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The Growing Greens: How Young Postmaterialists Delivered Electoral Success for the German Green Party in 2021

Isaac Lamoreaux

Introduction

The German Green Party seemed to be forever a secondary party in German politics. That is, until the German General Election in 2021 when they gained more seats in the Bundestag than any other party. Many wondered how such a small party could perform such a feat. Scholars, particularly Ronald Inglehart, have theorized on and studied the concept of postmaterialism. In a basic sense, postmaterialism is a set of values that turns away from safety and security concerns (materialism), and more toward what Inglehart called intellectual and aesthetic concerns (Inglehart 1971, 991–993). These concerns range from topics like freedom of speech, greater protections and rights for minority groups, and environmentalism (Inglehart and Abramson 1999, 670). It has been postulated that postmaterialism is mostly driven by middle and upper-class young people who did not experience war or financial instability during their upbringing. These young people would then begin to bring postmaterialist values to the political environment (Inglehart 1971, 991–993). Building off of the scholarly literature, I theorize that a younger generation of Germans holding postmaterialist values was an important factor to the German Green Party’s electoral success in the 2021 German Bundestag Elections, where the Green Party gained over fifty seats. The party then held 118 seats in the 736-seat Bundestag (“Distribution,” 2021).

The electoral success of the German Green Party presents an opportunity to study how postmaterialism affects vote choice in elections. It has been theorized that younger voters holding postmaterialist values are driven to vote for Green Parties. Additionally, we can focus on the success the party had on younger voters, who were the core of the Green Party’s electorate.

In order to study the effects that postmaterialism had on young voters' party choice, I use the GLES (German Longitudinal Election Study) to connect postmaterialist values and young voters choosing the Green Party over other alternatives. The GLES is an exit poll conducted over the Internet targeting German voters in the 2021 Federal election. The GLES asks who they voted for in 2021 and 2017, as well as other thermometer questions that study voter's attitudes on specific issues like immigration, populism, inequality, and more. Using the exit polling data and the questions asked to the participants in the GLES, the study shows holding postmaterialist values affected vote choice. A major limitation of the GLES is its lack of a specific postmaterialist measurement, which will be outlined in subsequent sections. Without these specific measurements, I identified nine questions given to participants which I will use to study postmaterialism within the sample.

The findings would not exactly be what Inglehart would have expected. After running multivariate and multinomial regression, I find that younger voters were more likely to vote for the Green Party than other age groups. Furthermore, I found that younger voters were more likely to hold postmaterialist values than older voters. Finally, those that held more postmaterialist values were more likely to vote for the Green Party over other party alternatives. These results may indicate that the Green Party is solidifying its base around those who hold postmaterialist values.

From these findings, I theorize that young postmaterialists were a significant factor in the German Green Party's success, unifying around a strong party that prioritizes postmaterialist concerns against a backdrop of record flooding and climate activism in Germany. There are limitations to this conclusion, the primary being that the GLES survey did not include a postmaterialist measurement. Furthermore, some of the criteria for postmaterialist values are more correlated with populism and right-wing parties in Germany. Finally, the limited number of younger voters in the survey could lead to bias in the results.

This main paper will first go through relevant scholarship that has been done on the topic of green parties and postmaterialism. Then I will discuss the theoretical argument and move into the methods of this paper. Finally, I will discuss the results and conclude with final remarks, making note of topics for further research on this question.

Literature Review

In 1971, Ronald Inglehart proposed a theory which is the basis of this paper. Inglehart theorized that the relative economic peace and prosperity after the second world war brought political realignment in Western Europe, as those who grew up in times of peace and prosperity would have shifting political values. Those in the upper-middle classes who experienced economic stability and security would no longer look for these values in their political leaders, taking these conditions for granted. Instead, they would look toward more intellectual and aesthetic needs. Those in the working class, meanwhile, would have had opportunities to gain property and general economic growth, and would then be more interested in the security and stability of their economic assets,

instead of in gaining these assets. Thus, those in the middle class would turn from the parties on the right and center, parties of stability and security, to parties more on the left, which advocate for larger societal changes. Working class people, meanwhile, would shift their voting patterns from the left to the right, as they would be more interested in the economic prosperity that the right offers over the economic stability that the left campaigns from (Inglehart 1971, 991–993). For this paper, I am interested in the value shifts of those from the middle class—shifts which Inglehart would later define as “postmaterialism.”

Postmaterialism was measured originally through a test assessing four values. People were asked to pick two values that were most important to them out of the following four: “maintaining order in the nation, giving the people more of a say in important political decisions, fighting rising prices, and freedom of speech,” (Inglehart 1971, 994). Responding with “giving people more of a say” and “freedom of speech” indicates more postmaterialist values, while “order” and “fighting rising prices” are indicative of more materialist values. Inglehart later created a twelve-value test that asked survey takers an additional eight questions that gauged what they preferred in the long term. These values ranged from intellectual and belonging (postmaterialist) to safety and sustenance needs (materialist—the opposite of postmaterialist values, which includes having strong defense capabilities and maintaining order to economic growth and a stable economy) (Inglehart 1977, 39–48). This test showed that citizens of developing countries placed greater emphasis on materialist values, while developed nations had higher rates of postmaterialism. For example, only 7% of respondents in Ireland (which was identified as developing at the time) were identified as postmaterialist while 14% of Belgians identified as postmaterialist (Inglehart 1971, 38).

Postmaterialism significantly impacts political ideology, and as a result, it impacts public policy outcomes as well. Inglehart found that those who were identified as postmaterialist were also likely to identify themselves as leaning left politically. The opposite is true for materialists (Inglehart 1977, 60–62). This is an interesting consideration, especially when taking into account that part of Inglehart’s theory is that postmaterialist and materialist values will transcend classical left-right ideologies in the future (Inglehart and Abramson 1999, 669). In the same article, Inglehart and Abramson identify issues that postmaterialists would be likely to support. These issues include the acceptance of abortion, LGBTQ+ rights, prostitution, and more. Further, they define taking part in strikes, boycotts, and demonstrations as postmaterialist actions (Inglehart and Abramson 1999, 670). Interestingly, many of these viewpoints and actions are associated with leftists and other left-leaning political ideologies. They comment on this point, stating that “postmaterialism has been reshaping the meaning of left and right, shifting the original emphasis on class conflict issues, such as government ownership of industry and the redistribution of income, toward an increasing focus on the quality of life, such as environmental protection, women’s rights, and the status of gays and lesbians,” (Inglehart and Abramson 1999, 669). What Inglehart appears to be arguing is not the disappearance of the left-right labels, but rather a shift in what parties value and is important to them.

Inglehart attributed the rise of postmaterialism to the younger generations of the middle-class. These youths, who have grown up in times of economic prosperity and physical safety, turn their attention to social, environmental, intellectual, and belonging values (Inglehart 1971, 1977, 1999). In 1977, Inglehart noted that postmaterialist values were increasingly found in younger populations (Inglehart 1977, 54 and 69).

In the context of political and economic conflict, the stability of postmaterialist values in today's youth comes under question. Economic crises like the Great Recession and the effects of COVID-19 put the younger generation in a precarious situation in terms of their loyalties to postmaterialist values. According to Inglehart, a socialization process takes place when individuals have had a stable economic and physical upbringing. These values, which are developed in their teen years, become solidified and stabilized over time (Inglehart 1981, 881). This Socialization Theory was tested some years later, and it was shown that young postmaterialists in the United States and the Netherlands held onto postmaterialist values into their adult years (De Graaf, Hagenaars, and Luijkx 1989, 183–201). Interestingly, postmaterialist values were seen to be less stable in Germany. This instability was attributed to the economic hardships endured after WWII and the subsequent introduction of American economic and cultural values. These explanations, however, were not empirically tested (De Graaf, Hagenaars, and Luijkx 1989, 192–193). More recently, studies have shown that postmaterialist values have persisted in the face of the Great Recession among younger people. This stability through a devastating economic crisis may mean that younger people will continue to hold onto their postmaterialist values beyond the COVID-19 pandemic (Henn, Sloam, and Nunes 2021, 16).

Effects of postmaterialism on voting patterns have been studied by multiple scholars. In the United States, noneconomic interests were beginning to play a large role in politics for both materialists and postmaterialists during the presidential races of the 1990's. In those races, noneconomic concerns proved to shift postmaterialists to Democratic candidates (Brown and Carmines 1995, 490). During the Australian parliamentary elections of 1990 and 1998, it was found that postmaterialists were beginning to change their vote share to Labor instead of smaller parties (like the Australian Green Party), which points to larger parties beginning to encompass postmaterialist ideals in their platforms in Australia (Western and Western 2001, 457). After German Reunification, materialist concerns became more salient, even after postmaterialist concerns became integrated into the Social Democratic Party's (SPD) platform. This reversion to materialism was caused by the integration of East Germans into the political sphere, which caused greater electoral success for the CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union of Germany and Christian Social Union in Bavaria) and created a challenge for the SPD to create a mixture of a materialist and postmaterialist platform (Fuchs and Rohrschneider 1998, 112–3). From these different results, we can see that the country and the economic and/or political situation of that country affects how postmaterialists vote.

In the present day, young postmaterialists have been influential in a multitude of political activities. For example, postmaterialism has been linked to higher rates of institutionalized and non-institutionalized forms of political participation by younger

people. It has been found that while British postmaterialists tend to favor activities like boycotting and demonstrating, they are also more likely than their materialist counterparts to vote. It is also interesting to note that the same group favored more party competition within the United Kingdom, throwing their support towards smaller parties and electoral reform (Henn, Oldfield, and Hart 2018, 712–37).

Furthermore, young postmaterialists have been increasingly linked to environmental and political activism. A study conducted by Henn et al. shows that postmaterialism among Europe's youth is connected to environmental protest and politics. The same group was also connected to greater political engagement, with a tendency toward higher levels of female and educated populations (Henn, Sloam, and Nunes 2021, 1–21). Similar results were found in Chile, during the environmental protests of 2011. It was found that youth who held postmaterialist values were more likely to have participated in the protests (Scherman, Arriagada, and Valenzuela 2015, 151–71). Both of these studies make an interesting conclusion: postmaterialist, environmentally minded youth were more likely to be found in urban or cosmopolitan centers. Additionally, many of these studies about postmaterialist youth produced similar findings across countries. As noted above, postmaterialist youth are likely to participate in elections, which translates to the vote choice of environmental or green parties.

These green parties exist globally, and some play important roles in governance or opposition. According to the Global Greens, an international network of green parties, green parties are those that center “ecological wisdom, social justice, equality, freedom, participatory democracy, non-violence, sustainability, and respect for diversity,” in their party platforms (“Charter” 2021). These parties center on environmental concerns. It is important to note that most, if not all, of their core values are intrinsically postmaterialist and noneconomic in nature. The presence of these parties may thus draw the votes of postmaterialists. The German Green Party is no exception, but must distinguish and prove itself in order to compete with other left-leaning German parties.

There are three main left-leaning parties in Germany: The Social Democrats (SPD), Die Linke (The Left), and the Green Party. Die Linke is the successor of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the party that ruled East Germany under the Iron Curtain. Since reunification, Die Linke has been solidly materialistic, prioritizing issues such as taxes, the minimum wage, and working conditions. However, they have also evolved to be more postmaterialist, emphasizing environmentalism, equality, and other non-economic concerns. The SPD is a center-left party that existed in West Germany before unification. The SPD strategically emphasized postmaterialist values when these values became more salient for West German voters, and minimized them after unification when economic concerns were at the front of mind for East Germans. Contrary to the rest of the German left, the Green Party is the only party that has been reliably postmaterialist. Even after reunification, they continued to emphasize values of environmentalism, equality, and justice until today.

The environmental activism of young postmaterialists translates into their voting habits. Countries with multiparty systems have seen an increase in support for green parties amongst young people. Two explanations for this trend have been put forward.

One, which is in line with my own theory, observes the success of the Green Party in Germany and hypothesizes that it is linked to the rise of postmaterialist values in constituents and the Green Party's ability to present itself as a viable, further left alternative to the Social Democrats (Kaelberer 1998, 299–315). The other theory suggests that young people are influenced by the postmaterialist rhetoric of green parties. For younger voters, the social and environmental issues of the Green Party resonated with them, causing them to turn out to vote for the Green Party at a higher rate. In this case, political socialization is an important factor in developing postmaterialist attitudes (Tranter and Western 2009, 145–67). This theory suggests reverse causality between voting for the German Green Party and holding postmaterialist values. Regardless of when or how German voters came to hold postmaterialist values, this paper explores whether postmaterialists were an important factor in voting for the German Green Party in the 2021 election.

Theory

With past literature and theories in mind, we now move to the causal logic of the increase of Green Party voters from 2017 to 2021. While there may be many reasons for the general shift from other parties to the Green Party, there are three that were either widely discussed during this election cycle or were relevant to prior scholarship. These three key factors are devastating floods and accompanying environmental youth protests, the rising number of individuals who hold postmaterialist values, and the fragmented and weak state of left-leaning alternatives.

On September 24, 2021, thousands of young people and students gathered in front of the German Bundestag (“Fridays for Future: Climate Protests Kick off with Greta Thunberg in Berlin” 2021). Greta Thunberg, the then eighteen-year-old climate activist, spoke to the crowd of masked students: “Voting is essential, but alone it is not enough. If we want to ensure a safe presence and a future on planet Earth, we need to be active democratic citizens and go out on the streets, like what we are doing today,” (Abnett 2021). Just two months earlier, Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia were hit with a series of catastrophic floods (“Floods in Germany” 2022). 184 Germans were thought to have lost their lives. Soon, much of the media was reporting on an article published by multiple academics who claimed that the large amount of rainfall was 1.2 to 9 times more likely because of climate change (Kreienkamp et al. 2021). Climate action was a salient issue among German voters but was especially salient among young voters. This was a perfect occasion for the German Greens to solicit votes from anxious youths and Germans affected by the floods.

Political mobilization by institutional and noninstitutional means, is often displayed by those holding postmaterialist values (Henn, Oldfield, and Hart 2018, 712–37). If Inglehart's theory of postmaterialism is accurate, then we should expect a higher number of young people to hold more postmaterialist values every year. This effect should be especially visible at a time when the Green Party is visible and climate rhetoric may be influencing the values of younger people (Tranter and Western 2009,

145–67). According to the World Values Survey, in 2013, 20.5% of German people under the age of 29 were indicated to be postmaterialist by Inglehart's four item survey (“World Values Survey 2013 Germany,” n.d.). In 2017, that number nearly doubled to 39.9%. This growing number of young postmaterialists may have had a big impact on the number of young constituents the Greens were able to carry.

Finally, the other left-leaning alternatives were either weak or emphasized materialist goals more. The German Green Party emphasized the environment and other postmaterialist concerns in the party's manifesto, and while they addressed economic concerns, it was not centered like the SPD's platform was. The SPD did campaign on some postmaterialist values, but they did not center them like the Green Party did. Die Linke, on the other hand, campaigned heavily on environmentalism, but still emphasized classic leftist economic concerns (wages, working conditions, taxing the wealthy, etc). While they were able to create a platform that emphasized both materialistic and postmaterialist concerns, they had major party in-fighting. In her book entitled *The Self-Righteous*, Sahra Wagenknecht, a popular Die Linke politician, raved about the “‘lifestyle leftists,’ for whom being left-wing has become a question of culture and taste rather than material or class interests,” according to Jacobin (Balhorn 2021). Inter-party bickering within Die Linke made the party appear weak and caused it to underperform in the 2021 election. It failed to win the votes of East Germans and urbanites (Hasselbach 2021). While a significant portion of youth voters did vote for Die Linke, it did not experience the electoral success of the Green Party, which was much more unified.

Research Design and Methods

To create a causal link between younger voters and the German Green Party's success, I used survey data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES). The GLES collected exit polling data from those that participated in the 2021 federal election. Furthermore, it asked a variety of questions ranging from who participants voted for in 2017 to opinion questions and general data (education level, location, sex, age, etc.).

This survey does have a few limitations. First, in some cases, the survey was completed a few months after the election. Many different factors could have contributed to why a person voted for the party that they did. Furthermore, this gap in time may increase the probability of retroactive opinions about different survey questions. Additionally, the survey had a fairly small number of younger respondents. While this may distort the findings, it is also reflective of the small number of youth voters (~7% of the electorate). Lastly, the survey was conducted over the Internet. While this may not be to the detriment of the survey, it is not clear how the creators of the survey selected those that took their survey. Despite these limitations, I believe that the GLES survey data will stand to be a good determinate of how Germany voted in the 2021 Federal Election.

The causal logic of this paper rests on three separate hypotheses: (1) younger voters tend to vote for the Green Party, (2), younger people tend to hold postmaterialist values, and (3) those with more postmaterialist values tend to vote for the Green Party.

Most of the hypotheses outlined above were tested by using regressions. These regressions employed a number of variables that control for the traditional Green Party base. This includes those with higher college degrees, urbanites, those who live in historical West Germany, women, and the financially well-off.

For the first hypothesis, I used multivariate logit regression to illustrate that the younger one is, the more likely they will vote for the Green Party. I will then use multinomial regression to identify the party preferences that young voters had during this past election. The multinomial regression has a base party in order to avoid issues with perfect multicollinearity. The CDU/CSU (Christian Democratic Union of Germany and the Christian Social Union in Bavaria) will serve as the base party.

The second hypothesis is that holding postmaterialist views is a significant predictor in voting for the Green Party. Part of the GLES included a questionnaire. While participants were not asked Inglehart's four or twelve item survey, they were asked questions that we can use to determine whether they hold postmaterialist values. Some of these include warmth towards immigrant groups, concern about the environment, and views of democracy, among other factors. First, I ran regressions for each measure of postmaterialism with relevant controls and party choice. Then, I combined the relevant postmaterialist variables into an index and regressed the index with party choice.

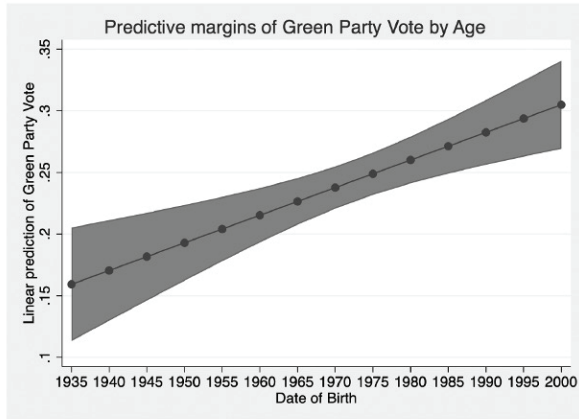
My third and final hypothesis is that a higher postmaterialist score will have a higher likelihood of voting for the German Green Party. For this, I will use the post-materialist index score and run a regression with the different parties to visualize the likelihood of voting for each party while holding postmaterialist values.

Findings

For the first hypothesis, there was statistically significant evidence that those who voted for the Green Party tended to be younger than thirty years old. The German Green's main base (other than youth) are with women, western Germans, urbanites, the well-educated, and the financially well-off. I controlled for these variables in order to ensure that there are no omitted variable biases present in the results of the regression. I ran a multivariable regression into ascertain the linkage between age and voting for the Green Party. While the results are significant, the date of birth accounts for only a tiny increase of voting for the Greens (a coefficient of 0.002). Furthermore, all other controls, except for economically stable, were more significant. However, age still predicts a higher probability of voting for the Greens as the voter becomes younger (as seen in the graph below).

VARIABLES	(1) Green Party Vote
Age	0.00224*** (0.000584)
Urban	0.115*** (0.0209)
Female	0.0680*** (0.0173)
Educated	0.167*** (0.0195)
West	0.109*** (0.0188)
Financially Stable	0.0497*** (0.0191)
Constant	-4.396*** (1.151)
Observations	2,275
R-squared	0.089

Standard errors in parentheses
 *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

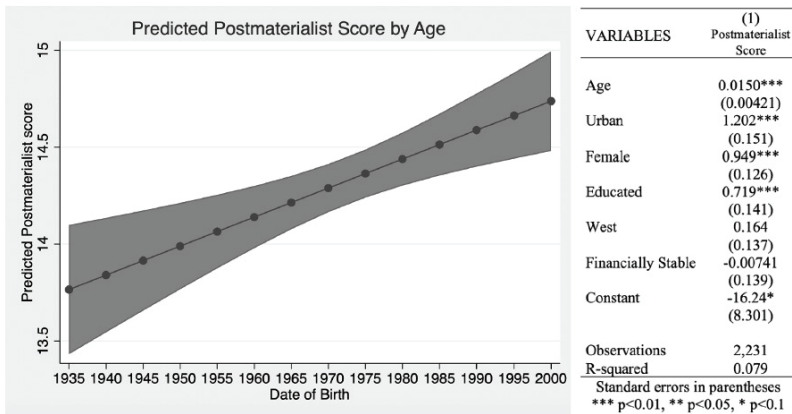


I then ran a multinomial regression testing for whether age was a significant factor in voting for each party while controlling for relevant control variables. Compared to other political parties, the Green Party (denoted by GRUENE in the regression table below) was statistically significant in younger voters voting for them. Other parties and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) are the only other parties where age was a significant indicator of vote choice. These results are unsurprising. The FDP, Greens, and other smaller parties are known to attract younger voters (Bundesamt 2021). These results may cast doubt on the validity of the first hypothesis, as many younger voters in the GLES preferred the FDP over the Green Party. These results from the regression do not align with the actual voter turnout of the election. 24% of voters between the ages of 18 and 24 voted for the Green Party, while 20% voted for the FDP (Bundesamt 2022, 17). While these values are similar, they show that there was a larger turnout for Green Voters than the multinomial regression is predicting. This indicates that there may be sampling issues with the dataset. While we have established that the dataset has significantly fewer younger voters than older voters, we see that there seems to be a slight FDP bias with the GLES, which we will keep in mind for the rest of the paper.

VARIABLES	(1) CDUCSU (omitted)	(2) SPD	(3) FDP	(4) GRUENE	(5) DIE LINKE	(6) AfD	(7) Other
Age		0.000684 (0.00443)	0.0370*** (0.00608)	0.0264*** (0.00480)	0.0121* (0.00721)	0.0107 (0.00728)	0.0326*** (0.00725)
Urban		0.451*** (0.160)	-0.140 (0.238)	0.870*** (0.166)	0.934*** (0.235)	-0.419 (0.313)	0.00743 (0.278)
Female		0.349*** (0.126)	0.221 (0.177)	0.382*** (0.140)	-0.124 (0.214)	-0.859*** (0.232)	0.225 (0.213)
Educated		-0.0667 (0.144)	0.227 (0.193)	0.667*** (0.150)	0.299 (0.233)	-0.384 (0.274)	0.222 (0.235)
West		-0.0113 (0.144)	-0.274 (0.197)	0.287* (0.167)	-1.705*** (0.221)	-1.517*** (0.218)	-0.498** (0.228)
Financially Stable		-0.155 (0.146)	0.0803 (0.211)	-0.126 (0.164)	-0.719*** (0.230)	-1.191*** (0.222)	-0.496** (0.233)
Constant		-1.261 (8.720)	-74.03*** (12.01)	-52.91*** (9.470)	-24.12* (14.20)	-20.28 (14.35)	-65.26*** (14.32)
Observations	2,009	2,009	2,009	2,009	2,009	2,009	2,009

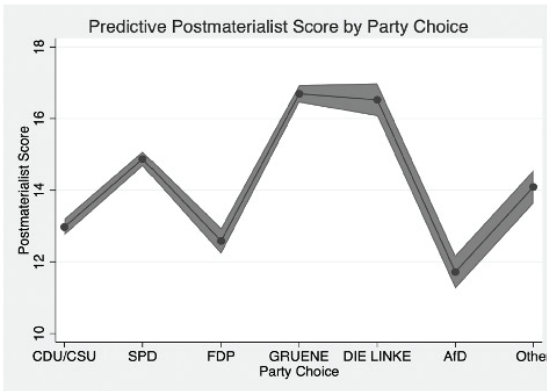
Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

To test the second hypothesis, I made an index for all the postmaterialist measures. The index scored each respondent between 0 (most materialist) to 25 (most postmaterialist). This index is based on questions that the respondents were asked during their survey. These questions covered a range of topics including environmental concern, acceptance of immigrants, and attending political demonstrations.¹ I regressed the postmaterialist index score and age, while controlling for other relevant factors. The results shown below indicate that young voters are considerably more postmaterialist than older voters. With this in mind, we can then tentatively conclude that younger people are more likely to hold postmaterialist values.



¹ These survey questions: the importance of combating climate change; immigrants shouldn't be obligated to adapt to German culture; participated in a boycott; participated in a demonstration; the government should take action to reduce income disparities; and, there should be a mandatory quota on large companies for women sitting on supervisory boards. In these questions, respondents were asked how much they agreed with each prompt (except for participating in a boycott or demonstration, which was a simple yes or no). From there, each participant was assigned a score based off of how postmaterialist they were.

Finally, I ran a regression with this index and party choice, controlling for relevant factors. I found that higher postmaterialist scores are more related to the German Green Party than other party alternatives. However, Die Linke scores are just below the German Green Party's coefficient. This means that postmaterialist voters may not have been as loyal to the Green Party during this election than other scholars would argue.



VARIABLES	(1) Postmaterialist Score
SPD	1.899*** (0.157)
FDP	-0.389* (0.218)
GRUENE	3.720*** (0.172)
DIE LINKE	3.553*** (0.262)
AfD	-1.255*** (0.264)
Other	1.120*** (0.265)
Urban	0.741*** (0.136)
Female	0.708*** (0.114)
Educated	0.391*** (0.125)
West	0.0499 (0.128)
Financially Stable	-0.153 (0.128)
Constant	12.42*** (0.190)
Observations	1,986
R-squared	0.348

Standard errors in parentheses
 *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Conclusion

Postmaterialism proved to be the key to explaining much of the German Green Party's electorate. While environmental concern and to a lesser extent, age, were still significant variables in higher probabilities of voting for the Greens, having higher postmaterialist values seemed to be the best predictor, even with constants. It is important to note that more young people held postmaterialist values than older populations. While there is shaky evidence at best with climate change as a motivator, younger people still preferred the German Green Party over others, especially other left-leaning parties.

Future research should explore this topic more by taking a sample and asking specific postmaterialist measures as outlined in the World Values Survey. As outlined above, future scholarship could also investigate the relationship between right-wing populist views and postmaterialist values. This could help scholars identify patterns in voting and explain vote choices for races in Germany in the future.

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