted, 0–49,999 Euro, 50,000–99,999 Euro, 2 = 250,000–499,999 Euro, over 500,000 Euro
Tax_welfare	Binary	0 = spending more on social services, 1 = reducing taxes

gage indebtedness, and the respondent's attitude toward more or less taxation to finance higher social spending. The idea behind choosing this latter variable is to test the suspected negative link between the mortgage burden of recent homeowners and the resulting aversion to taxes for social spending, a position traditionally represented by left-wing parties (Kemeny 2005). Ideally, we would need to examine housing prices alongside the mortgage size to account for households' net wealth position (Ansell 2014). Given the data, we can at least distinguish mortgaged from non-mortgaged homeowners and we also know their attitudes towards taxation. The appendix lists the operationalizations of all variables.

We generally rely on the pooled cross section, including all years between 1980 and 2016. Pooling all cases across time does not allow for time-specific findings. For this reason, we control for development over time and include a time dummy for each decade, as well as an interaction term of the time dummy and our main explanatory variable of the different housing tenures. The former absorbs unobserved heterogeneity of specific time periods, while the latter reveals whether housing effects are stable over time or time

dependent. This modelling strategy exploits the longitudinal dimension of the data and thus goes beyond the typical single-year cross-sectional analyses of existing studies. For the mechanism tests, however, we can only draw on certain survey years. With the exception of the regression on the left-right scale, we rely on logistic regressions for our estimation technique as our dependent variables are nominal. As the Durbin-Watson and the Breusch-Godfrey test statistic did not allow us to reject the hypothesis of serial correlations, we calculate robust standard errors in our time-series models.
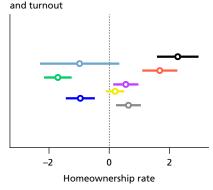
4   Results

Regional and urban macro-level analyses

We start by presenting the macro-level results from electoral districts and city neighborhoods. Electoral districts split the complete country into exhaustive regions and broadly represent an urban-rural divide, whereas city neighborhoods illustrate intra-city divides between poorer and better-off neighborhoods. The coefficient plots display results from single models for each housing market indicator which illustrate a party's vote share and turnout as a function of housing characteristics and several control variables. To ensure comparability, all results are scaled by one standard deviation. All effects therefore represent the response of the outcome variable to a change in the dependent variable by one standard deviation. Full model results and details on the specification can be found in the appendix.
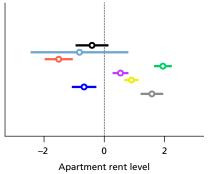
On both the level of electoral districts and neighborhoods, the house and rent price levels serve, to a certain extent, as a proxy for more urban and wealthier areas along a left-right dimension. This is reflected in the fact that vote shares for the SPD and Die Linke are generally lower in high-price areas, whereas the vote shares for the FDP, Greens, and CDU are higher in high-price and high-rent areas. However, this simple left-right model cannot capture the whole picture. One obvious deviation is the urban-rural cleavage reflected in prices and rent. This explains, for instance, why the CDU tends to win in low-price areas with low price increases on the electoral-district level, but has greater success in the high-price neighborhoods in cities. It also explains why the CSU is a party for which the rent- and house-market prices show different vote-share results, as it tends to lose in areas with low rents but to win in areas with high house prices. Again, this captures an urban-rural divide in Bavaria that is not fully explained by city size alone. Finally, looking at the Greens, we see that they perform worse in areas with a higher homeownership rate (particularly in rural and suburban areas), while they have higher vote shares in areas with higher rent and house price levels. Although the Greens are more left-leaning on an economic policy dimension, we argue that these effects are driven by the party's generally better performance in booming urban environments with higher rent and house price levels and an electorate that can afford these rising
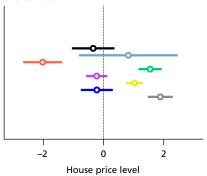
Figure 1 Housing and voting in electoral districts

Impact of homeownership rate on party vote share
and turnout

Homeownership rate

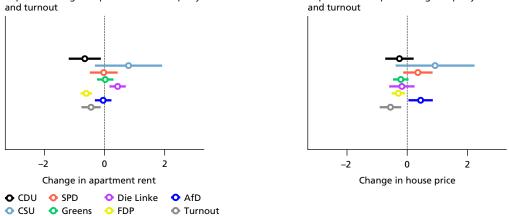Impact of apartment rent level on party vote share
and turnout

Apartment rent level

Impact of house price level on party vote share
and turnout

House price level

Impact of change in apartment rent on party vote share
and turnout

Change in apartment rent

Impact of house price change on party vote share
and turnout

Change in house price

● CDU   ● SPD   ● Die Linke   ● AfD
● CSU   ● Greens   ● FDP   ● Turnout

Notes: Covariates scaled by 1 standard deviation, standard errors heteroskedasticy robust.

prices. A similar *embourgeoisement* effect holds for the SPD vote share that is also as-
sociated with high homeownership or single-family house levels (Figure 1).

The other dimension the left-right model does not fully capture is a populist one. Die
Linke is another party where the associations with rent and house price levels point in
different directions. While its vote share is negatively associated with house prices, it is
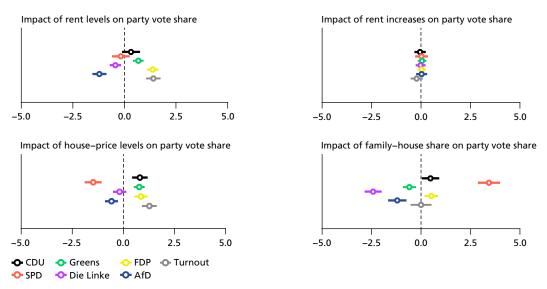
Figure 2 Marginal effect on the neighborhood level

Impact of rent levels on party vote share

Impact of rent increases on party vote share

Impact of house–price levels on party vote share

Impact of family–house share on party vote share

CDU Greens FDP Turnout
SPD Die Linke AfD

Notes: Covariates scaled by 1 standard deviation, standard errors heteroskedasticity robust.

positively associated with rent levels and even increases when rents are on the rise. Die Linke also performs better in urban than in rural contexts, which might explain the rent level effect. Its positive association with rent increases, however, is an interesting finding. In our view, it points to the fact that Die Linke adopts a convincing position against excessive rent increases, for the provision of housing at lower costs, and, more generally, social housing. Here, our results probably capture a different political dynamic and tell us a populist story about voters responding to rising rents and the subsequent social processes of displacement and gentrification.[7] The other populist outlier is the AfD, which is the only right-wing party whose vote shares are negatively associated with house and rent price levels as well as homeownership rates. It is interesting to note that high or rising house prices, which usually correlate strongly with rent prices, can, on the one hand, increase the populist vote of dissatisfied urban tenants while, on the other, also benefitting the more established parties through homeowners' wealth effects. These wealth effects, however, can also be reversed where smaller cities or the hinterland do not benefit from rising housing wealth and so tend to vote against the system. In both cases, rents and house prices capture a populist dimension not fully covered by the left-right or by the urban-rural dimension. In our view, focusing on housing markets allows us to discern particular spatial patterns of party support which go beyond binary distinctions of urban vs. rural political contexts. Housing markets combine information on space (i.e., urban/rural) with economic dynamics (acting as a proxy for a variety of socioeconomic processes, such as inflow of habitants, demographics, etc.), which create very different political environments (Figure 2).

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7   Importantly, the results of rising rents on party support for Die Linke continue to hold when we exclude districts from eastern Germany where Die Linke generally performs better than in western Germany.

Finally, turnout is generally high where homeownership and prices are high, but lower where rents and house prices are rising. Throughout all analyses, housing variables can make a difference to explaining political outcomes on the aggregate level.
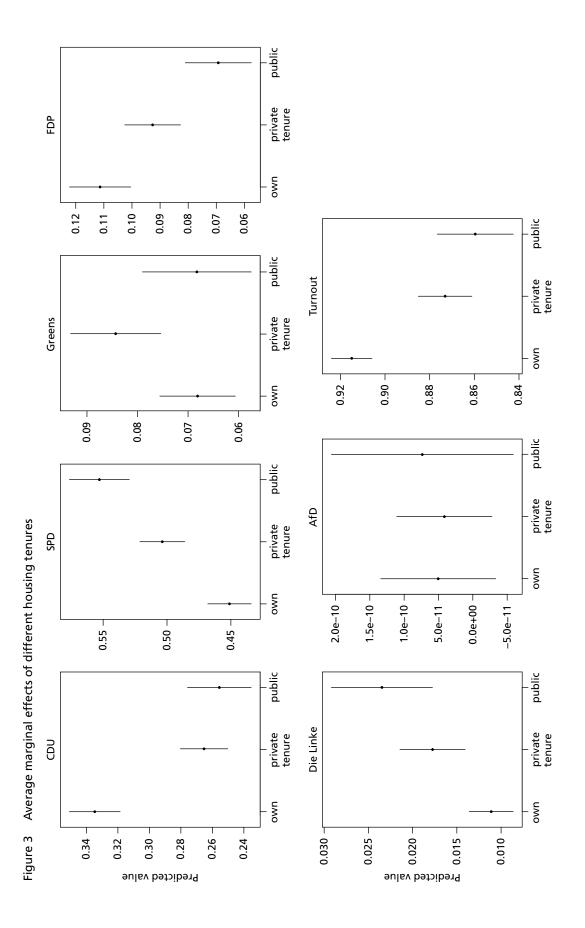
Micro-level analysis

To illustrate the effect of housing tenure on party choice on the micro level, Figure 3 displays the results of our first set of binomial regressions on voting preference and turnout with different housing tenures as independent variables. Again, all tables with controls can be found in the appendix.

The estimates broadly confirm a positive effect of homeownership on conservative party choice. In comparison to private renters, homeowners are more likely to vote for the FDP and CDU than for other parties. Social tenants are, in turn, more likely to vote for the SPD and Die Linke, and less likely for the FDP and CDU, than either homeowners or private tenants. Tenure differences are less pronounced for the AfD, and private tenants are most likely to vote for the Greens. Generally, the ownership dimension thus plays a role when choosing to vote between the established parties in the center, but the effect does not linearly extend to the left-right spectrum. Both homeownership and social tenancy effects can be reproduced by exchanging the party choice variable with the left-right attitude scale (see appendix). The above effects of homeownership on conservative voting are amplified by differences in turnout between homeowners and social tenants. Being a homeowner has more of a positive significant effect on going to the polls than being a private renter. Social housing tenure, in turn, exerts a negative significant effect on participating in national elections when compared to private tenants.

Although we control for *Länder* fixed effects and eastern Germany, we estimated the model for eastern Germany separately. Whereas tenure-related voting patterns for the large parties remain stable, there is a much clearer divide between tenants favoring Die Linke and homeowners favoring the FDP and AfD in eastern Germany than there is in western Germany. We also interacted the effect of tenure with decennial time periods and mainly found evidence of an *embourgeoisement* effect. Parties that are traditionally more left wing and supported by tenants, such as the SPD and the Greens, are increasingly less likely to capture the tenant vote over time. The overall left-right separation of homeowners and private and social tenants slowly fades over time, which again fits with the aggregate analyses of the more recent years only.

While we do not know the house prices and rents of survey respondents, the ALLBUS regional use file allows us to merge city-level rent and price data from ad prices (Boelmann et al. 2019a) with regionally sensitive individual-level data for the last waves 2008–2016. During this period, both rents and house prices increased considerably, particularly in booming cities, and we find strong correlations between both indica-

Figure 3   Average marginal effects of different housing tenures

tors, which is why we use house prices as a proxy for market development because they are most evenly spread across the country. The results generally confirm the effects of house prices presented on the more aggregate level of the last elections – with the exception of the AfD result, which shows a different coefficient. One interesting additional finding is the regression on the left-right scale using an interaction of house price increases and housing tenure: high house price levels are generally associated with more right-leaning voters, and house price increases, perhaps through a wealth effect, lead to right-leaning self-reporting. However, these price increases in interaction with private tenancy produce more left-leaning results, as urban tenants are probably faced with less affordable prices and rents, a micro finding that supports the macro finding about rent increases benefitting left-wing parties such as Die Linke.

Next, we investigate the question of which mechanisms link housing to voting: economic voting or socialization? We conduct two additional regressions for each, which we report in the appendix. To test economic voting, we first conduct a logistic regression on party choice, including information on net housing wealth, only available for the year 2014, to see whether more indebted homeowners are even more conservative. As a reference category, we identify the 44 percent of homeowners who own between 100,000 and 250,000 euros of net wealth as owner-occupiers. Thirty-one percent of the households in our sample own net housing wealth of below 100,000 euros.[8] Finally, we also investigate the group of homeowners owning more than 250,000 euros of net housing wealth. Their wealth often also comprises secondary real estate, which tends to be subject to a wealth effect: rising housing wealth rather than mortgage debt makes people more conservative. Net wealth does indeed make voting for the CDU more likely and for the SPD less likely, but this effect disappears when we control for income. Among homeowners, those less burdened by household debt are not more likely to vote more conservatively. Homeowners are perhaps homogeneous enough in Germany for housing wealth not to matter.

As a second element of the economic voting argument, we examine people's attitudes towards taxes and redistribution in a number of survey waves from 1980 to 2010. The preference for lower taxes and opposition to higher welfare spending is the missing link between financially burdened homeowners and their conservative party choice. We do indeed find that homeowners in the 1980s and 1990s (but not in the latest survey wave year of 2010) were more likely than tenants to be against more tax increases than more social spending.

Finally, we address the socialization argument through two additional tests. To test whether the suburban living environment makes people more conservative, we conduct a further logistic regression on party choice, including the duration of residence

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8   In this group, debts considerably lower the median value of the owned homes, which a recent ECB study found to be around 168,000 euros (ECB 2013). Although this group is smaller when compared to the around 50 percent of mortgaged homeowners in the Eurostat statistics, we are still able to single out a group for which mortgage debt plays a considerable role.

and its interaction with ownership (we drop age due to multicollinearity). The rationale behind the inclusion of the interaction term is to find out whether homeowners who resided longer in a more homeowner-dominated neighborhood are more likely to vote for conservative parties than private tenants. The duration of residency variable is available for a number of survey waves from 1980 to 2010. However, we do not find evidence for this hypothesis. Whether an individual moved into homeownership just recently or whether they have been owner-occupiers for their entire life does not make a difference in terms of party choice. We interpret this finding as first evidence against any socialization mechanism being at work.

As a final test for the socialization mechanism, we compare owner-occupiers of apartments to those of single-family houses. Forty-five percent of all households in our sample own houses, while about five percent own apartments with an increasing trend over time. About nine percent of all owner-occupiers live in apartments. The upshot of this comparison is that it controls for background factors related to homeownership, such as housing wealth or the decision to buy, and isolates the socialization effects of the suburban environment that the literature on suburbia hypothesizes about. We would thus expect suburban single-family house owner-occupiers to be more conservative than their counterparts in city apartments. For this reason, we construct the dummy variable "single-family house" to replace the tenure variable in our basic regression on party choice. Owner-occupiers of apartments are the reference category and, once again, this variable is available for all pooled cross sections from 1980 to 2016. We do not find a significant effect of homeowners' suburban living environment on party choice throughout the entire period. Beyond housing tenure, there do not seem to be any neighborhood effects related to housing type that are of importance.

5   Discussion and conclusion

The above results suggest that housing is important for voting even in the least-likely case of Germany, where house prices have developed more conservatively and homeownership levels are so low as to have already made homeowners a more homogeneous class (Korom 2017). The results thus support the argument that housing acts as an important socioeconomic proxy that is not reducible to typical electoral predictors. They are more cautious when it comes to the importance of the causal mechanisms of economic self-interest or socialization in this context. The three main empirical takeaways are that, first, homeownership, house prices, and rents cannot be shoehorned into a simple left-right model, but add a more fine-grained urban-rural and populist dimension to the explanation of political outcomes. Second, according to existing international studies, the often correlated rent price dynamics can lead to different political outcomes in a tenant-dominated country such as Germany. Finally, there is evidence of an *embourgeoisement* effect over time that erodes the more traditional left-right division of tenants and homeowners.

In general, it is worth noting that the results on different levels of analysis and for different time periods do not always point in the same direction. The macro analyses were for the last two or three elections only, whereas the microdata cover the last three and a half decades. The micro results show that time is of relevance for the relationship between housing and tenure, as homeownership was apparently part of the general *embourgeoisement* of typical left-wing voters, which is mainly found for the income and education dimension (Piketty 2019). This micro finding can explain why homeownership-dominated electoral districts or city neighborhoods with a preponderance of single-family houses show a strong association with SPD vote share. However, results may also differ geographically. One difference is the clearer left-right cleavage of tenants and homeowners with regard to the parties Die Linke, AfD, and FDP. The macro analyses may also come to different conclusions due to urban/rural differences: electoral districts cover the whole of Germany, but in very broad regions, whereas city districts just encompass certain urban parts of Germany. Overall, however, the effects of house prices and rents depend less on the unit of analysis, even though they carry the risk of ecological fallacies. If, for instance, regions with a large number of homeowners and conservative party votes correlate, it might still be the case that tenants in these regions cause the cross-regional difference and even survey respondents living in high-price areas could live in decoupled housing units and display envy effects instead of wealth effects.

On the macro level, homeownership is positively associated with voting for larger parties, not only the center-right ones, and negatively particularly with the Greens. These findings suggest that housing tenure captures not only a left-right dimension but possibly also an urban-rural or city-suburban divide not fully covered by our control measures. The recent house price boom is negatively associated with the SPD but also the AfD vote share, whereas with both center-right parties and the Greens there is a positive association. Homeownership, high prices, and low price increases are associated with higher turnout in micro and macro areas. Despite the different ecologies of electoral and city districts, the results are relatively robust across levels. The division into the buyers' and renters' market is relevant for certain parties such as Die Linke or the CSU. For future studies, this implies the need to go beyond house price analyses and to include rents as well, particularly when looking at countries and cities with lower levels of homeownership.

On the micro level, homeowners are more likely to vote for conservative parties, particularly the CDU and FDP, and to go to the polls more often than private tenants. This result makes the least-likely German case rather similar to other countries. However, social tenants are less likely to vote than private tenants and tend to vote more for left-wing parties. These findings are robust toward modification of the dependent variable: homeowners, unlike social tenants and private tenants, are more likely to display right-leaning political attitudes. The effects are also not reducible to homeowners' class, education, rural residency, gender, religion, or age. Rather, housing tenure seems to

represent an independent effect on party choice and right-left attitudes, though none on welfare and tax preferences.[9]

Empirically, we cast some doubt on the two causally stronger views – economic voting and socialization theories – that attribute housing with causal properties of its own. According to the socialization view, we would expect longer residence in homeownership to increase homeowners' conservatism or for a suburban single-family house environment to create conservative attitudes. Yet we found no evidence for these claims in the German case. The economic voting view, on the other hand, assumes that mortgaged homeowners oppose higher tax burdens and welfare expansion and that this is why they vote more conservatively. In this view, the expected or real net housing wealth makes households independent of welfare provision. However, we only found very weak support for this latter mechanism and even then, this effect diminished over time. Although the data availability does not allow us to control for selection effect, these tests suggest at least indirectly that selection could be at play.

From a theoretical perspective, both causal views (economic voting and socialization) run into many more difficulties. First of all, first home buyers in Germany have traditionally been in their late thirties, i.e., long after basic political worldviews have been formed. Moreover, they have often only bought property once in their lifetime, not with a view to climbing the housing ladder, but to benefit from the local use value and bequeath something to their children (Wedel and Hoffmann 2002). Changes in housing tenure or prices thus tend to be restricted to the group of swing voters. However, in existing panel data, such as the British Household Panel Survey, changing tenure and changing political attitudes are both rare events, which reduces the number of cases.

A second problem lies in the difficulty of clearly isolating the timing of housing as an influence. For example, does owning a single-family house affect attitudes immediately after the purchase date or does the conservatism it brings about have an incubation period of more than a decade? Or does the intended purchase of a house in ten years' time make an individual anticipate their future budget situation and already change their current political behavior before they even take out their first mortgage? The incubation and anticipation make the already high data requirements even higher. A third objection to housing as an important causal factor in explaining electoral behavior is that it occupies a low position in voters' ranking of the most important problems. For instance, in the GLES, barely a single interviewee mentioned housing in response to the question "What is the most important political problem?" Although housing might be part of a general concern for household budget, this does not translate into it being a permanently important policy item on voters' agendas.

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9   This latter finding might reflect a category that is too broad and needs to be refined in further research. Homeowners might, for instance, have an aversion to social transfers and welfare for the poor but still embrace taxes and welfare for security spending.

While homeownership and social housing are strongly associated with political outcomes in cross sections on both the micro and macro level, longitudinal shifts in homeownership on both levels are more difficult to explain. In the life course of one individual, there might be more swing vote incidents than tenure changes and the two might not even coincide. However, the changes in votes between two national or *Länder* elections are also hard to predict based on the slow and steady movements of homeownership or social tenancy rates. While the strength of the CDU over the past decade seems to align well with Germany's highest homeownership levels since the first measurements, similarly high levels and prior increases also existed during the last SPD governments. Also on an international level there was a shift toward left-wing parties in reaction to the very high homeownership rate increases during the last housing boom. Panel analyses including more than these bivariate observations on both levels would be necessary to explore the timing and sequence of tenure and voting effects in more detail. Housing tenure does not seem to be characterized by a variation that would suddenly tip the balance in one party's favor.

These arguments make it difficult to accept any of the stronger causal views about housing's role in explaining voting behavior, be it economic voting or socialization theories. That said, we need not discard housing completely as a factor in helping us to explain voting behavior. Housing is an easily observable property, an effective sorting mechanism in the urban electoral geography, and can still guide political parties in their political campaigns. It is therefore reasonable to fall back on the socioeconomic proxy view of housing, which captures crucial features of people's economic, locational, and even lifestyle situation that cut across more traditional cleavage lines and are not reducible to income, religion, gender, or class.

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