



The 9/11 conservative shift



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HIGHLIGHTS

- This study analyzes whether 9/11 induced a conservative shift in political support.
- Identification is based on exogenous variation in survey interview timing.
- Terror shock decreased political support intensity among left-wing voters.
- Strength of support among right-wing voters increased with 9/11.
- No switch in support between political blocks.

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the causal impact of the 9/11 terror attacks on individual political orientation and political support intensity using the German Socio-Economic Panel 1999–2003. Exploiting survey interview timing in 2001 for identification and controlling for unobserved individual heterogeneity, I find 9/11 to have increased overall political mobilization. While there is no indication of a considerable switch in support between political blocks, the attacks significantly weakened support intensity among left-wing voters and increased the strength of political support among right-wing voters, indicating a shift in conservative direction.

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1. Introduction

This study contributes to a growing economics literature aiming at an increased understanding of the direct and side effects of terrorism, in particular on political mobilization, voting behavior and political attitudes (see e.g. Echebarria-Echabe and Fernández-Guede, 2006, Gassebner et al., 2008; Bozzoli and Müller, 2011; Montalvo, 2011 and Finseraas and Listhaug, 2013). Exploiting 9/11 as a natural experiment, I analyze the impact on political party alignment in a European country not directly targeted by the attacks—Germany. In a difference-in-differences approach, I compare political attitudes of individuals interviewed before and after 9/11 in 2001, relating them to the same respondents' attitude

levels one year prior. To my knowledge, this is the first study investigating this issue in a quasi-experimental setting based on individual panel data.

Two competing theoretical hypotheses are tested: according to the 'worldview defense' hypothesis (Greenberg et al., 1992), the terror attacks and the related increase in salience of security threat and mortality may result in the polarization of political views with liberals becoming more liberal and conservatives becoming more conservative. In contrast, the 'defensive conservatism' hypothesis (Jost et al., 2003) suggests that a 'conservative shift' is a general psychological response to vulnerability salience, even among liberals, due to the core conservative values of authority, stability and order providing a comforting anchor.¹

Results indicate that while the 9/11 terror attacks increased overall political mobilization, they did not induce switches in

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¹ For a review of previous (mainly experimental) evidence, see Nail et al. (2009).

Table 1

Left- and right-wing alignment.

Source: SOEP 2000–2001, own calculations.

	Dependent variable: LW support = 1; Otherwise = 0			Dependent variable: RW support = 1; Otherwise = 0			Dependent variable: interest in politics (1–5)
	Subsamples			Subsamples			
	2000 no (1)	2000 LW (2)	2000 RW (3)	2000 no (4)	2000 LW (5)	2000 RW (6)	(7)
Year = 2001	0.099*** (0.003)	−0.251*** (0.006)	0.027*** (0.003)	0.073*** (0.003)	0.019*** (0.002)	−0.272*** (0.007)	−0.052*** (0.005)
Year = 2001 × Treat	0.056* (0.029)	−0.064 (0.049)	0.029 (0.027)	0.057** (0.027)	0.013 (0.019)	−0.062 (0.056)	0.104** (0.045)
N	19,128	9764	7432	19,128	9764	7432	37,252

Note: Balanced panel, fixed effects models. *Treat* = 0 for both years (2000 and 2001) if the 2001 survey interview took place between January 1 and September 10, and = 1 if the 2001 interview was between September 12 and October 31. The *Treat* indicator is hence time-invariant. Constant is included.

*** significant at 1%; ** significant at 5%; * significant at 10%.

Table 2

Strength of left- and right-wing support.

Source: SOEP 2000–2001, own calculations.

	LW-supporters		RW-supporters	
	Dependent variable: strength of LW support (1–5)		Dependent variable: strength of RW support (1–5)	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Year = 2001	−0.010 (0.013)	−0.012 (0.014)	−0.030* (0.016)	−0.031* (0.017)
Year = 2001 × Treat	−0.350*** (0.098)	−0.362*** (0.099)	0.230* (0.134)	0.245* (0.136)
Individual controls	No	Yes	No	Yes
Federal state dummies (16)	No	Yes	No	Yes
N	6008	5982	4286	4264

Note: Balanced panel, fixed effects models. See notes to Table 1. Individual controls include age (4 categories), education (3 categories), employment status (6 categories), marital status (4 categories), net household income (log) and a constant.

*** significant at 1%; ** significant at 5%; * significant at 10%.

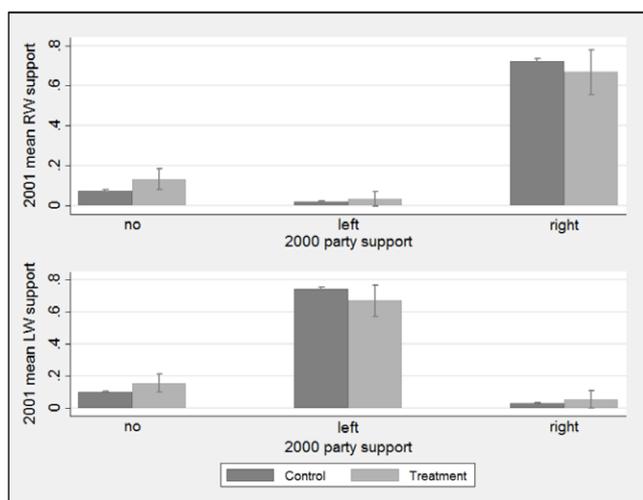


Fig. 1. Evidence on switchers: share of right-(left-)wing supporters in 2001 conditional on 2000 political alignment.

Source: SOEP 2000–2001, own calculations.

political alignment between blocks. However, I find that left-wing supporters react by weakening their support intensity while right-wing supporters increase support strength. This ‘conservative shift’ within political blocks is consistent with the ‘defensive conservatism’ hypothesis.

2. Data and empirical setup

This analysis is based on data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP, 2011), a representative longitudinal survey of private

households in Germany. The sample consists of individuals aged 25 or older to ensure that most individuals have completed education. The main estimation employs the survey years 2000 and 2001, common-trend assessment employs an extended period from 1999 to 2003. Outcome variables of interest are binary variables indicating left-wing and right-wing party support respectively. They are based on a combination of two survey questions: ‘Many people in Germany tend towards a particular party in the long term, even if they occasionally vote for another party. Do you tend towards a particular party?’. If respondents answer yes, they are also asked ‘Which party do you tend towards?’, which enables me to construct indicators of left-wing and right-wing party affinity.² Second, I examine party support intensity, based on a survey question asking respondents with a party affinity to state the extent to which they lean towards that specific party. Answer categories range from 1 (very weakly) to 5 (very strongly). Additionally, I also use the survey question on general interest in politics based on the question ‘Generally speaking, how much are you interested in politics?’ with answers measured on a 4-point scale. Summary statistics are presented in Table A.2 in Appendix.

The identification strategy proposed relies on an interpretation of the 9/11 attacks as a natural experiment. Under the plausible assumption that the attacks were not anticipated, the sample is divided into two groups: one group interviewed post-September 11 in the survey year 2001 (the treatment group) and another group whose 2001 interview took place before September 11 (the control group). The small normalized differences in observable characteristics between these groups (reported in Table A.2 in

² Table A.1 in Appendix describes the variable construction.

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