Stability of National-Identity Content: Level, Predictors, and Implications

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A neglected topic in empirical research on national identity is its stability at the individual level, and this is especially true for its content, that is, the meaning elements that people associate with the concept of nation. In this article, we study the stability of key dimensions of national-identity content. We ask three simple questions: How stable is national-identity content—as captured in the ethnic/civic framework—at the level of individual citizens? Are there clear differences in stability across subgroups? What are the implications of interindividual differences in stability? Analyzing data from four waves of a large-scale panel survey of German citizens (N = 4,654) collected over a five-year period (2016–21), we show that there is high but not perfect stability of the degree to which individuals subscribe to ethnic and civic criteria of nationhood. Second, we find little difference in stability as a function of several theoretically selected characteristics. Third, we show that the association between national-identity content and relevant political attitudes (immigration attitudes and far-right party support) increases with intraindividual stability. These findings have important implications for our understanding of how national-identity content is shaped and mobilized and how it can influence political attitudes and behaviors.

Salience and contestation of national identity have increased rather than decreased in past decades. The reasons for this are themselves contested. One prominent explanation is, for example, that globalization has led to national borders becoming both porous and contested (de Wilde et al., 2019; Kriesi et al., 2008; Norris & Inglehart, 2019), as most recently evidenced by the crystallizing events of the European refugee crisis in 2015 (Kirkwood, 2019; Perron, 2021) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Mylonas & Whalley, 2022; Woods et al., 2020). This has rekindled interest in how national identity structures political attitudes and behavior, and whether and how political actors can mobilize it for their purposes. Among the most important research findings on these issues is that national identity is contested in public discourse, that the nation means different things to different people, and that this identity content is in turn associated with

different political attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Abdelal et al., 2006; Bonikowski, 2016; Helbling et al., 2016; Kunovich, 2009; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

Less attention has been paid to the question of how stable national-identity content is at the individual level. While there are various assumptions about individual-level stability in the literature, there are few studies that have examined this empirically. This is surprising because the stability issue is relevant to all issues mentioned above. Developing some sense of the base-line stability of national-identity content is important, for example, to understand how attempts of political elites to mobilize national identity play out. Does rhetoric directly shape identity content or (merely) raise its psychological salience? Furthermore, answering the stability ques-tion can also contribute to a more fundamental, interdisciplinary debate about the relevance of social identities for explaining attitudes and behavior. While many researchers studying social identity in general and national identity in particular tend to view identities and their meaning as stable (e.g., David & Bar-Tal, 2009), other research, particularly in economics, often assumes a high degree of fluidity (e.g., Kalin & Sambanis, 2018). Empirical findings that could resolve these contradictory assumptions are scarce with respect to identity content in particular (but see Osborne et al., 2017; Wagner et al., 2012).

To help fill this research gap, we address three questions here: (1) How stable is the content of national identity—captured through the civic/ethnic framework—at the level of individual citizens over five years? (2) Are there marked differences in stability across subgroups? (3) What are the implications of interindividual differences in stability? Analyzing data from four waves of a large-scale panel survey of German citizens ($N = 4,654$) collected over a period of five years (2016–21), we show that there is high but not perfect stability of the degree to which individuals subscribe to ethnic and civic criteria of nationhood. Stability is high at the inter- and intraindividual level and comparable to the stability of national attachment—the affective iden-tity component—and right-wing authoritarianism, which is generally considered to be a stable attitude syndrome or even personality trait (Altemeyer, 1998). Second, subgroup analysis shows little variation in stability. We consider a theoretically based selection of variables (strength of attachment, extremity of identity content, and structural ambivalence) and show that the level of stability is comparable across subgroups. Third, we show that the association between national-identity content and relevant political attitudes (immigration attitudes and far-right party sup-port) increases with intraindividual stability, suggesting that variation in stability—to the extent that there is any—matters for attitude formation.

Mapping National-Identity Content: The Civic/Ethnic Framework

We use the ethnic/civic framework to capture key beliefs about the group boundaries of the national group. These beliefs are widely regarded as core elements of the content of national identity and are often invoked to explain political attitudes and behaviors. They have never been subjected to stability analyses before, however, despite the fact that researchers routinely rely on them to understand a wide range of public attitudes and behaviors. To cite just a few examples: Recent studies have examined the effects of national-identity content on attitudes toward immi-grants and immigration policies (Citrin & Sears, 2014; Janmaat, 2006; Reijerse et al., 2013), free trade (Jungherr et al., 2018; Powers et al., 2021), European integration (Aichholzer et al., 2021), democracy and autocracy (Erhardt et al., 2021), populism (Filsinger et al., 2021) and turnout and vote choice (Koopmans & Statham, 1999; Lubbers & Coenders, 2017; Mader et al., 2021).

The ethnic/civic framework goes back at least to Kohn (1944), classifying Europe into mainly ethnic versus mainly civic nations and peoples. The original idea of assigning entire

nations to one type or another is not convincing (e.g., Bugge, 2022), but the framework nevertheless remains useful for describing different traditions of conceptualizing the nation. Accordingly, the focal point of the ideal-typical ethnic conception of national identity is genealogy. The route to membership is ancestry; the national ingroup is defined as a community of people of common descent, and to be a member of the national group requires these blood ties. The focal point of the civic conception is the political community. Membership is seen as a function of accepting certain political values and institutions. In its pure form, according to this conception, it is enough to adhere to these values in order to be a member of the nation.

The ethnic/civic framework represents an ideal-typical classification of identity markers. Individuals do not necessarily correspond to these ideal types. The different (types of) markers should rather be interpreted as symbolic resources that can be used to construct different visions of the nation (Bonikowski, 2016; Zimmer, 2003). In all nations, several such visions typically coexist and compete, and they often have for a long time. The visions are formed in a process of day-to-day interactions and elite discourses in which different identity markers are interwoven and concretized with country-specific historical and cultural aspects (Abdelal et al., 2006; Bonikowski, 2016; Helbling et al., 2016; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). In effect, each vision of national identity resembles a marble cake with different mixing ratios of ethnic and civic (and also cultural) markers. One implication of this ongoing (re-)construction of national identity is that markers often cannot be assigned to one vision of national identity without knowledge of the national context in question, as the ways in which identity markers are combined vary across these contexts (which makes the survey-based, invariant measurement of identity content across nations so difficult; see Medina et al. 2009). This complexity does not render the civic/ethnic framework useless, but means that it should not be applied like a rigid template to every case (nations and individuals).[1]

The case under study here, contemporary Germany, exhibits both ethnic and civic identity traditions. While ethnic identity content in its pure form was openly propagated only at the margins of society for a long time after the excesses of National Socialism, the notion of Germany as a nation of descent lived on, not least in the institutional regulations on citizenship and immigration rules (Brubaker, 1992; Koopmans & Statham, 1999). Recently, the new right-wing populist party AfD has taken over the scepter of the advocate of ethnic identity content and now represents it more loudly and radically than ever before in the history of the Federal Republic (Art, 2018; Arzheimer & Berning, 2019). At the same time, a civic notion of national identity plays a central role in German postwar elite discourse (Kronenberg, 2006) and is deeply ingrained in many citizens' understandings of what it means to be a German (Ariely, 2011; Mader, 2016). Key values in the German variant of civic

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[1]A typical example is the identity marker of being born in a country in order to be considered a member of the nation. Some researchers interpret this marker as expressing a civic understanding of national identity (e.g., Haller & Ressler, 2006; Shulman, 2002), as it corresponds to the *ius soli* principle of citizenship, which in turn contrasts with the *ius sanguinis* principle, according to which citizenship is determined by descent (Brubaker, 1992). Other researchers have interpreted "being born" as an expression of the ethnic vision, because survey data show that in many countries this marker loads with the ancestry marker onto a common dimension (e.g., Kunovich, 2009; Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010). In light of the contextual view of the civi-cethnic framework presented here, this can be explained by the fact that in many (European) countries the identity entrepreneurs (Reicher et al., 2005) of an ethnic conception of national identity use "being born" as a quasi-operationalization of the ancestor criterion. This rhetorical move works particularly well in countries that are not traditional immigration countries, where the awareness has not yet taken hold that people with nonnative ancestors may have been born and spent their entire lives in the country. Because of this and similar ambiguities, some authors prefer other pairs of terms than ethnic/civic to denote essentially the same clusters of markers, such as ascriptive-achievable (e.g., Wright et al., 2012, p. 472).

identity have been captured by the notion of "constitutional patriotism," which prescribes citizens to reject authoritarianism and to embrace democratic principles (Habermas, 1990; Müller, 2006). In short, the civic/ethnic framework captures central—if not all—aspects of the content dimension of German national identity, which makes the analysis of its stability theoretically and substantively relevant.

Different Perspectives on the Stability of National Identity

In their review of social identity research, Kalin and Sambanis (2018) usefully suggest that existing perspectives on social identity can be arranged along a continuum from stable to fluid. From the stability perspective, many identities that are tied to large-scale social categories are predispositions. As such, they are represented in long-term memory and can be activated to serve as evaluation criteria of (political) objects and behavioral options. National identity, this line of research argues, is acquired through childhood socialization and persuasive communication (Almond & Verba, 1963; David & Bar-Tal, 2009). In support of this claim, David and Bar-Tal (2009) point to multiple studies showing that the nation constitutes the first recognition of a macro-social group by the child. Accordingly, individuals are socialized into the shared beliefs underlying national identity from an early age on and constantly (re-)experience institutionalized forms of national identity and solidarity. Direct experiences with other nationals, with the institutions representing the community's shared values, and with institutionalized forms of solidarity strengthen an individual's emotional attachment to the national community and convey the constitutive norms of the group. Hence, this perspective implies that the content of national identity should be stable rather than fluid.

Theories closer to the stability pole do not assume absolute stability. The social identity approach (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987) describes mechanisms how even strong identities may change as a result of contextual changes. For example, the leaders of the group—which are typically seen as prototypical for the group—have the power to shape the group's constituent norms through rhetoric and action (Haslam et al., 2020; Reicher et al., 2005). That capacity for such identity entrepreneurship is limited, however, by the existing meaning associated with a social identity (Turner, 1991). Radical attempts to change the content of the group identity are more likely to cause leaders to lose their influence over the group—by causing the loss of their prototypicality in the eyes of their followers—than to cause group members to follow them. Changes in the content of national identity are thus possible but occur only slowly or in response to extreme events.

Much closer to the fluidity pole are instrumentalist accounts that rely on strict assumptions from rational choice theory. In the extreme, social identities are conceptualized as epiphenomenal and "little more than a metaphoric fig leaf that masks efforts to further the material interests of the people who mobilize around them" (Kalin & Sambanis, 2018, p. 140). Consistent with this idea, studies in this tradition do not account for (national) identities as an independent explanatory factor of political attitudes and behavior. From this instrumentalist perspective, national identification should be rather fluid and change from one context to the next, depending on what seems helpful in pursuing one's interests in a given situation. For example, from this perspective a deterioration in personal economic situations might motivate people to adopt a more exclusive conception of national identity in order to legitimize support for welfare chauvinism (Rapp, 2022; Wright & Reeskens, 2013). A related argument that may imply identity fluidity is that identity is the result of a rational choice (Shayo, 2020). For example, Atkin et al. (2021) argue that individuals choose their religious
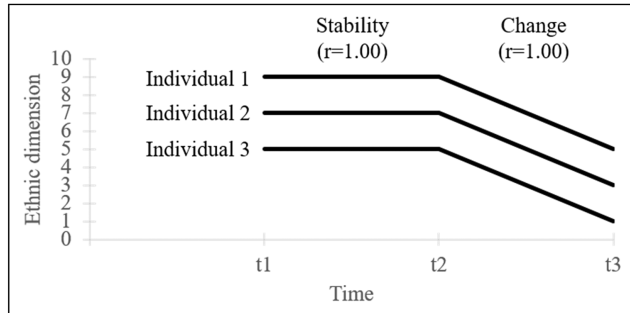
Figure 1. Interindividual stability and intraindividual change.

and ethnic identities as a response to the cost of following the groups' respective prescribed behaviors. Applied to identity content and, crucially, situations where identity content is contested, people may choose (change) the identity content they subscribe to on the basis of (changing) instrumental considerations.

Given these contradictory perspectives on the stability of national identity, empirical studies could give a verdict about which is more in line with reality. But prior research on the intraindividual stability of national identity is rare, due to the scarcity of suitable panel data. We are aware of only two studies that speak to the question of long-term stability of national-identity content at the mass level (Osborne et al., 2017; Wagner et al., 2012), and these studies are not even primarily interested in intraindividual stability. Consequently, they inform about this issue only in a limited way. Wagner and colleagues analyze German public opinion data from a two-wave panel survey conducted in 2002 and 2006. They report standardized stability coefficients of 0.73 for patriotism and 0.89 for nationalism, estimated from a cross-lagged latent variable model.[2] The authors conclude that the measures proved "highly stable over a period of four years" and that nationalism and patriotism are "relatively stable attitudinal entities" (Wagner et al., 2012, p. 326). Osborne et al. (2017) also report stability coefficients, in their case from an analysis of data from a three-wave panel survey in New Zealand between 2007 and 2009. Once differences in measurement and estimation are taken into account, their results point to the same conclusion as Wagner et al.'s.[3]

The current state of the art is limited in multiple ways. We do not know anything about the stability of other important national-identity dimensions beyond nationalism and patriotism. Furthermore, existing studies inform only about inter- and not intraindividual stability. As Asendorpf (1992) explains, "in principle, [interindividual] stability is independent of intraindividual change; if all subjects of a sample change a lot, but to the same amount and in the same direction, their rank order is not changed and the stability is 1.0 (correlations are independent of changes in means)" (p. 104). Figure 1 displays mock data of three individuals to illustrate the point. In both periods, t1 → t2 and t2 → t3, there is perfect stability of the rank

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[2]Conceptually, nationalism and patriotism combine affective and cognitive (i.e., content) elements and are hence not an ideal referent, given our primary interest in the stability of identity content.

[3]Like Wagner et al. (2012), the authors report standardized stability coefficients from a structural equation model, namely 0.66 for patriotism and of 0.50 for nationalism (Osborne et al., 2017, p. 1092). Although these coefficients are numerically lower, they result from an analysis in which the variables are entered into the standard error of mean (SEM) as observed variables, which means that random measurement error is not accounted for as effectively as when modeled as latent variables.

ordering of the individuals' scores on the ethnic dimension (and hence stability coefficients are 1.0). But while there is intraindividual stability in $t1 \rightarrow t2$, there is substantial change in $t2 \rightarrow t3$. To study the stability of individual characteristics in a population comprehensively, both stability at the inter- and intraindividual level should be considered. We will explore this below, guided by a research question rather than a specific expectation about the level of stability:

> *RQ1:* How stable are ethnic and civic national-identity content (1) at the interindividual level and (2) at the intraindividual level?

The intraindividual perspective allows a more nuanced, "shades of gray" view on the stability of national-identity content. It helps reconciling and integrating the predispositional and fluidity perspectives by asking which account provides a more apt description of whom (under what circumstances) and to what effect. That is, provided that people differ in the temporal stability of national-identity content, the two perspectives outlined above first suggest that certain characteristics predict individual differences in temporal stability. Moreover, depending on the degree of temporal stability, national-identity content may be more or less likely to represent a predisposition that influences (political) evaluations and decisions. We discuss both issues one by one.

Variation in the stability of national identity between individuals may be driven by a number of factors. We focus on three potential sources of variation. We select these because they explicitly or implicitly derive from prior theorizing. First, social identity theory suggests that individuals with weak attachment to the nation might exhibit lower stability in identity content. That is because the stronger the identification with the group, the more motivated individuals are to learn criterial group norms and act accordingly (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Individuals who do not feel attached to the nation might hence develop ideas about national-identity content in the moment the category becomes psychologically salient or, put slightly differently, answer questions about national-identity content spontaneously, on the basis of whatever pops into their head. What is at the top of their head is, in turn, partially a function of the social context at a given time. People with strong attachment to the nation, in contrast, are more motivated to internalize group norms. This means that these people should have these norms saved in long-term memory, ready to be activated whenever the social category becomes psychologically salient. These considerations lead to the following hypothesis[4]:

> *H1:* The stronger the national attachment, the more stable the content of ethnic and civic identity is.

Second, extreme attitudes are generally considered to contribute to attitude strength, that is, the degree to which attitudes are durable and resistant to attack (Abelson, 1995; Krosnick & Abelson, 1991). Analogously, we expect views on identity markers to be particularly stable when they are extreme—which means here that civic and ethnic content are viewed as either extremely important or extremely unimportant.

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[4]Alternatively, individuals might exhibit a low attachment to the nation because they associate negative things with it. In this reading, then, the absence of attachment expresses not indifference but rejection. Germans might associate their nation with the Nazi era and the murderous nationalism that was cultivated then. Individuals with medium attachment might hence show the highest variation in the answer distribution. We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this possibility out to us. However, this conjecture is not supported by the data.

H2: The more extreme the positions on the civic and ethnic dimensions, the more stable these positions are.

Third, stability might be lower among individuals who subscribe to both ethnic and civic national membership norms, compared to individuals whose conception of national identity resembles the civic and ethnic ideal type, respectively. This hypothesis derives from recent work suggesting that such "mixed types" may experience ambivalence in certain situations (Lindstam et al., 2021). Accordingly, identity content can come into conflict when that content is used in public discourse to advocate opposing positions. The constellation of internalized identity contents then resembles the state of structural ambivalence known from attitude research (e.g., Priester & Petty, 1996). Political opinions are then more contextual because they depend on the identity content that is psychologically salient at a given moment (Lavine, 2004). Furthermore, structural ambivalence may translate into felt ambivalence, that is, internal conflict, and create stress. A long tradition of psychological research suggests that individuals generally try to resolve such dissonance using a range of measures, including change in those beliefs and attitudes that cause the ambivalence (Alvarez & Brehm, 2002; Festinger, 1957). Applied here this means that such mixed types should exhibit more variation in response behavior.

H3: "Mixed types" show less stability than other types of identity-content combinations.

The final part of this section discusses potential implications of interindividual differences in stability. The predispositional view holds that national identity can influence political attitudes and behavior. If the identity is salient, group norms are activated and influence how individuals think and act in a given situation (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Hogg & Smith, 2007). We argue that the degree of stability of a given norm predicts how much the norm affects attitude formation and action choice. More precisely, the strength of association between identity content and outcome variable at a given point in time should increase with the stability of the identity content during the previous period. Different psychological mechanisms can be at play and constitute this effect. The more stable the intraindividual stability of a group norm is, the more likely it seems that it is actually activated when the identity becomes salient. It also seems more likely that citizens with unwavering views will consider the norm—once activated—as binding and use it as a criterion during attitude formation and action choice.

We apply this idea to two outcome variables that, according to prior research, are influenced by the degree to which individuals accept civic and ethnic criteria of nationhood. First, prior research suggests that citizens form immigration attitudes on the basis of their conception of national identity. The more they subscribe to an ethnic view, the more they favor restrictive immigration policies, whereas acceptance of civic criteria is typically associated with more liberal views on immigration (Citrin & Sears, 2014; Janmaat, 2006; Lindstam et al., 2021; Reijerse et al., 2013). Second, prior research suggests that the ethnic and civic dimensions also have such opposite effects on support for far-right parties (Lubbers & Coenders, 2017; Mader et al., 2021). Higher scores on the ethnic dimension make it more likely to support such parties; high scores on the civic dimension make it less likely. From these considerations, we derive the following expectation:

H4: The association between identity content and immigration attitudes and far-right party support should increase with the stability of said content in the prior period.

Table 1. Sample Information.

	Wave 1 (Time 1)	Wave 2 (Time 2)	Wave 3 (Time 3)	Wave 4 (Time 4)
Internal GLES numbering	Wave 1	Wave 9	Wave 11	Wave 21
Field time	Oct-Nov 2016;	Mar 2018	May-Jun 2019	Dec 2021
N total (W1 retention)	18,079	9472 (52%)	7683 (42%)	6177 (34%)

Note: Number of participants in all three waves: 5,139 (28% of original sample); *N* of balanced panel = 4,654.

Data and Methods

Case Selection

Germany in the period of 2016–21 is a suitable case for investigation. During this period, the country struggled with the consequences of the so-called "European refugee crisis" of 2015, which increased the salience and contestation of national identity along civic/ethnic lines (Mader et al., 2021; Mader & Schoen, 2019). One of the consequences was that the far-right AfD party achieved record results in state elections and in the 2017 federal election. For the first time in the history of the Federal Republic, an extreme right-wing party was now represented in the national parliament. Starting in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic kept identity-related issues salient, such the closing national borders and transnational solidarity (Mylonas & Whalley, 2022). This prevalence of identity cues in the information environment means that citizens had ample opportunities to rethink what their national identity means to them. Readily available identity cues also make identity effects on political attitudes more likely even among citizens who have not deeply internalized identity content. Note that we do not claim to use this research design to determine the influence of a particular event—such as the establishment of the radical right-wing AfD in the German party system—on national-identity content. We are rather arguing that the study period was characterized by medium salience and contestation of national identity (relative to prior periods). Neither was there any outstanding event that would have made national identity extremely salient, nor does it seem reasonable to characterize the period as particularly quiet in these respects.[5]

Sample

The data source is a combination of waves of a panel survey conducted in the framework of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES, 2021). National-identity batteries were included in four different waves in the 2016–21 period. Table 1 provides information about the timing of the four waves, sample sizes, and retention rates. The sample size of the balanced panel, that is, of respondents who participated in all four waves and answered all questions necessary for the stability analysis, is 4,654. The sample was recruited from the Respondi AG online access panel of prerecruited persons using quotas that are representative of the German online population. To further improve the validity of inference from the achieved sample to the population, we use a survey weight that mitigates panel mortality bias by weighting the distribution of

[5]A special circumstance, however, could be that the period under study begins shortly after the refugee crisis, which certainly represents a high point in terms of the meaning and contestation of German national identity. This could mean that our data were collected in a consolidation phase after identity content had changed significantly before. We take up the question of the influence of prominent events and the generalizability of the results again in the conclusion.

certain variables (age, sex, education, and residence in East or West Germany) in later waves to match the distribution in the first wave.

Survey Measures

The empirical analysis below entails multiple steps, which partially rely on different measures. We describe these in turn in the order in which they appear in the analysis. A complete documentation of the survey items (including the original German wording) is provided in Appendix S1 in the online supporting information. All measures draw on the same survey items across the four survey waves, so we generally do not need to distinguish between waves here.

To measure the degree to which respondents subscribe to an ethnic and civic conception of the nation, respectively, we used items from a battery that asks respondents how important they think certain markers are for being a true German. We hence follow the approach employed in the national-identity modules of the International Social Survey Programme (e.g., ISSP Research Group, 2015), which is widely used to analyze the ethnic/civic distinction. While the items to capture the ethnic dimension were taken from the ISSP battery, we extend the ISSP measure for the civic dimension by using items that target the political values and institutions whose acceptance is at the core of the (German) civic vision of the nation.

Specifically, three items were used to measure the ethnic dimension, namely how important respondents consider the following markers to be a true German: (1) to have German ancestors, (2) to be born in Germany, and (3) to have lived most of one's life in Germany. These items capture core aspects core of contemporary ethnic narratives of German national identity and have been used in prior research for the same purpose (e.g., Kunovich, 2009; Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010). Analogously, three items were used to measure the civic dimension, namely how important respondents consider the following markers to be a true German: (1) to have democratic convictions, (2) to attend one's civic duties, and (3) to treat all society's groups equally. These items target core content of constitutional patriotism, which emerged after the end of World War II as the German realization of a civic understanding of the nation. Respondents indicated how important they consider these aspects using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *Not important at all* to 5 = *Very important*). The next section reports psychometric analyses that attest to the soundness of these measures, including their measurement invariance over time. The analysis of intraindividual stability will proceed using simple additive indexes.

Below we compare the stability of identity content with that of national identification and right-wing authoritarianism. National identification was measured using three statements ("It is very important to me to be German"; "When talking about Germans, I often say 'we' instead of 'they'"; "The adjective 'German' fits me very well.") which respondents rated on a 5-point scale as to how much they applied to them (1 = *Applies not at all* to 5 *Applies squarely*). Right-wing authoritarianism was measured with three statements ("Troublemakers should be made to feel clearly that they are unwanted in society"; "We need strong leaders so that we can live safely in society"; "Traditions should be cherished and upheld at all costs.") and a similar response scale (1 = *Do not agree at all* to 5 *Agree completely*).[6]

To operationalize the predictors of stability discussed above, we form indicators of the extremity of identity content and structural ambivalence in identity content which rely on the same ethnic/civic items described above. The extremity measures are constructed by folding the respective index variables at the midpoint of the scale. The "mixed" identity type that may be expected to exhibit structural ambivalence (Lindstam et al., 2021) is operationalized with a

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[6]The third item was not included in the fourth wave, so RWA was measured only with the other two items in that wave.
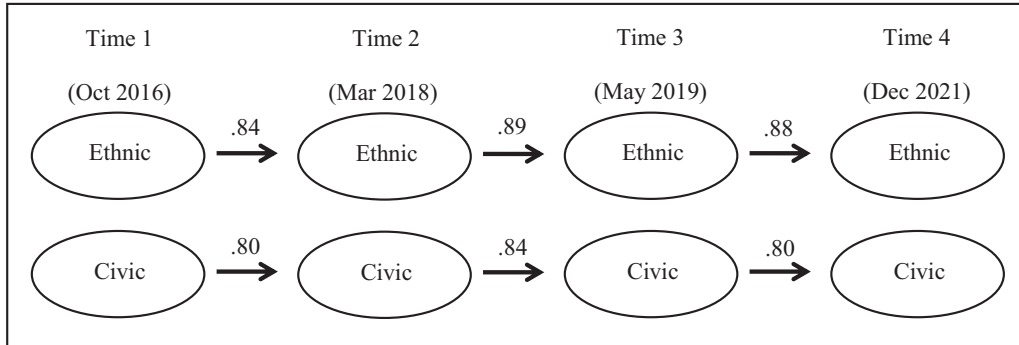
Figure 2. Interindividual stability of national-identity content. Latent variable model with full measurement invariance over time (indicator variables, error terms, and cross-lagged effects are not included for simplicity; χ^2 (284) = 21,302; RMSEA = 0.075 [0.074–0.076]; CFI = 0.956); reported are standardized coefficients; for all coefficients, $p < .001$.

dummy variable identifying respondents with above-median index scores on both the ethnic and civic index variable. Admittedly, this is a crude measure of a complex construct and hence only allows for a first assessment of the implications of identity-based ambivalence. Nonetheless, it is also true that it maps precisely those structural conditions that previous research has associated with classic ambivalence effects.

To analyze the implications of differences in stability, we measure respondents' immigration attitude using the following item: "The next topic is immigration opportunities for foreigners. Should immigration opportunities for foreigners be made easier or restricted? What is your opinion on this issue?" Reponses were made using a 7-point scale (1 = *Facilitate immigration of foreigners* to 7 = *Restrict immigration of foreigners*). Support for the far-right party AfD, finally, was measured using a standard rating item ("What do you think of each political party in general? Please describe this with a scale from −5 to +5: AfD (Alternative für Deutschland); "−5 *Do not think anything at all of the party*"—"+5 *Think very highly of the party*").

Results

Stability of Identity Content

We assess the interindividual stability of the national-identity conceptions by estimating a four-wave cross-lag panel model (Little et al., 2015). To ensure comparability of the latent constructs across time, we specified full measurement invariance, that is, we constrained factor loadings and thresholds of the indicators of the civic and ethnic constructs to be equal across time, respectively. The fit of the data to this highly constrained model (χ^2 (284) = 21,302; RMSEA = 0.075 [0.074–0.076]; CFI = 0.956) is acceptable according to common guidelines (Brown, 2006), which is why we do not modify it further. Methodological details and additional results (factors loadings, correlations) are reported in Appendices S2 and S3 in the online supporting information.

The estimated stability coefficients (Figure 2) range between 0.80 and 0.89 and attest to the interindividual stability of the ethnic and civic dimensions.[7] From a relative point of view, they

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[7] We report standardized coefficients, which means that the t1→t2 coefficient for the ethnic dimensions indicates that 1 standard-deviation difference at t1 predicts a 0.84 standard-deviation difference at t2.

Table 2. Individual-Level Stability of National-Identity Content.

	Ethnic Dimension				Civic Dimension			
	t1 → t2	t2 → t3	t3 → t4	t1 → t4	t1 → t2	t2 → t3	t3 → t4	t1 → t4
−1 point or more	8%	8%	9%	11%	4%	3%	6%	5%
≤ ±1 point	83%	85%	83%	79%	92%	93%	91%	89%
+ 1 point or more	9%	8%	8%	10%	4%	4%	3%	6%

Note: Reported are column percentages. Due to rounding, column percentages do not always add up to 100. $N = 4,654$.

are roughly comparable to the results from previous research examining patriotism and nationalism (Osborne et al., 2017; Wagner et al., 2012). What we can conclude from these results is that there is little change in the rank-ordering of individuals across the time period studied. As discussed above, this does not necessarily mean there is intraindividual stability, as the ethnic and civic identity content of the whole sample could be shifting more or less uniformly during the period of analysis. We now turn to the analysis of intraindividual stability and change to address this possibility.

To assess the intraindividual stability of identity content, we formed additive indexes for the ethnic and civic dimensions at each point in time, calculated wave-to-wave differences, and finally trichotomized these differences. We contrast respondents who exhibit less than ±1 scale-point change in the index with respondents who exhibit more than ±1 scale-point change (Table 2). We believe these to be reasonable cut-off values to discriminate between stability and change, but acknowledge that choosing cut-off values is always arbitrary.[8]

Table 2 shows that the intraindividual stability of identity content is high, with that of the civic dimension slightly exceeding that of the ethnic dimension. Four in five respondents exhibited less than 1 scale-point change between waves on the ethnic dimension, whereas it is only 1 in 10 on the civic dimension. We suspect this difference in stability is due to a period effect, as the aftermath of the so-called European refugee crisis might have caused respondents to readjust their views about the relevance of ethnic criteria. Note that there is no clear trend in the direction of change, suggesting that during the aftermath of the European refugee crisis German citizens did not become more ethnically oriented on average. The diagnosis of stability not only applies to the analysis of consecutive waves but also when considering the longest possible time span that we can capture with our data, that is, change between t1 and t4 (October 2016–December 2021). Again, we find intraindividual stability to be high, indicating that small intraindividual changes did not stack up to result in more substantial longer-term change. Rather, some respondents appear to have changed their responses back and forth. In addition, over-time stability of national-identity content appears to vary across individuals.

To put these findings into perspective, we complement them with a stability analysis of other constructs. We compare the stability of identity content (1) with another national identity dimension, namely national identification, and (2) a psychological construct that is widely considered to be stable, namely right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) (Altemeyer, 1998). Using the same procedures as above, we find that the stability of the ethnic and citizenship dimensions is very similar to that of national identification and RWA, although perhaps a little lower. The stability coefficients of the former range between 0.84 and 0.96 (Figure 3), while the percentage

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[8] Appendix S4 in the online supporting information replicates the analysis with different cut-off points.
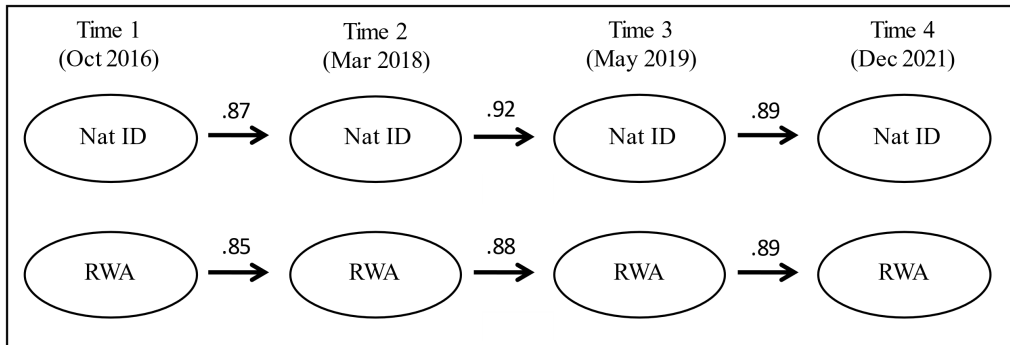
Figure 3. Sample-level stability of national identification and right-wing authoritarianism. Latent variable model with full measurement invariance over time (indicator variables and error terms are not included for simplicity; Nat ID: χ^2 (78) = 3205; RMSEA = .055 [.054–.057]; CFI = 0.990); RWA: χ^2 (66) = 3925; RMSEA = .067 [.065–.069]; CFI = 0.967); reported are standardized coefficients; for all coefficients, $p < .001$.

Table 3. Individual-Level Stability of National Identification and Right-Wing Authoritarianism.

	Nat ID				RWA			
	t1 → t2	t2 → t3	t3 → t4	t1 → t4	t1 → t2	t2 → t3	t3 → t4[a]	t1 → t4[a]
−1 point or more	9%	4%	8%	10%	4%	4%	12%	13%
≤ ±1 point	87%	90%	89%	85%	91%	92%	84%	82%
+1 point or more	4%	6%	3%	5%	4%	4%	4%	5%

Note: Reported are column percentages. Due to rounding, column percentages do not always add up to 100. N = 4,654.
[a] RWA measured with only two items.

of respondents with essentially stable scores on the national identification and RWA measures ranges between 85% and 92% (Table 3).

Finally, we consider the intraindividual changes in a more aggregated form, by summing the absolute values of the three consecutive wave-to-wave differences. The resulting measures have a theoretical range of 0–12 and capture the total movement a given individual experienced on the respective content dimension.[9] The average score of the ethnic measure is 1.8 (SD =1.3; 10th percentile = 0.3; 90th percentile = 3.7), for the civic measure it is 1.3 (SD = 1.3; 10th percentile = 0.3; 90th percentile = 2.7). Figure 4 shows the distributions of these measures and contrasts them with analogous measures of the absolute intraindividual change of national identification and RWA. Overall, these and the preceding analyses suggest a clear answer to our research question (*RQ1*): National-identity content is stable at the inter- and intraindividual level, both in absolute and relative terms.

Predictors of Differences in Stability

In the second step in the analysis, we try to understand better the variation in intraindividual stability that we do find, using the lines of reasoning developed above. To this end, we regress the sum of absolute intraindividual change—the variable shown in Figure 4—on

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[9] A score of 12 on the ethnic measure, for example, would mean that the respondent moved from 1 (t1) to 5 (t2) to 1 (t3) to 5 (t4) on the 5-point ethnic index scale.
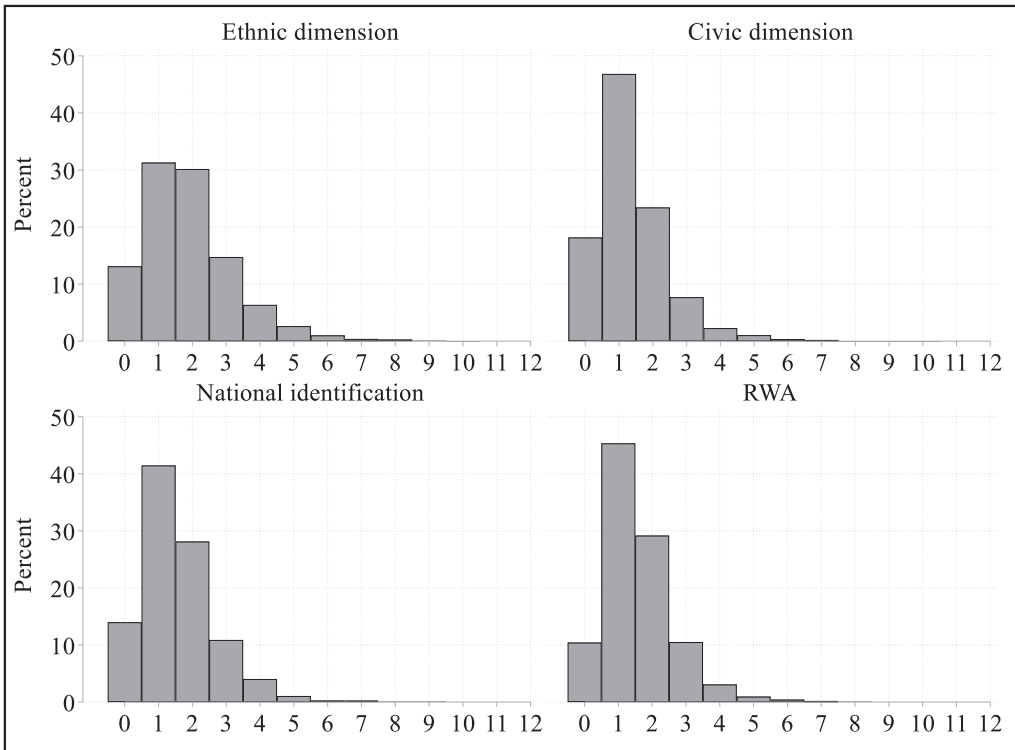
Figure 4. Sum of absolute intraindividual change, 2016–21.

the three predictors discussed above. The general setup of the OLS regressions is to use variables that were measured at t1 to predict change in identity content during the following t1–t4 period.

Figure 5 reports predicted change scores for different subgroups.[10] The differences between groups are very small, and there are no consistent patterns across the ethnic and civic dimensions. Low R^2 of 0.01 and 0.04 underline the poor performance of the predictors.[11] The strength of national identification correlates negatively with the change in the content of civic identity, but there is no correlation with the ethnic dimension. Thus, there is mixed evidence for Hypothesis 1. Contrary to expectation *H2*, the extremity of the identity content is positively associated with the change in the ethnic dimension, while in the case of the civic dimension, we see the expected negative correlation. The former might be due to the refugee crisis, which peaked in 2015 and might have polarized German citizens with respect to the ethnic dimension for a while. The positive effect of extremity that we find for the period 2016–21 could indicate a normalization of views after the crisis. However, we cannot say this with certainty, and given the small size of the effect, it could also be a statistical artifact. Finally, we find no evidence of increased content volatility among individuals who simultaneously exhibit ethnic and civic identity markers (*H3*). In fact, these individuals show slightly less change.

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[10] Full regression tables of all regressions are reported in Appendix S5 in the online supporting information.

[11] The low R^2 might also reflect the high stability of the identity content, where much of the (overall low) variation in the change variable could be due to random measurement error.
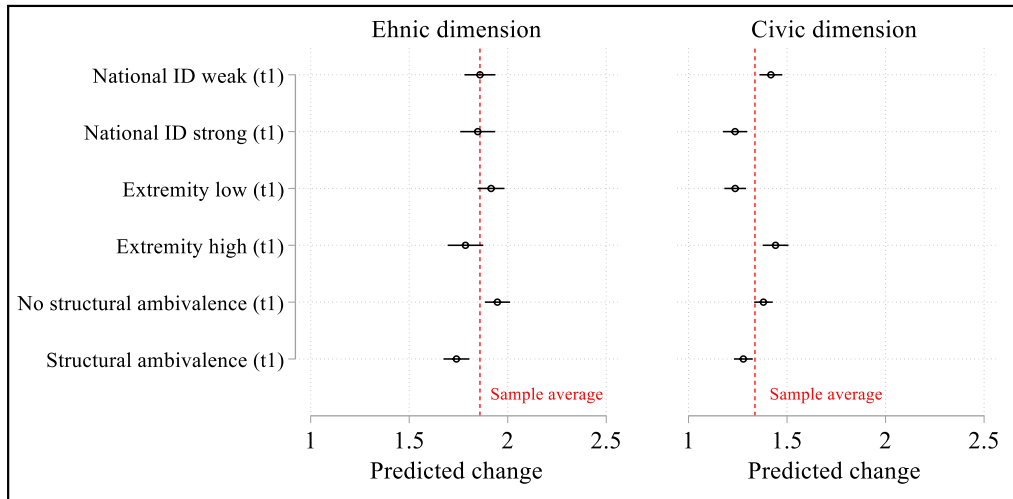
Figure 5. Predictors of intraindividual change. Reported are predicted values and 95% confidence intervals from linear regressions. "Weak"/"low" and "strong"/high" are defined as the 10th and 90th percentile of the respective predictor variable.

In summary, the previously made diagnosis of a high stability of identity content does not need to be differentiated. The differences that show up in the subgroup analysis are small—if there are any differences at all. Subgroups that, according to the theory, should show increased instability of identity content empirically also show high stability.

Implications of Differences in Stability

In the third step of the empirical analysis, we turn to the implications of interindividual differences in stability. First, we estimate an OLS regression of the immigration attitude, with an interaction between identity content and its stability as the main independent variables of interest. More specifically, we estimate whether the association between immigration attitude and identity content, both measured at t4, varies as a function of the sum of absolute intraindividual change in the respective identity content in the t1-t4 period. Second, we use the same procedure to analyze AfD support. To facilitate the comparison of effect sizes, all variables were rescaled to a 0–1 range.[12]

As the plots in Figure 6 show, the direction of effects is as expected and reported in prior research (e.g., Lindstam et al., 2021; Mader et al., 2021): We find that higher scores on the ethnic (civic) dimension are associated with lower (higher) support for a liberal immigration policy and higher (lower) support for the far-right AfD. More importantly, we find clear evidence for a moderating role of stability consistent with our hypothesis (*H4*). The association between identity content and political attitude is consistently stronger if the stability of the respective content dimension is high.

The underlying interaction coefficients are statistically significant ($p < .001$) in all four cases, and the differences in effect sizes are substantial. The estimated increase in effect sizes between low and high stability groups in Figure 6 range between 40% and 150%. What is more, "low" and "high" stability are defined as the 10th and 90th percentile of the change variable (see

[12]In all regressions, we additionally control for the level of national identification to ensure that it is the identity content and not the level of attachment driving the associations. See Appendix S5 in the online supporting information.
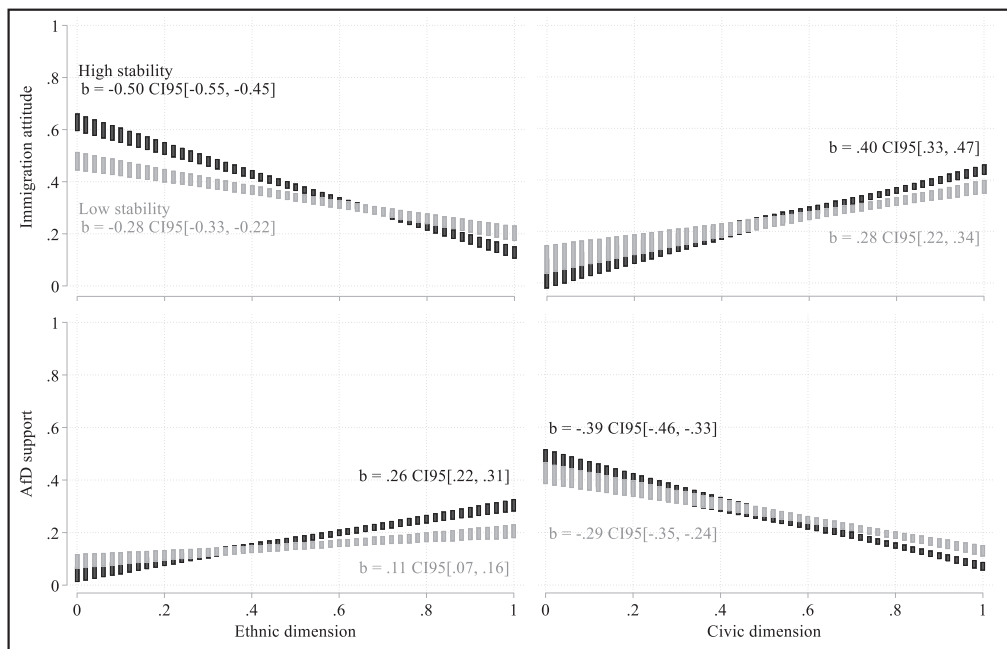
Figure 6. Effects on immigration attitude and far-right party support. Reported are confidence intervals of point estimates from OLS regressions. "High" and "low" stability are defined as the 10th and 90th percentile of the change variable.

above), respectively. Remember that the 90th percentiles are 3.7 and 2.7 for the ethnic and civic measures, respectively, and that the theoretical range of the change variable is 0–12. Purely on the basis of the model parameters and the point estimates they imply, the model predicts that at extreme values of instability there is no relationship between identity content and outcome variables. We refrain from entering higher values of the moderator variable into the equation, however, as these point estimates are imprecise due to the low number observations on which these predictions are based.

In sum, the empirical analysis shows identity content to be stable at the inter- and intraindividual level. There does not seem to be much interpersonal difference in stability, and the level of intraindividual stability in identity content is systematically related to political attitudes.[13] In the final section, we discuss the implications of these findings for the different views on national identity (content) and conclude with discussing future lines of research.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study have several important implications. First, they strengthen the case of researchers who attribute dispositional causality to national-identity content. Intraindividual stability—as shown here for key content dimensions and the general public as a whole—can be seen as necessary (but not sufficient) evidence that national-identity content occupies a central

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[13] The findings might be methodological artifacts of variation in respondents' attentiveness in answering the survey questions. But we find no evidence of that. The results reported here are robust to controlling for different proxies of attentiveness (evaluations of survey, response latencies). See Appendix S6 in the online supporting information, where we also demonstrate the robustness of the findings to the inclusion of sociodemographic controls (age, gender, education).

position in individuals' belief systems and that this content, in turn, elicits consistent responses across situations.

Second, our results suggest that everyday events and discourses are unlikely to change identity content permanently. The addition of "permanent" is essential here because our study design does not allow us to say anything about short-term changes. Existing research suggests that such event-induced change indeed occurs (e.g., Ariely, 2019; Gehring, 2022; Steiner et al., 2022). Rather, our longer-term study gives an impression of the extent to which the sum of relevant events and identity discourses that occurred between survey waves are associated with variability in identity content, in a case that includes several such relevant events and discourses in the period under study—such as the establishment of the right-wing populist party AfD in the German party system and the COVD-19 pandemic. The fact that this study finds high stability suggests, in our view, that it might be useful to view national-identity content as located toward—but not at—the trait-like pole on a continuum between state-like and trait-like characteristics (e.g., Fridhandler, 1986). From this perspective, the content of national identity is stable in the long run but can temporarily change with the context. Evidence of long-term stability is then readily consistent with short-term change in national identity, as, for example, recent studies in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic do (Chan et al., 2021; Sibley et al., 2020).

Third, we can speculate on the role that national identity has played in the recent rise of nativist politicians and parties in many countries. Analyzing cross-sectional data, Helbling et al. (2016) find that expressions of ethnic identity content and politicians' articulation of exclusive notions of national identity are correlated, and they wonder whether elite rhetoric shapes identity content or whether politicians mobilize voters who already exhibited corresponding identity content (Helbling et al., 2016, p. 762). Given our findings, the latter seems more likely. This, in turn, would mean that the rise of the new far-right parties and movements in Europe and beyond was borne by the activation of preexisting exclusionary identity content and attitudes, rather than by a change of heart among populations fueled by these elites. This is precisely the pattern that has been demonstrated for the German case and the rise of the AfD in the wake of the refugee crisis in 2015, where voters switched parties based on preexisting exclusionary attitudes that remained stable during the crisis (Mader & Schoen, 2019).

Of course, we must not make the mistake of hasty generalizations. We have presented evidence from one country and one period, which naturally raises the question of whether stability is also as high in contexts that differ on relevant dimensions. Only further, similarly designed analyses can resolve this issue. Several cases stand out as particularly interesting. In line with Helbling et al.'s (2016) question about the effects of politics, one might ask whether Donald Trump's rise led to a proliferation of ethnic identity content, especially among Republican Party supporters. Second, what would we find if we looked at the period before and after the European refugee crisis in Germany (and other strongly affected countries)? The fundamental economic dislocations of the Great Recession starting in 2008 would also be an interesting test case. The socioeconomic situation of many people changed during this period, and if there is any truth to the theoretical view of national identity as epiphenomena of economic interests, then substantial changes in identity content should be evident here. However, if identity content turned out to be stable even in these cases, this would significantly strengthen the predispositional view.

In the second step of the analysis, we explored whether differences in stability might influence how identity content shapes political attitudes and behavior. In light of fundamental

stability, this may seem a negligible question. If there is little variation in stability, why bother researching its implications? First, because even small differences can have big effects. The Brexit referendum went 52% to 48%, to cite just one example where many research findings suggest that national-identity perceptions played a major role in the voting decision (Hobolt, 2016; Iakhnis et al., 2018). Second, we have already indicated that the generalizability of our findings remains to be confirmed and that identity content may be changeable and fluid in certain contexts after all. To the extent that this is the case, the findings about the conditional nature of identity content effects gain significance. Third, the results are important because they may help reconcile the predispositional and epiphenomenal view in identity content. While the high correlation between identity content and political attitudes in the high-stability group is consistent with the predispositional view, the low(er) correlation in the low-stability group is consistent with the epiphenomenal view. Thus, both views make accurate statements about different groups, and thus both contribute to our understanding of the effects of national identity. The relevance of the two perspectives is then determined by the relative size of the two groups. In the analysis presented here, at least, the high-stability group proved to be significantly larger and the predispositional view consequently significantly more relevant.

In conclusion, this study makes an important contribution by providing evidence of considerable long-term stability of national-identity content. Certainly, this does not conclusively answer the question of stability—we have covered some limitations of this study, and others could be added.[14] Moreover, our reflections on the (seemingly) contradictory findings of studies that focus on different time horizons raise interesting conceptual and theoretical questions that future research should address. It seems highly likely that the social significance of national identity will increase rather than decrease in the future, making it more important to answer these questions.

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[14] For example, we did not look at all relevant content (e.g., cultural identity markers); the panel data structure does not allow for clear causal identification of effects; and panel mortality introduces bias that cannot be fully addressed.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Appendix S1 Question Wording (English Translation and Original German Wording)
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