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Conceptions of national identity, turnout and party preference: Evidence from Germany

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Abstract

As globalisation makes national boundaries both permeable and contested, conflicts over national identity and related policy issues are bound to increase the salience of citizens' individual national identities and, consequently, increase their impact on political attitudes and behaviour. We study the link between ethnocultural and civic dimensions of national identity and turnout and party preferences. After providing a theoretical discussion that integrates conceptions of national identity into established models of turnout and party preference formation, we explore the merit of accounting for these conceptions of national identity in a case study of Germany. Analysing data from two surveys conducted in the period between 2015 and 2017, we show that acceptance of civic criteria of national identity was positively associated with turnout and partisan support for all German parties besides the AfD. Acceptance of ethnocultural criteria was associated with increased support for (centre-) right and decreased support for (centre-) left parties. Some of these patterns differ significantly and in predictable ways between the two data points bracketing the height of the European refugee crisis. These findings suggest that individual conceptions of national identity may be of importance for our understanding turnout decisions and party preferences, but the specific relationships presumably depend on contextual conditions.

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KEYWORDS

ethnocultural/civic distinction, Germany, party identification, turnout, voting

1 | INTRODUCTION

After a decades-long eroding of national borders in the context of globalisation, this process is increasingly met with opposition in advanced Western societies. In some places, the development has come to a halt or is even being reversed. The President of the United States, Donald Trump, wants to close the nation's borders, "make America great again" and defines American greatness in stark, ethnocultural terms (Sides, Tesler, & Vavreck, 2018). In recent years, Europe has witnessed Britain's decision to leave the European Union (EU), considerable internal tensions over migration, and an increasing public weariness towards the European integration project (Anderson & Hecht, 2018; Polyakova & Fligstein, 2016; Schäfer & Gross, 2020). More generally, national borders and cultural differences have come to feature prominently in today's political discourse, with new far-right parties offering nationalist and demarcationist positions that were previously non-existent in many West European party systems (Akkerman, de Lange, & Rooduijn, 2016; Kriesi et al., 2008). In line with this development, national identity and its political implications have been receiving an increasing amount of attention in current research (Bonikowski, Halikiopoulou, Kaufmann, & Rooduijn, 2019; Fukuyama, 2018; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). One important aspect of this research agenda is studying the relevance of citizens' national identities for their individual turnout decisions and party preferences.¹

In this article, we examine the link between different conceptions of national identity and both turnout and two expressions of party preference, namely, party identification and vote choice. To this end, we provide a general theoretical discussion that integrates conceptions of national identity into established models of turnout and party preference formation. We then explore the merit of drawing on these conceptions of national identity for understanding political preferences and behaviour in a case study of Germany.

The incorporation of conceptions of national identity into electoral research has the potential to help understand citizen behaviour in the electoral arena because current debates touch on national identity and the criteria deemed necessary for being a compatriot. The "struggle over borders" that increasingly characterises political discourse (de Wilde, Koopmans, Merkel, Strijbis, & Zürn, 2019) is bound to make salient citizens' personal views on the boundaries of the nation. To capture relevant variation in these conceptions of national identity, we follow previous national identity research and draw on the civic-ethnic framework (Hjerm, 1998; Janmaat, 2006; Jones & Smith, 2001; Kunovich, 2009). Accordingly, we will consider how the degrees to which individuals subscribe to civic and ethnic (or rather ethnocultural)² visions of nationhood might influence their decisions to cast a ballot and which party they come to prefer. In doing so, we generalise and complement the literature on ethnocultural conceptions of national identity as a driver of the radical-right vote (Golder, 2016; Rydgren, 2018). While that literature focuses on the implications of one specific dimension of national identity content for voting for one particular type of party, we utilise the ethnocultural-civic framework to capture identity content more broadly and analyse its potential relevance for partisan attitudes and behaviour in general.

Our empirical case is Germany in the period from 2015 to 2017. Data from two large-scale surveys are analysed, the first a single-shot survey fielded in June 2015, the second a multi-wave panel survey conducted between October 2016 and October 2017. Crucially, besides a range of measures of political attitudes and behaviour, these data contain measures of civic and ethnocultural conceptions of national identity not usually included in national election surveys. Analysing these data allows a first exploration of the relevance of different national identity conceptions in the electoral arena in the broad sense described in the previous paragraph. While the generalisability of single-country studies is naturally limited, Germany is a particularly interesting case for tracing the associations

between conceptions of national identity and turnout and party preferences. For one, the ethnocultural and civic conceptions of national identity are—by now—well rooted within the country. Germany was the textbook example of an “ethno-cultural” nation in terms of its traditionally exclusive national membership regimes in the past (Brubaker, 1992). At the same time, a civic notion of national identity plays a central role in the German postwar elite discourse (Koopmans & Statham, 1999; Kronenberg, 2009), and the country has gradually shifted towards more permissive citizenship and immigration laws (Green, 2013; Joppke, 2007).

Moreover, the two-survey design allows us to study the link between conceptions of national identity and turnout and party preferences in markedly different contexts. Starting in late summer of 2015—after the data from the first survey we analyse here were collected—the arrival of large numbers of refugees in Germany became the dominating topic in public discourse and attracted the attention of virtually all Germans (Mader & Schoen, 2019). While immigration opponents expounded potential problems of ethnic and cultural differences, elites pleading for a liberal stance stressed humanitarian ideas that underlie civic notions of German national identity (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016; Mushaben, 2017; Trauner & Turton, 2017). In short, the two surveys bracket events that increased the salience of national identity. This setting enables us to explore implications of the theoretical model that relate to the conditionality of the link between national identity and turnout and party preferences.

The results of our case study show that ethnocultural and civic conceptions of the nation are associated with electoral participation and party preferences in predictable ways. Support for the civic dimension of national identity is positively associated with (intended) turnout at both points in time. In both instances of party preference that we analyse, adherence to an ethnocultural national identity is associated with support for CDU/CSU and Alternative for Germany (AfD) and is negatively related to a preference for SPD, Greens and Left. A civic understanding of national identity, on the other hand, is positively correlated with a preference for CDU/CSU and SPD and negatively correlated with favouring AfD or Left. Whereas these findings certainly are only one stone in what must become a mosaic of studies depicting the electoral relevance of national identity at the individual level, the present study suggests that national identity may be fruitfully utilised in electoral research, in particular when contestation of the concept is salient in the political discourse.

2 | ETHNOCULTURAL AND CIVIC CONCEPTIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY, TURNOUT AND PARTY PREFERENCES

Because conceptions of national identity are not usually considered in electoral research, it is worthwhile to provide a general discussion of the potential mechanisms that might connect these phenomena with turnout and party preferences. We begin with conceptual clarifications and then draw on established theories of turnout and party choice to establish the connection. While the empirical analysis below will not attempt to isolate specific mechanisms but take a more holistic approach, spelling out the fundamental assumptions and conditions will allow us to think more clearly about the issue at hand and hopefully be instrumental in future efforts aimed at exploring these assumptions and conditions explicitly.

The ethnocultural/civic distinction is a recurring theme in national identity research and refers to different ways of drawing “the circle of we” (Hollinger, 2006). Accordingly, citizens define the boundaries of the nation using ethnocultural and civic criteria. The civic conception of national identity sees group membership as a function of achievable characteristics. Anyone can belong to the national ingroup, “provided he or she accepts certain fundamental values and institutions” (Wright, Citrin, & Wand, 2012, p. 241). Ethnoculturalism is defined as the belief that the boundaries of the nation are defined by ethnic and cultural markers, which cannot be (easily) transcended: “Genealogy and presumed descent ties, popular mobilization, vernacular languages, customs and traditions: these are the elements of an alternative, ethnic conception of the nation” (Smith, 1991, p. 12). This distinction between ethnocultural conceptions on the one and civic conceptions on the other hand, however, is an idealized one. They should, therefore, not be understood as necessarily being mutually exclusive.

Our first research question concerns the potential influence of citizens' conceptions of national identity on electoral turnout. Regarding possible paths of influence, we see two arguments that can be derived from standard theories about turnout. The first derives from the observation that the civic tradition of conceptualising the nation often includes norms of political engagement in general and the conviction that participation in national elections is constitutive of being a good national in particular. Previous research from the United States (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2004; Schildkraut, 2007), for example, suggests that for many Americans, voting is "a prescriptive, normative component of American identity" (Huddy & Khatib, 2007, p. 65). Similar notions exist in Germany, encapsulated in the concept of constitutional patriotism (Habermas, 1990; Müller, 2009; Sternberger, 1990). Generally speaking, in a national context where a civic understanding of national identity includes such ideas as attending one's civic duties, a relationship should exist between embracing a civic conception of national identity and electoral turnout.

A second mechanism possibly connecting both the civic and the ethnocultural dimension of national identity with turnout can be derived from issue-based voting. Accordingly, if citizens do not believe that their preferred conception of national identity is represented within the party system, they may be dissuaded to cast their ballot. The argument rests on the idea that citizens compare their own position on a given issue with the parties' positions and choose the party that fits with their own position (Downs, 1957; Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989). Accordingly, if citizens think that there is no party whose issue positions are compatible with their own, they have less reason to turn out (Brockington, 2009; Hillen & Steiner, 2020; Schäfer & Debus, 2018). Conceptions of national identity can be interpreted as such an issue for which citizens may or may not find a party match. Not finding a match in the run-up to an election should result in lower turnout among the respective citizens, compared with those believing in the existence of a compatible party with regard to their idea of national identity. This mechanism is conditional, however, on citizens caring about national identity and knowing where the parties stand on the issue. In addition to such election-specific effects, if they do care and the perceived representational gap persists over an extended period of time, citizens may develop a general dissatisfaction with, and alienation from, political parties and the political system. Such attitudes have been shown to reduce the probability of turning out (Grönlund & Setälä, 2007; Karp & Banducci, 2008).

Moving on to our second political outcome of interest, party preferences, we should clarify that we will consider both party identification and electoral choice as expressions of party preference. Both of these instances involve, at least implicitly, a decision favouring one party over others. We therefore begin with a joint discussion of how they might be dependent on citizens' conceptions of the nation. At the same time, we acknowledge and discuss the conceptual differences between party identification and electoral choice later in the text.

We previously deliberated the possibility that voters who do not believe their preferred conception of national identity is present in the party system may be dissuaded to cast their ballot. The implied comparison of voters' own positions with the corresponding positions of the political parties may also drive relationships between conceptions of national identity and party preference. Drawing on the core idea of issue voting again (Downs, 1957; Rabinowitz & Macdonald, 1989), voters might develop a preference for the party with the best fit compared with their own conception of national identity. Like above, in order for this mechanism to come to play, citizens have to perceive (differences between) the parties' positions on national identity, and their own national identity must be psychologically salient at the time of preference development (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960, pp. 169–171). Provided these conditions hold, this mechanism thus involves linking national identity directly with party preferences. Applied to the two national identity dimensions, which are the focus of this paper, this means that voters might choose the party that accepts or rejects ethnocultural and civic criteria of nationhood to the same degree as they do themselves.

A second mechanism possibly connecting conceptions of national identity and party preferences is of a more indirect nature. Even in the absence of a salient context at the time of preference formation, national identity might influence party preferences by shaping more specific policy attitudes and candidate evaluations, which, in turn, are often relevant for the formation of those preferences. Previous research has shown, for example, that the way people conceptualise the nation influences how they think about a range of issues. These issues include regional

integration (Carey, 2002; Hooghe & Marks, 2005) and disintegration (Clarke, Goodwin, & Whiteley, 2017; Iakhnis, Rathbun, Reifler, & Scotto, 2018), free trade (Mansfield & Mutz, 2009), the welfare state (Wright & Reeskens, 2013), immigration (Esses, Wagner, Wolf, Preiser, & Wilbur, 2006; Sides & Citrin, 2007) and ethnic diversity (Citrin & Sears, 2014).

Until now, we have discussed different instances of party preference together. We now resolve this simplification and explicitly discuss differences between two core expressions of party preference, namely, party identification and voting. The Michigan model of vote choice places party identification at the level of long-term factors and describes the concept as “loyalties [which] have persisted through a number of elections” (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 67). Accordingly, party identification holds a central position in citizens' belief systems and influences a wide range of attitudes and behaviours, including vote choice. Against this backdrop, the key question here is whether to reserve a similarly prominent position for national identity and whether to expect national identity to influence party identification.

The creators of the concept did *not* characterise party identification as an “unmoved mover” but rather as fluctuating under appropriate conditions, such as personal change in the social milieu and great national crises (Campbell et al., 1960, pp. 149–151). Enduring changes in the party system, which are themselves often the consequence of a national crisis or a fundamental societal trend, may also trigger realignments at the citizen level (Green, Palmquist, & Schickler, 2002; Key, 1959). At the same time, socialisation research has shown that understanding oneself as a member of the nation “constitutes the first recognition of a macro-social group by the child” (David & Bar-Tal, 2009, p. 360). That is why we conceive of conceptions of national identity as a predisposition similar to party identification and, consequently, attribute a comparable role in the theoretical model of electoral behaviour to them. The relationship between national identity and party identification is thus best considered as conditional on context. Perhaps more often than not, the development of a given national identity may be the result of identifying with a party. However, in circumstances in which some event—whether personal or social—renders national identity highly salient, citizens may come to identify with the party that they believe best defends or elevates their notion of national identity. While we might not be able to clearly establish the order of influence between party identification and national identity under all circumstances, the pattern is more straightforward where electoral choice is concerned. Both direct and indirect influences of national identity on vote choice are plausible and potentially observable given the specific context and resulting salience.

Summing up, this section has described several mechanisms that may connect conceptions of national identity to turnout and party preference. Importantly, both with respect to turnout and party preference, we discussed mechanisms that are conditional on identity salience and the specific configuration of electoral supply with respect to conceptions of national identity. Accordingly, directly testable hypotheses can only be proposed against the backdrop of the particular empirical case under consideration, which is in this paper is Germany in the time period from 2015 to 2017. The next section describes the boundary conditions of our case and derives specific and empirically testable hypotheses.

3 | APPLICATION TO THE GERMAN CASE

The empirical analysis below is based on two surveys of the German public, conducted before and after the government's decision to keep the borders open at the height of the refugee crisis. This particular research design allows us to propose and test several observable implications of the theoretical discussion presented above. We begin by proposing individual-level hypotheses regarding associations between conceptions of national identity and turnout and party preference. We then deduct hypotheses about differences in these patterns between the two surveys, utilising the fact that they bracket the events of the refugee crisis and therefore represent data collected in contexts with varying identity salience. Note that while we derive the hypotheses from the theoretical model discussed above, we will not focus on specific mechanisms but rather employ a holistic approach that concerned with the general

relationship between conceptions of national identity and turnout and party preference, leaving indirect and mediated patterns of influence for future research. Also, because the research design (detailed below) does not allow for the identification of causal effects, the hypotheses are worded as statistical associations rather than in the language of cause and effect.

Beginning with turnout, one mechanism reviewed above suggests that embracing a civic conception of the nation increases the probability to turn out, as this conception incorporates the norm to be a good citizen, and casting one's ballot is considered to be a civic duty in Germany. Accordingly, we can expect the following to hold across contexts:

Hypothesis 1 Acceptance of civic criteria of national identity is associated with a higher probability (intention) to cast a ballot.

The other mechanism regarding turnout reviewed above states that people refrain from casting a ballot if they think that no party represents their notion of national identity. Assuming that people have some idea about party positions on the issue of national identity, the key question concerning the relevance of this mechanism is whether such a perception of missing representation was present among (certain parts of) the German electorate.³ We believe that to be unlikely, as citizens had a variety of party positions regarding national identity to choose from—at both points in time studied here.

In the legislative term from 2013 to 2017, the federal parliament consisted of five factions: the Christian conservative union of CDU and CSU, the market-liberal FDP, the social-democratic SPD, the Greens and the Left. During this legislative term, the newly founded and increasingly far right AfD won seats in all state legislatures one election at a time. All parties besides the AfD subscribe to some version of "constitutional patriotism" (Vorländer, 2009). This constitutional patriotism represents a strong version of a civic conception of German national identity, which emerged as a countermovement to Nazism and its excessive nationalism (Fulbrook, 1999; Habermas, 1990; Müller, 2009). As for the acceptance of ethnocultural criteria of national identity, the CDU/CSU and, much more clearly at present times, the AfD subscribe to ethnocultural criteria of national identity (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Pautz, 2005). The CDU/CSU tend to portray civic criteria as necessary but not sufficient to describe Germanness (e.g., de Maizière, 2017). Accordingly, the internalisation of national folk traditions and manners is necessary to become truly German. The SPD, the FDP, the Greens and the Left, in contrast, are critical of these identity markers (Pautz, 2005). In its beginning, the AfD combined liberal economic with culturally conservative positions—including an ethnocultural conception of the nation. The party subsequently evolved into the nativist party it is today, a process that was catalysed by the refugee crisis (Franzmann, 2019; Rosenfelder, 2017).

Against this background, we can develop hypotheses about the linkage between conceptions of national identity and party preferences. If voters compare these party positions with their own views of national identity, those with an ethnocultural understanding should find CDU/CSU and AfD particularly attractive, while the probability of favouring SPD, FDP, Greens or Left should be lower among these citizens. Furthermore, because all established parties besides the AfD accept civic criteria of national identity more or less to the same degree, we expect that citizens who find these criteria important are more likely to favour CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Greens and Left over the AfD. The same expectations result from considering the potential indirect influence via policy attitudes, as the constellations of party positions on pertinent issues such as citizenship regimes, immigration and integration by and large reflect the described party positions on national identity. Citizens who oppose immigration because of a perceived threat to national ethnocultural homogeneity, for example, should find CDU/CSU and AfD in particular more attractive than SPD, Greens and Left because the former parties are more critical of immigration than the latter.

Hypothesis 2a Acceptance of ethnocultural criteria of national identity is associated with a higher probability of favouring CDU/CSU and AfD and a lower probability of favouring SPD, FDP, Greens and Left.

Hypothesis 2b Acceptance of civic criteria of national identity is associated with a higher probability of favouring CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP, Greens and Left and a lower probability of favouring the AfD.

During the legislative period between 2013 and 2017, the refugee crisis came to dominate the political discourse, in particular after Chancellor Merkel decided to keep the German borders open in September 2015. In the late summer of 2015, the refugee topic turned into the single most important issue by a large margin, both in terms of media coverage and citizen concern (Czymara & Dochow, 2018; Kratz & Schoen, 2017; Mader & Schoen, 2019). After Merkel's controversial decision, the question of how much ethnically diverse immigration Germany could absorb took centre stage in the public and political debate, culminating in massive electoral gains for the AfD. Clearly, the situation Germans faced was now a different one from when refugees were discussed as a remote humanitarian crisis taking place on the Mediterranean Sea, because these refugees were now located on Germany's "doorstep." Comparing the before and after time period, we observe a policy change of the CDU, massive electoral gains for a new party leading to its inclusion in the federal parliament in 2017 and low and high saliency conditions of national boundaries (relatively speaking).

Hypothesis 3 The association between national identity and party preference is stronger after August 2015 than before.

Hypothesis 4 Acceptance of ethnocultural criteria of national identity is associated with a lower probability of favouring the CDU/CSU after August 2015.

The policy change of the CDU, furthermore, led to strife with their Bavarian Union-partner CSU, as the CSU did not support Chancellor Merkel's decision. The CSU publicly distanced itself from the Chancellor's policy of welcome and continued to promote the values it is historically associated with (Bandau, 2019). Assuming that citizens were aware of this internal conflict, we expect the link between subscribing to an ethnocultural conception of national identity and evaluations of CSU and CDU to differ accordingly. Due to data limitations, a differentiated analysis of CDU and CSU is not possible, where electoral choice is concerned. Furthermore, party evaluations were not measured in the 2015 dataset we employ. We are, however, able to distinguish between evaluations of both parties at a later point in time.

Hypothesis 5 Acceptance of ethnocultural criteria of national identity is positively associated with the evaluation of the CSU and negatively associated with the evaluation of the CDU after the height of the refugee crisis.

The final hypothesis concerns evaluations of Chancellor Merkel. Before the refugee crisis, citizens probably extended the ethnocultural party stereotype of the CDU to the Chancellor. During the refugee crisis, however, she was the leading figure in the government's decision to open the country for refugees. We therefore expect to observe different relationships between ethnocultural norms and evaluations of Merkel before and after the August events.

Hypothesis 6 Acceptance of ethnocultural criteria of national identity is positively associated with the evaluation of Chancellor Merkel before the refugee crisis and negatively associated afterwards.

4 | DATA, MEASURES AND METHODS

For the empirical analysis of our hypotheses, we employ two different sources of survey data. The first survey is a one-shot online survey of German YouGov panellists ($N = 2,517$), which was conducted between July 9, and July

24, 2015.⁴ The second data source is a combination of the first and the eighth wave of the 2017 campaign panel survey conducted in the framework of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) (Roßteutscher et al., 2018). Wave 1 was fielded in October/November 2016 and Wave 8 in September/October 2017, immediately after the 2017 federal election. This data structure allows us to relate conceptions of national identity that were measured in 2016 to actual vote choices reported shortly after at the 2017 federal election. Concerning panel mortality in the campaign panel, 8,421 out of the originally recruited 15,777 Respondi panellists “survived” until Wave 8 and form the sample we employ in our data analysis.⁵ In the following text, we refer to the respective surveys based on the year in which they were fielded, that is, “2015” and “2016/17.” Both YouGov’s and Respondi’s sampling approaches involve a matching algorithm to draw a sample of respondents who have elected to receive online surveys. Selected respondents are matched on demographic factors (gender, age, education and region). The final achieved samples are weighted to the characteristics of the German adult population.

We used identical or very similar standard survey items to measure partisan preferences (voting intention [2015], reported vote choice [2017], party identity, attitudes towards Angela Merkel, party evaluations) in both surveys. The exact question wordings and response options of these and all other items used in the analysis are reported in Appendix. While party identity was measured identically in both surveys, slight differences in question wording and response scales exist concerning vote choice and the Merkel item. Party evaluations were measured in the 2016/2017 survey only.

To measure respondents’ conception of the nation, we used items from a battery that asks respondents how important they think certain aspects are for being a true German. These aspects were (1) to have German ancestors, (2) to be born in Germany, (3) to have lived most of one’s life in Germany, (4) to have a Christian worldview, (5) to speak accent-free German, (6) to share German manners and norms, (7) to have democratic convictions, (8) to attend one’s civic duties and (9) to treat all society’s groups equally. The first six items of this battery were taken from a similar item battery employed in the national identity modules of the International Social Survey Programme (e.g., ISSP, 2015). Items 7–9, however, expand the ISSP measures in an attempt to capture the civic content dimension to a finer and more comprehensive degree.

Following Lindstam, Mader, and Schoen (2019), measures of the ethnocultural and civic dimensions were derived by estimating a two-dimensional exploratory structural equation model (ESEM) on the basis of the nine identity items.⁶ ESEMs can be used to identify latent dimensions of thought as reflected in responses to survey items, uniting features of exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis (EFA/CFA). They allow the same tests with regard to model fit available in CFA, without the restrictive assumption that each item only taps into one psychological concept (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2009; Marsh, Morin, Parker, & Kaur, 2014). The two-dimensional model describes the data well, in line with the theoretical arguments presented above (2015: $N = 2,426$; model fit: $\chi^2 [df = 19] = 149$, RMSEA = .053 [CI 90% (.045, .061)], CFI = .994; 2016: $N = 15,251$; model fit: $\chi^2 [df = 19] = 1,437$, RMSEA = .070 [CI 90% (.067, .073)], CFI = .992). Crucially, indicators (1)–(3) exclusively load on one factor, which evidently taps into the ethnocultural conception, whereas items (7)–(9) load substantially only on the second, civic, factor. Using the regression method, we calculate factor scores of the two dimensions on the basis of the ESEM and rescaled these scores to range from 0 to 1.

A crucial issue is the question of third variable control. First, to avoid omitted variable bias in the statistical estimates we are interested in, we include demographic control variables (gender, age, education and German region), political interest and measures of value priorities (traditionalism, conformity, security, benevolence and universalism; see Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2006; Piurko, Schwartz, & Davidov, 2011) in all models, the latter in an effort to capture basic orientations underlying individuals’ political ideologies. Detailed information about these measures is provided in the Appendix. Second, to abstain from overspecifying our models by including mediating variables, we refrain from controlling for more proximate factors that have been shown to shape turnout decisions and party preference but that have also been shown to be influenced by conceptions of national identity, such as issue attitudes and candidate preferences. Regarding the civic dimension, the norm to vote would be such an issue, while positions on immigration surely are influenced by an ethnocultural understanding of national identity.

The approach made here therefore represents an effort to ascertain general associations between content dimensions of national identity and our outcomes of interest.

To test our hypotheses, we use logistic, multinomial and linear regression analysis. Of central interest are the relationships between national identity measures and turnout and party preference variables. Note that this statistical approach, in conjunction with the given data structure, does not allow demonstrating causal effects and pinpointing associations on specific mechanisms—even if the panel structure of the 2016/2017 data means that at least we measure the hypothesised cause, that is, conceptions of national identity, before the hypothesised effect, that is, turnout and vote choice. Instead, the more limited goal is to test whether the variables of interest are associated in the ways predicted by our causal theory. Presence of the predicted associations would be consistent with causal effects without proving them, while not finding these associations would cast serious doubt on the actual occurrence of our theorised causal processes. Ideally, we could triangulate the causal effects, using not only individual-level panel data from a survey, which began well before the development of the refugee crisis, but also data generated through experiments, where a treated and a control group allow a comparison between respondents for whom national identity is a salient concern and those for whom this is not the case. As data of this kind do not exist, we employ whatever tools we can to identify significant existing trends and patterns in the result section below, without wanting to distract from the fact that our results may be tentative.

5 | RESULTS

We begin by regressing turnout on ethnocultural and civic conceptions of national identity. As stated in our first hypothesis, we expect a civic understanding of national identity to be associated with a higher probability of casting a ballot. As a first test of this hypothesis, we estimate Models A1 and B1 in Table 1, which contain the two conceptions of national identity as well as the control variables.

The results are substantively consistent across datasets and in line with our first hypothesis. A civic understanding of national identity is positively related to the probability of turning out both before and after the height of the refugee crisis, which is in line with the fact that the norm to vote is part of the civic conception, and there are multiple parties that champion a civic conception of national identity. To quantify the strength of these associations, we calculated predicted probabilities of turnout at different levels of the national identity variables (right-hand panel in

TABLE 1 Relationships between national identity dimensions and turnout

	2015		2016/2017	
	A1	A2	B1	B2
Ethnocultural norms	0.48 (0.62)	0.08 (0.72)	-0.11 (0.30)	-0.17 (0.30)
Civic norms	2.27* (0.62)	1.86** (0.75)	2.71* (0.38)	2.48* (0.38)
Political interest	3.90* (0.53)	2.71* (0.58)	2.46* (0.23)	2.03* (0.24)
Party identification		3.26* (0.27)		0.86* (0.11)
Constant	-1.65** (0.71)	-2.49*** (0.90)	-0.58 (0.32)	-0.59 (0.32)
Pseudo-R ²	0.18	0.41	0.14	0.16
N	1,471	1,439	6,347	6,338

Note: Entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses from logistic regressions. Additional controls (not shown): political interest, traditionalism, conservatism, security, benevolence, universalism and sociodemographics. Full regression results are presented in Appendix.

* $p < .001$, ** $p < .05$, and *** $p < .01$.

Figure 1) based on Models A1 and B1. The 2016/2017 model, for example, estimates a difference in turnout probability of about 22 percentage points between citizens with minimum values (75% turnout probability; CI 95% [67, 82]) and maximum values (97% [96, 98]) on the civic dimension.⁷

The internalisation of ethnocultural idea elements is not associated with turnout (see left-hand panel in Figure 1). This may indicate that citizens did not care enough to base their participation decision on a corresponding perceived gap in electoral supply or did not perceive such a gap. Given the contextual features described above, we consider the latter more likely for the 2016/2017 period in particular, given the increased salience of the refugee topic, the connected debates about German national identity and the AfD offering an increasingly radical (Franzmann, 2019; Rosenfelder, 2017) and hence clearly visible, ethnocultural position. Individual-level data on identity salience and perceptions of the electoral supply, which unfortunately are not available, would be needed to explore this matter further.

In a second step in the analysis of turnout, we introduce party identification into the regression models to explore the sensitivity of the key estimates. As discussed above, we cannot conclusively identify the causal order of party identity and national identity, and in turn, there is no unequivocally correct decision to be made about controlling or not controlling for party identity. One way of looking at Models A2 and B2 in Table 1 is therefore as an excessively conservative specification, given they include a potential mediator variable of the theoretically assumed impact of national identity. Despite this conservative approach, however, the findings are substantively similar.⁸

Moving on to party preferences, we analyse the associations between national identity and party identification and vote choice using multinomial regression and the same set of controls as above. The dependent variable in the case of party identification was derived from responses to the standard German item measuring that concept, coded to indicate whether respondents identified with CDU/CSU, FDP, SPD, Greens, Left, AfD, another Party or no party. In the case of vote choice, the dependent variable was derived from responses to items asking respondents to indicate which party they gave (or, in case of the 2015 data, intended to give) their second vote. The responses analysed here are vote choice for CDU/CSU, FDP, SPD, Greens, Left and AfD.

Coefficients from multinomial regressions cannot be interpreted and compared directly; we therefore report average marginal effects (AMEs), that is, the instantaneous rates of change for the two national identity dimensions (Figure 2).⁹ The AMEs reported here approximate percentage point differences in the probability of voicing a preference for a given party when moving from zero to one on the independent variable or, given the coding of the variables, the differences in probability between citizens with minimum and maximum values on the national identity dimensions.¹⁰

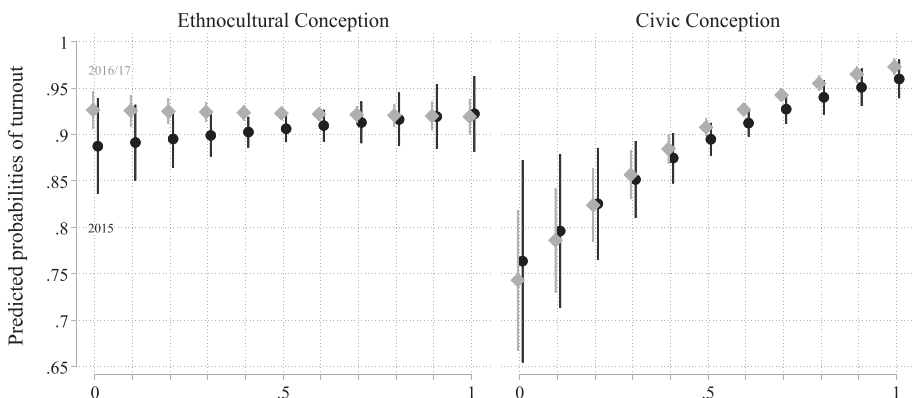


FIGURE 1 Predicted probabilities of turnout

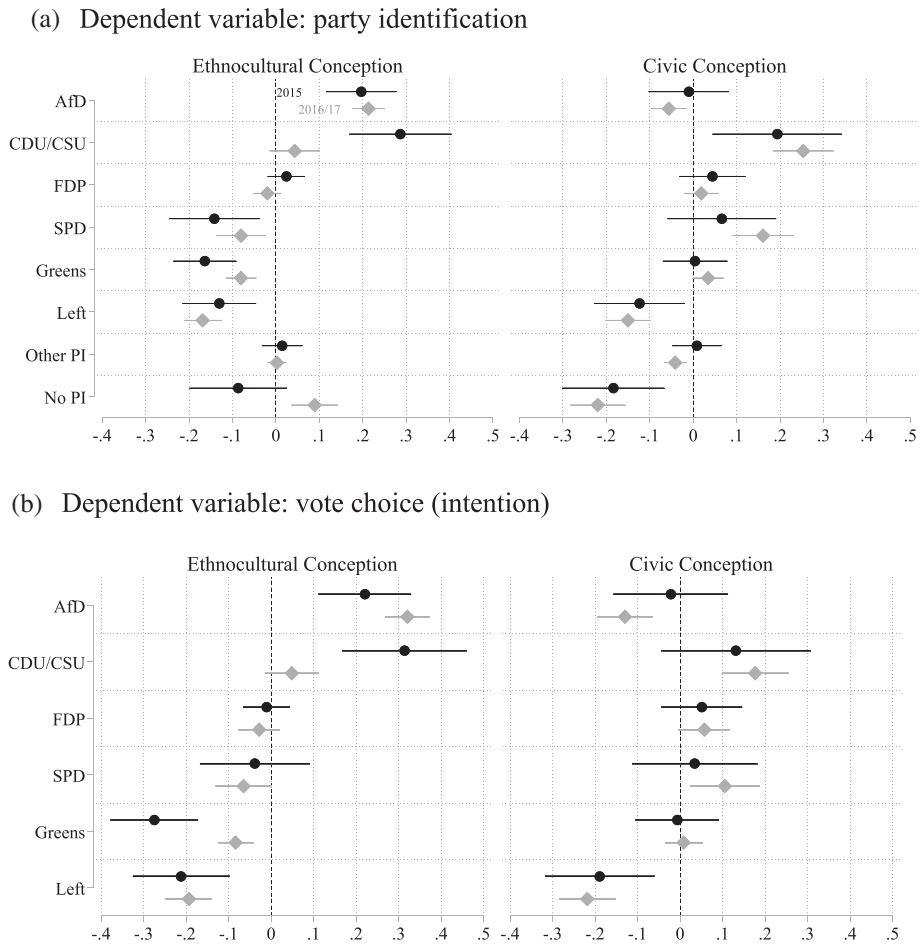


FIGURE 2 Average marginal effects of national identity on party preference

The general picture emerging from Figure 2 is that national identity is associated with party identification and vote choice in similar and expected ways. Furthermore, the results for the two time points are similar in the fundamentals but differ in ways that are consistent with the parties' behaviour during the European refugee crisis.

Specifically, we find that acceptance of ethnocultural norms is associated with an increased probability of siding with conservative/right-wing parties (CDU/CSU and AfD) and a decreased probability of siding with progressive/left parties (SPD, Greens and Left). These findings are in line with Hypothesis 2a. We also find differences in relationships that are in line with our expectations regarding change over time. Most notably, while acceptance of ethnocultural norms was roughly equally closely associated with CDU/CSU allegiance as with AfD allegiance before the height of the refugee crisis, the associations virtually disappears for the CDU/CSU afterwards. This suggests that whereas the CDU/CSU was able to attract ethnocultural voters before fall 2015, the AfD appears to have become the "natural home" of these voters afterwards. In case of vote choice, for example, the AME of the ethnocultural dimension is .22 (.11, .33) on voting for the AfD and .31 (.17, .46) on voting for the CDU/CSU in 2015. In 2016/2017, the estimates for the same parties in the same order are .32 (.27, .37) and .05 (−.01, .11), respectively. These findings are consistent with ethnoculturally oriented citizens reacting to the events surrounding Chancellor Merkel's decision to keep the borders open in the autumn of 2015 (cf. Hypothesis 4), even if it remains unclear what exactly triggered these reactions—whether it were, for example, the actions of the CDU/CSU, the AfD or both.

The results for the civic dimension of national identity are more ambiguous than those for the ethnocultural dimension. In 2015, the AME estimates are indistinguishable from zero for SPD and Greens and negative for the Left. In the later time period, a civic understanding of national identity is positively associated with a preference for the SPD, but the statistical effect remains, on average, zero for the Greens and negative for the Left. Concerning the results for the conservative/right-wing parties, however, we observe the expected patterns of association. In 2015, the civic dimension was unrelated to AfD support, but by the time the federal election of 2017 came around, a civic understanding of national identity was associated with a lower probability of AfD support. The civic dimension was positively linked to support for the CDU/CSU at both points in time, in contrast, but is stronger for 2016/2017 than for 2015. The association with FDP support is positive throughout but does not consistently attain established levels of statistical significance.

Summing up, our findings support Hypothesis 2a and partially support Hypothesis 2b. Furthermore, the pattern of larger AMEs observable in the results for the civic dimension partially backs the third hypothesis of stronger relationships after the climax of the refugee crisis.

In the third and final step of our analysis, we take a more differentiated look at the link between national identity and attitudes towards the CDU, CSU and Chancellor Merkel (Table 2). To this end, we compare evaluations of the Chancellor from before and after the crucial events the late summer of 2015. On the basis of her policy change, we expect to observe a positive relationship between ethnocultural norms and Merkel evaluations before these events and a negative relationship afterwards. Ideally, we would be making the same comparison for evaluations of the sister parties CDU and CSU. Unfortunately, party evaluations are not available for the 2015 data. In line with Merkel evaluations and incorporating the disagreement of the CSU with the policy change, we expect to observe a negative correlation between an ethnocultural conception of national identity and CDU evaluations and a positive correlation with CSU evaluations in our 2016/2017 data.

The regression results largely confirm our expectation regarding the evaluation of CDU and CSU. We find a negative association of an ethnocultural national identity with CDU and positive association with CSU assessments (-Hypothesis 5). A voter evaluates the CDU .07 (95% CI [-.11, -.02] points lower (on a 0–1 scale) if she holds maximal values on the ethnocultural dimension compared with minimal values. The same comparison yields a 0.13 (.08, .17) points better evaluation of the CSU. A last interesting point to make is the sizeable positive estimate of .28 (.22, .33) of civic criteria on the evaluation of the CDU, which is much larger than the corresponding estimate for CSU evaluations (.11 [.06, .16]). This pattern may be interpreted as tentative support for the idea that the new refugee policy and its humanitarian frame triggered civic norms among the electorate.

The findings for attitudes towards Merkel presented in Table 2 are in line with what we expected. Acceptance of ethnocultural criteria and these attitudes are positively associated in the 2015 data and negatively in 2016/2017 data (Hypothesis 6). This difference is especially noteworthy given that the estimates are quite substantial, with coefficients of .13 (.04, .22) and $-.14$ ($-.19, -.09$), respectively. Also noteworthy are the even more substantial positive associations between the civic dimension and Merkel attitudes. One might have expected this relationship to

TABLE 2 Party evaluations of CDU and CSU after the policy change

	CDU 2016/2017	CSU 2016/2017	Merkel 2015	Merkel 2016/2017
Ethnocultural conception	-0.07^* (0.02)	0.13^{**} (0.02)	0.13^* (0.05)	-0.14^{**} (0.03)
Civic conception	0.28^{**} (0.03)	0.11^{**} (0.03)	0.41^{**} (0.05)	0.30^{**} (0.03)
Constant	0.19^{**} (0.02)	0.15^{**} (0.02)	0.20^{**} (0.06)	0.19^{**} (0.02)
Adjusted R^2	0.06	0.06	0.10	0.07
N	8,037	8,020	1,633	8,035

Note: Entries are coefficients from linear regressions with standard errors in parentheses. Additional controls (not shown): political interest, traditionalism, conservation, security, benevolence, universalism and sociodemographics. Full regression results can be found in Appendix.

* $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$, and *** $p < .05$.

grow stronger, but the results suggest that Merkel had been seen as a civic champion even before her decision to leave the borders open and to allow the refugees to keep coming.

We have now shown results relating to all partial questions and hypothesised relationships we were able to incorporate into this first exploration of the theoretical models we extrapolated above. The following conclusion will put our findings into a more general context and point towards further avenues of research needed to support the presented endeavour.

6 | CONCLUSION

This article's point of departure was the argument that, as globalisation increases the political salience of national borders (de Wilde et al., 2019; Kriesi et al., 2008), electoral research may profit from studying the implications of citizens' national identities in the electoral arena. We have considered the implications of one particular facet of these national identities—individual conceptions of national identity—for turnout decisions and partisan preferences. As globalisation manifests itself politically as a “struggle over borders” (de Wilde et al., 2019), these dimensions of national identity, which relate to individuals' personal definitions of national boundaries, are bound to become particularly relevant. This raises the question of the electoral relevance of this national identity content in general. Consequently, we have utilised the ethnocultural–civic framework in order to capture the diversity of national identity conceptions prevalent in modern societies. As such, in this paper, we attempt a merger of analytical tools from national identity and electoral research. We thereby generalise and complement current literature on radical-right voting, which also considers the role of national identity but focuses solely on ethnocultural identity conceptions.

Our case study of Germany in the 2015–2017 period supplies initial support for the relevance of conceptions of national identity at the individual level in the electoral arena. Specifically, subscribing to civic criteria was associated with an increased probability of turnout as well as preferences for the parties firmly rooted in the liberal democratic tradition of the Federal Republic. These parties—namely CDU/CSU, SPD, FDP and Greens—come from both the left and the right side of the political spectrum. Germany's new far right party, the AfD, appeared to be less attractive for citizens subscribing to a civic vision of the nation. At the same time, the higher respondents scored on the ethnocultural dimension, the more likely they were to prefer the AfD. According to the data analysed here, this was true especially after the height of the refugee crisis and the—at least interim—shift in relative party positions it brought about. The AfD now seems to be the natural home of ethnoculturally oriented citizens, who were previously predominantly supporters of the CDU/CSU. This dynamic of partisan attitudes is also reflected in evaluations of Chancellor Merkel before and after her decision to keep the German borders open to all refugees.

These findings are based on multiple data sources and measures tailored to capture different national identity conceptions. At the same time, the present analysis is limited to a single country, and the research design does not allow strong claims about causality and the isolation of psychological processes. Consequently, the evidence presented here does not represent a comprehensive test of the mechanisms reviewed in the theoretical section above, and our results may be tentative. The findings should rather be taken as support for the assumption that the consideration of conceptions of national identity in electoral research is a promising area for further research—research that delves into the specific theoretical mechanisms that we described above. Our theoretical work has been an effort of theoretical transfer and integration rather than genuine innovation—we rely heavily on established analytical tools for capturing conceptions of national identity (the ethnic/civic framework) and evaluation and decision-making processes (e.g., issue voting). But because national identity in general and conceptions of national identity in particular do not feature in standard models of turnout and party preference, we hope that our efforts will facilitate future research on the topic.

Such research might focus on the mechanisms that connect conceptions of national identity and turnout decisions and party preference. As noted above, our own analysis does not delve into this issue but merely estimates statistical associations to quantify the total effects of conceptions of national identity as implied by the theory. While

we found a statistical association between the civic conception of national identity and turnout, the psychological process that established this association remains unknown. Similarly, we are unable to say whether citizens consciously favour a party because it matches their respective conception of national identity or whether the mechanism is indirect—for example, via policy attitudes or leader evaluations. A more fine-grained analysis of the mechanisms is thus an important area of further research. Of major importance in this context are measuring citizens' perceptions about party stances on national identity as well as research designs that ensure external validity and allow the causal identification of the relevant effects.

Another fundamental assumption we made is that citizens' conceptions of national identity are predispositions, which are held with conviction and which remain stable over of time—and not fleeting epiphenomena adopted in the pursuit of material interest, as some theoretical accounts would have it (see Kalin & Sambanis, 2018). To the extent that the latter view is correct, the theoretical model of relationships between national identity and electoral behaviour would need to be revised, which would of course in turn affect its empirical study. For example, our analysis of associations between national identity and party identity was predicated on the assumption that national identity is a similarly fundamental—or even more fundamental—predisposition. Currently, key tests of the predispositional status of national identity, such as the intra-individual stability of national identities, are largely missing (but see Wagner, Becker, Christ, Pettigrew and Schmidt 2012). Further research is therefore needed, not only in order to evaluate the present study but also to learn more about the ability of these identities to influence citizen attitudes and behaviour.

In conclusion, while this study points to potential relationships between different conceptions of national identity and turnout and party preference, their size and form presumably depend on contextual conditions. At the most general level, these conditions are the political salience of national identity, the particular content of the conceptions of national identity that are present within a society and the specific distribution of party positions. The present analysis of German data has corroborated the importance of exploring these issues and has contributed to developing the theoretical means to do so.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ We use “citizens” here to refer to the group of people that is eligible to vote. We do not wish to imply that they are necessarily aware of their role as citizens. “Citizens” and (potential) “voters” will be used synonymously.
- ² We prefer the term “ethnocultural” over “ethnic” because the former indicates more clearly that this conception of national identity is usually not defined by ancestry exclusively but extends to certain cultural features. See the conceptual discussion below.
- ³ To our knowledge, data on public perceptions of party positions on national identity have never been collected. We thus have no means to ascertain the veracity of the assumption. We suspect that correct views on party positions are more likely to exist in times when national identity is salient and, in turn, that this mechanism of connecting conceptions of national identity with turnout and party preferences is more relevant in these times. Repeatedly witnessing such debates—in Germany, for example, the recurring debates about a German *Leitkultur* (“dominant culture,” see Pautz, 2005)—may lead to the development of more enduring party images, however, which is why salience may not be a necessary condition. These complexities clearly call for further research.
- ⁴ The survey was designed and implemented by other researchers. We thank them for sharing their data with us.
- ⁵ This survey was conducted with two different groups of respondents; 15,802 respondents were newly recruited for this study; 2,681 participants of the 2013 GLES campaign panel study were contacted and participated again in the first wave of the 2017 panel. At this point, we analyse only the newly recruited panellists because as of now a survey weight is available only for that subsample.

- ⁶ A detailed description of the procedure can be found in Appendix. There, we provide methodological details and all results, including factor loadings, correlations and distributions.
- ⁷ Turnout is overreported in our sample; actual turnout in the 2017 federal election was 76%. Overreporting plagues all survey research on turnout, and there is no methodological fix to the problem. Note that, while the bias in the univariate distribution of the turnout variable is evident, it is less clear to what extent associations are biased as well. Research on the topic suggests that in our case, we would observe a tendency of overestimating associations of interests, as our variables of interest are positively correlated (Bernstein, Chadha, & Montjoy, 2001). However, one could also argue that we underestimate the true relationship because we allow respondents into our analysis on whom the independent variables could not have the theorized impact, as these respondents did not actually turn out.
- ⁸ The strength of association estimated in these models is very similar to those reported in Figure 1. In the analysis of party preference reported below, we employed the same strategy of checking for the robustness of the findings by estimating additional regressions including party identity. To avoid overburdening the presentation here, the regression models of party preference explicitly accounting for party identification are placed in Appendix. As an additional robustness check, additional analyses looked into differences across subgroups (respondents with vs. respondents without party identification; high vs. low national attachment; high vs. low political interest). These analyses yielded no further relevant insights. The associations reported here are thus stable across different segments of society.
- ⁹ Full regression tables are displayed in Appendix.
- ¹⁰ We compared the AMEs with the actual percentage point differences in the predicted probabilities and found no substantial discrepancies between the two effect size metrics.

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