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RESEARCH NOTE

Breaking the German Cold War Taboo? The Generational Divide in Evaluating a Coalition Between CDU/CSU and The Left

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Abstract Germany's fragmented party system has revived debates about unconventional coalitions, including cooperation between the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and The Left to contain the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). We examine whether evaluations of this unlikely coalition vary by generational socialisation, assuming this to be the most likely scenario in which such a pattern would emerge. Using original survey data collected shortly before the 2021 federal election ($N = 1504$), we compared desirability ratings across three birth cohorts and estimated linear regression models. Results show uniformly negative evaluations overall, but systematic cohort differences exist: Respondents socialised during the German Democratic Republic period expressed the strongest rejection, while those socialised after reunification, particularly those whose formative years took place after The Left's emergence as a merged and rebranded party, were comparatively less negative. Living in eastern Germany is associated with fewer negative impressions of the coalition, and greater perceived ideological distance relates to lower desirability of the potential coalition. While the CDU/CSU and The Left have long represented ideological antipodes, cohort replacement may gradually soften this divide.

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Bruch mit dem deutschen Tabu des Kalten Krieges? Generationenunterschiede in der Bewertung einer Koalition zwischen CDU/CSU und der Linken

Zusammenfassung Deutschlands zersplittertes Parteiensystem hat Debatten über ungewöhnliche Koalitionen wieder aufleben lassen, auch hinsichtlich einer Zusammenarbeit zwischen Christlich Demokratischer Union/Christlich-Sozialer Union (CDU/CSU) und der Linken, um die Rechtsaußenpartei Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) einzuhegen. In der vorliegenden Arbeit wurde untersucht, ob sich die Bewertungen dieser unwahrscheinlichen Koalition in Abhängigkeit von der Sozialisierung verschiedener Generationen unterscheiden, unter der Annahme, dass dies die Regierungskonstellation ist, bei der ein solches Muster am wahrscheinlichsten auftreten würde. Anhand von Originaldaten einer Umfrage, die kurz vor der Bundestagswahl 2021 durchgeführt wurde ($N = 1504$), wurden die Erwünschtheitswerte in drei Geburtskohorten verglichen und lineare Regressionsmodelle berechnet. Die Ergebnisse zeigen insgesamt einheitlich negative Bewertungen, es bestehen jedoch systematische Kohortenunterschiede. Umfrageteilnehmer, die in der Zeit der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik sozialisiert wurden, brachten die stärkste Ablehnung zum Ausdruck, während Teilnehmer mit Sozialisierung nach der Wiedervereinigung vergleichsweise weniger negativ eingestellt waren – dies gilt insbesondere für Personen, deren prägende Jahre nach dem Aufkommen der Linken als fusionierte Partei mit neuem Image lagen. Ein Wohnsitz in Ostdeutschland ist mit weniger negativen Ansichten assoziiert, und eine größere wahrgenommene ideologische Distanz steht in Beziehung zu geringerer Erwünschtheit. CDU/CSU und die Linke sind seit Langem ideologische Gegenspieler, doch der Kohortenaustausch könnte diese Kluft allmählich verringern.

Schlüsselwörter Koalitionspräferenzen · Politische Sozialisierung · Generationenwechsel · Kohortenaustausch · Deutsches Parteiensystem

1 Introduction

Forming majorities in parliamentary democracies has become increasingly complex (Müller et al. 2024; Bräuninger and Debus 2024). Despite citizens valuing a certain degree of ideological homogeneity within governmental cross-party coalitions (Falcó-Gimeno 2012; Nyhuis and Plescia 2018; Plescia and Aichholzer 2017; Wurthmann and Krauss 2024), the rising fragmentation and polarisation of party systems have facilitated the emergence of unusual, previously untested coalition formats that challenge traditional patterns (Gross et al. 2025).

With the rise of the far right, traditional coalition logics face growing strain, as for instance the case in Germany with the Alternative for Germany (AfD). This has led to

intriguing debates, including proposals that even ideologically distant parties such as the Christian Democrats (Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union; CDU/CSU) and The Left might consider cooperation—not least to prevent parties of the radical right from entering government (Neuenfeld and Lewandowsky 2025) at the state level.

Social backing is typically a prerequisite for parties to as much as consider coalition cooperation (Wurthmann 2024; Debus and Müller 2013). However, despite several liberal Christian Democratic leaders publicly entertaining the idea of cooperation with The Left in recent years (Tagesschau 2024), both parliamentary cooperation and broader forms of collaboration have been rejected by the German public, including by CDU/CSU supporters (Wurthmann 2023). While there have been instances of occasional informal contact or pragmatic cooperation between the CDU/CSU and The Left, such efforts have largely remained outside public awareness (Holzhauser 2019). Strategic considerations likely underlie this caution, since even minor cooperation, such as joint parliamentary motions or questions, can be (mis)read as a sign of potential coalition-building (Wagner and Praprotnik 2024). Such perceptions, in turn, may influence voter behaviour (Falcó-Gimeno and Muñoz 2017).

For the CDU/CSU, who maintain a *cordon sanitaire* not only against the far-right AfD but also against The Left (Wurthmann 2023), this represents a considerable strategic dilemma. On the state level, their commitment to exclude the AfD from any cooperation narrows the range of viable majority coalitions, paradoxically opening the doors to The Left as a plausible option. The CDU/CSU, nonetheless, continue to uphold their cordon sanitaire against The Left and consider only coalitions with mainstream parties—the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Greens, or Free Democratic Party (FDP)—as legitimate; in many cases, these coalitions no longer command a majority at the state level. Despite polling, at the time of writing, suggesting that the CDU in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania is unlikely to secure a majority without the AfD or The Left, state party leader Peters maintains that he will not consider entering into a coalition with The Left (NDR 2025). Similarly, in Saxony-Anhalt, election polls place the AfD at around 40%, yet the state-level CDU continues to insist that it will not enter into any form of cooperation with The Left (zdfheute 2025).

The CDU justifies its rejection of any cooperation with The Left by arguing that the latter's values and objectives are incompatible with its own core principles of freedom, solidarity, and the social market economy. It points to The Left's continued references to socialist and communist ideals, which it regards as fundamentally at odds with Christian Democratic conceptions of human dignity. Moreover, the CDU views The Left as the legal successor of the Socialist Unity Party (SED), the ruling party of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), which it holds responsible for oppression and injustice. Profound disagreements also persist on issues of security and foreign policy, particularly regarding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and deployment of the German armed forces (CDU 2020).

While the characterisation of The Left as the legal successor of the SED is historically accurate (Holzhauser 2019; Wurthmann 2023), it is unclear whether this argument still resonates with the broader public, particularly among younger gen-

erations for whom the split between East and West Germany has long ceased to be a formative experience. The division between the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR is less salient among the younger western German generation in comparison to older generations; born after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the younger cohort has no lived experience of that division (Mau et al. 2024).[1] Generational differences may also emerge in how voters first encounter The Left. The youngest cohort of voters has only known the party under its post-2007 name, adopted when it rebranded from the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), a label with fewer negative associations. These factors should be relevant for the evaluation of a potential CDU/CSU–The Left coalition, as we know that one's formative years (generally understood as ages 15–25) play a crucial role in shaping political behaviour (Sears 1975; Jennings and Niemi 1981).

In this **research note** we therefore ask whether cohorts/generations in Germany differ in how they evaluate a potential federal-level coalition between CDU/CSU and The Left. Drawing on original data collected shortly before the 2021 German federal elections, we find that individuals who experienced their formative years during a divided Germany differ markedly in their evaluation of cooperation between CDU/CSU and The Left compared with those whose political orientations were shaped in postreunification contexts. These generational differences suggest that perceptions of coalition desirability not only are influenced by coalition familiarity and parties' ideological positions but reflect the gradual transformation of collective political memory and are thus impacted by the broader process of cohort replacement.

2 Coalition Preferences and Socialisation Effects

2.1 Understanding Coalition Preferences

Beyond affective and historical considerations, the visibility of signals of rapprochement or cooperation, as well as coalition familiarity, interact closely with programmatic proximity and shape coalition preferences. Differences in policy substance remain central, while voter perceptions of the likelihood that specific coalitions will be formed play a crucial role in the development of attitudinal preferences (Duch et al. 2010; Meffert et al. 2011; Harsgor et al. 2023; Wurthmann 2024). Within this context, voters are generally well aware of parties' ideological positions, and support for highly heterogeneous coalitions is correspondingly lower (Gross et al. 2024; Debus 2022; Wurthmann and Krauss 2024). Citizens understand how ideologically compatible particular coalitions are (Welz 2023). In this regard, the ideological distance between the CDU/CSU and The Left remains exceptionally large, rendering any form of cooperation both unrealistic and undesirable to most voters (Debus 2022).

Furthermore, when coalition preferences are the central focus of interest, familiarity with specific models of cooperation significantly influences their perceived

[1] Mau et al. (2024) also show that among eastern German young cohorts, the division remains prevalent.

viability as government options (Debus and Müller 2014; Wurthmann and Krauss 2024). Existing coalition formations have, ideally, already demonstrated their ability to work together in a solution-oriented and effective manner (Nyhuis and Plescia 2018). This familiarity also carries practical implications: As Bäck et al. (2024, p. 107) note, "familiarity—when parties have prior experiences of governing together—reduces bargaining duration, whereas a lack of familiarity prolongs government formation". Conversely, the complete absence of prior cooperation between parties is likely to have the opposite effect, reinforcing perceptions of incompatibility and further diminishing public support for such an alliance. While state-level coalition familiarity can influence coalition formation preferences on the national level (see Debus and Müller 2014), familiarity does not necessarily translate into support for a new coalition formation (Wurthmann and Krauss 2024). Familiarity is, therefore, only one of several factors explaining preferences for given coalition options.

2.2 Patterns of Socialisation

The notion of "familiarity" extends beyond institutional experience; it is also socially and generationally constructed. Citizens learn which forms of political cooperation are legitimate or plausible through processes of political socialisation and the intergenerational transmission of political norms (Inglehart 1977; Putnam 2000). This might lead to older cohorts being more critical towards coalitions that include newer parties or that are perceived as "unconventional". For cohorts socialised during or shortly after the German division, cooperation between the CDU/CSU and The Left may remain cognitively and, at some points, morally inconceivable. Younger generations, raised in a unified and more pluralistic Germany, may possess a broader sense of which political collaborations are conceivable.

The idea that the historical and political context in which individuals are socialised shapes their later attitudes and behaviour draws on the *formative* or *impressionable years* model (Sears 1975; Jennings and Niemi 1981). According to this model, individuals in their formative years (typically between the ages of 15 and 25) are particularly receptive to political information and prone to revising their attitudes and perceptions of political actors. Beyond this period, such orientations tend to stabilise and become less susceptible to change (Sears and Funk 1999; Peterson et al. 2020). As political contexts change over time, birth cohorts differ in how they are politically socialised and in which experiences, personalities, and events are formative. As such, political socialisation might lead to what can be called generational differences in political attitudes, political behaviour, or the perception of political actors. These generational/cohort-based differences have been documented for turnout (Bhatti and Hansen 2012), political attitudes (e.g. Inglehart 2008, Tiberj 2017), voting behaviour (e.g. Steiner 2023), and even with regard to the way political concepts such as "left" and "right" are understood (Steiner 2024).

Similarly, coalition preferences may therefore not only be shaped by ideological or strategic considerations but also be embedded in generationally structured processes of political socialisation. Coalition preferences can also include nonideological components, reflecting factors such as perceived familiarity, trust, or govern-

ing competence (Nyhuis and Plescia 2018). Older cohorts, whose formative years were marked by the division of Germany and the ideological polarisation of the Cold War, are likely to perceive cooperation between the Christian Democrats and The Left as a violation of long-standing moral and political boundaries. For them, such cooperation challenges the symbolic integrity of democratic anticommunism that underpinned postwar political competition. By contrast, younger generations socialised in a reunified Germany may view interparty cooperation through a more pragmatic lens. This should be particularly the case for those cohorts who became politically aware after the rebranding of The Left from the SED/PDS. Detached from the moral weight of the East–West divide, they are likely to evaluate potential coalitions primarily in terms of programmatic compatibility and perceived governing capacity. We therefore expect cohort-specific differences in the evaluation of a potential CDU/CSU–The Left coalition, despite an overall negative assessment driven by the substantial ideological distance between the parties.

3 Research Design

3.1 Case Selection and Data

Germany represents a *most likely case* for examining how socialisation shapes citizens' evaluations of unconventional coalition scenarios. The German party system is traditionally structured around strong ideological boundaries and historical cleavages that have long constrained coalition options (Gross et al. 2025; Debus 2022; Wurthmann 2024; Wurthmann and Krauss 2024). The persistent exclusion of both the far-right AfD and the far-left The Left from cooperation with mainstream parties on the national level renders any discussion of a CDU/CSU–The Left coalition an ideal testing ground for attitudinal limits of coalition acceptance.

Germany's reunification and the replacement of cohorts socialised under distinct systemic conditions—authoritarian socialism in the East and liberal democracy in the West—further enable an analysis of how collective memory and political learning shape perceptions of legitimacy. Recent research also points to enduring East–West differences in coalition evaluations and their determinants, underscoring the lasting influence of socialisation legacies (Walke and Wurthmann 2024; Welz and Huber 2022). Younger cohorts, however, have grown up in a unified and pluralistic political landscape, encountering The Left as a democratic and reform-oriented actor rather than the successor to the SED regime. If generational experiences attenuate resistance to ideologically distant coalitions, such effects should be most visible in Germany, particularly in assessments of a coalition that is not merely unconventional but symbolically charged. A CDU/CSU–The Left coalition represents, prior to the rise of the AfD, the greatest ideological and historical distance within the German party system, making it a powerful case for assessing the limits of coalition legitimacy.

The 2021 federal election provides an ideal empirical setting for this analysis. It marked a moment of exceptional coalition salience and party-system fluidity after Angela Merkel's departure, when multiple three-party constellations were publicly

debated (Wurthmann and Krauss 2024). Both the CDU/CSU and The Left subsequently entered opposition, while no realistic expectations of cooperation, or even dialogue, existed between them, ensuring an unbiased assessment of citizens' attitudes. At the same time, younger cohorts socialised entirely with The Left as a legitimate democratic party entered the electorate, while older cohorts with Cold War experiences remained politically active. Importantly, this period also preceded the far-right AfD's post-2022 surge, which later intensified debates on inability to govern. The data used in this paper stem from a research project conducted shortly before the 2021 German federal election. In collaboration with the market research company Respondi, an online panel survey was designed to ensure adequate coverage of the German electorate. For the purposes of this paper, we draw on data collected during the first survey wave, which was fielded between 9 and 14 August—approximately 6 weeks before election day. Respondents aged between 18 and 74 years were recruited through a quota sample based on Respondi's Access Panel, comprising around 100,000 registered members. Comparisons with representative census data indicate only minor deviations in sociodemographic characteristics (Online Appendix, Table A.1). Accordingly, our oldest respondents were born in 1947 and were therefore primarily socialised at a time when the Berlin Wall had already been built. For this reason, we are unable to draw any conclusions about individuals who were socialised before this pivotal moment in German history.

In total, 2270 individuals completed the survey. Of these, 64 were excluded because they were either ineligible to vote or uncertain about their eligibility in the federal election. A further 165 respondents were removed after being identified as straightliners within specific item batteries. An additional 537 individuals could not be included in the analysis, as they failed to provide substantive responses on several indicators deemed essential for this study. Similar rates of case reduction have been documented in previous research, particularly when dimensional indicators are involved (Banducci et al. 2017; Wurthmann and Krauss 2024). The final analytic sample thus comprises 1504 respondents.

3.2 Dependent Variable

Respondents were asked the following question: "Regardless of the outcome of the federal election, how desirable do you personally consider the following coalition governments to be?" Individual preferences were measured on an 11-point scale ranging from –5 "not at all desirable" to +5 "extremely desirable". This measurement approach is well established in survey research on coalition preferences.

3.3 Independent Variable

To capture differences in the evaluation of a potential CDU/CSU–The Left coalition, we grouped our respondents into different birth cohorts (generations), building on the idea that the politically most formative years of an individual are between 15 and 25 years of age. This yielded three groups: (1) those born before 1980 who were socialised with the GDR/during the Wall period, (2) those born between 1980 and 1991 who were politically socialised after reunification but before the former PDS

rebranded into The Left, and (3) those born after 1991 whose formative years fell into the period after this rebranding, which makes it less likely for them to perceive the party as the successor of the GDR's SED.

3.4 Control Variables

To control for respondents' perceptions of ideological distance between the potential coalition partners, we constructed a measure of the perceived ideological distance between the CDU, the CSU, and The Left. The operationalisation builds on two established dimensions of the political space: a socioeconomic axis and a sociocultural axis (Gidron and Tichelbaecker 2025). On the socioeconomic scale, respondents were asked to place the CDU, the CSU, and The Left each on a continuum ranging from 1 = "The government should play an active role in the economy" to 11 = "The government should not intervene in the market at all". The sociocultural scale ranged from 1 = "progressive" to 11 = "conservative".

For each respondent, we identified the maximum ideological distance between *any* of the three parties (The Left, CDU, CSU) on each ideological dimension. Concretely, this means that we took the lowest perceived party position and the highest perceived party position as the endpoints of the range. For example, if a respondent placed The Left at 2, the CDU at 5, and the CSU at 7 on a given dimension, we used 2 and 7 as the basis for calculating the ideological distance. This approach captures the perceived ideological dispersion of the three coalition partners from the respondent's perspective. As a result, two separate indicators were obtained—one socioeconomic and one sociocultural—each capturing the perceived ideological spread between the CDU, the CSU, and The Left. These were subsequently combined into a single measure using the Euclidean distance, thereby acknowledging the multidimensional nature of citizens' ideological perceptions and allowing for an integrated assessment of the perceived ideological distance between the potential coalition partners. We call this factor, therefore, the anticipated coalition range.

Especially in eastern Germany, The Left holds a distinct status, as it emerged from the former GDR party, the PDS (Hough 2000). To account for this, we included a control variable for region of residence, distinguishing between respondents living in western Germany (0) and eastern Germany (1). Finally, we controlled for respondents' sex (male = 0, female = 1) and their formal level of education. The latter was measured using four categories (no degree/primary school, lower secondary degree, upper secondary vocational degree, and *Abitur*). Because education was included solely as a control variable and we had no theoretically grounded expectation of nonlinear effects, we treated it as a continuous covariate in the model.

3.5 Analytical Strategy

We examined cohort-specific differences in the evaluation of a potential coalition between The Left and the CDU/CSU using a two-step approach. First, Kruskal–Wallis and Bonferroni-adjusted Wilcoxon rank-sum tests were applied to assess overall and pairwise differences across three birth cohorts. Second, linear regression models were estimated to account for additional explanatory factors, including anticipated

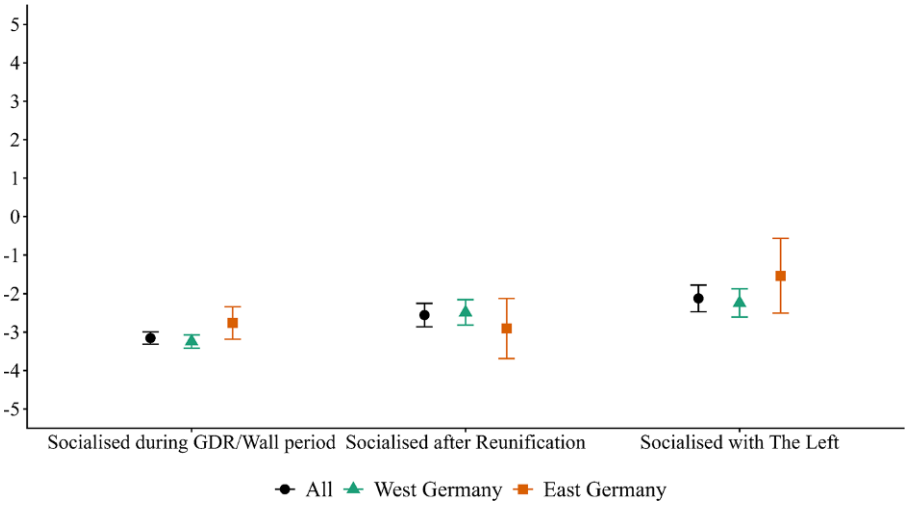

Fig. 1 Average desirability rating with 95% confidence intervals for a coalition between The Left and the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union across different birth cohorts and place of residence (eastern vs. western Germany). $N = 1504$. *GDR* German Democratic Republic

coalition range, region of residence, sex, and education. This combination of non-parametric and multivariate analyses allowed us to test whether the observed cohort effects persisted when relevant covariates were controlled for, thus directly linking our empirical strategy to the formative years framework.

The analyses presented here do not allow for causal inference. The design is observational and cross-sectional, and the reported associations should therefore be interpreted as descriptive evidence of age group/cohort-related differences rather than as causal effects of political socialisation. Nevertheless, the sequential modelling strategy, first estimating unconditional cohort differences and then adding theoretically relevant controls, enables us to examine whether the observed patterns are consistent with expectations derived from the formative years framework.

4 Results and Discussion

As expected from the literature on coalition preferences presented above, we observe an overall negative evaluation of a potential coalition between the CDU/CSU and The Left, with the most negative rating representing the modal response (Figs. A1 and A2, Online Appendix). However, we also find systematic differences in the average desirability ratings between those socialised during the existence of the GDR (born before 1980), those socialised after the fall of the Iron Curtain (born between 1980 and 1991), and those born after 1991, who were politically socialised following the rebranding of the PDS into The Left (Fig. 1).[2]

[2] See Fig. A3 and Tables A2 and A3 in the appendix for the average desirability rating of other coalitions across birth cohorts and place of residence. While almost all coalitions are evaluated more positively by

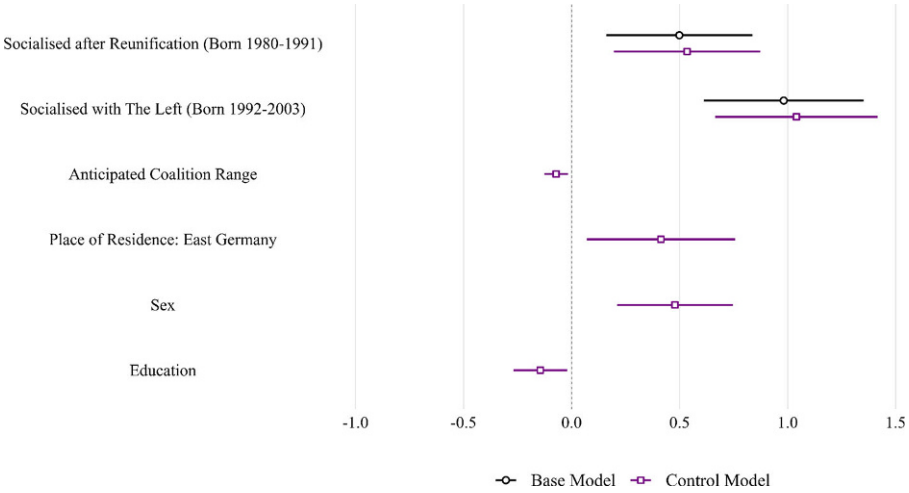

Fig. 2 Coefficients with 95% confidence intervals of two linear regression models. The base model includes only the birth cohorts; the control models adds control variables. Full model specifications can be found in the appendix in Table A4. $N = 1504$. Reference category for socialisation effects: those born in 1979 or before

Given that the dependent variable is not normally distributed (Fig. A1, Online Appendix), a nonparametric approach was applied to examine whether political attitudes towards CDU/CSU–The Left cooperation differ across the three birth cohorts. A Kruskal–Wallis rank-sum test reveals highly significant differences between socialisation periods regarding attitudes towards such a coalition ($\chi^2(2) = 43.56$, $p < 0.001$). To identify which groups differ significantly from one another, Bonferroni-adjusted pairwise Wilcoxon rank-sum tests were conducted. The results show significant differences between respondents socialised during the GDR/Wall period and those socialised after reunification ($p < 0.001$), as well as between respondents socialised during the GDR/Wall period and those socialised with The Left ($p < 0.001$). No statistically significant difference is observed between respondents socialised after reunification and those socialised with The Left ($p = 0.082$).

These results provide preliminary evidence that attitudes towards cooperation between the CDU/CSU and The Left vary systematically across birth cohorts. Respondents whose formative years were shaped by the GDR period expressed significantly stronger rejection of such a coalition than those socialised after reunification, while attitudes among younger cohorts appear somewhat more moderate. Yet even among younger respondents, the overall evaluation of this highly unlikely coali-

younger respondents, the differences are greater for "unconventional" coalitions and most pronounced for those that include The Left. This is in line with our argument that the perception of coalitions is associated not only with factors such as ideological proximity or familiarity but also with socialisation experiences. Younger generations that have not yet been exposed to many previous coalition governments might evaluate "unconventional" coalitions more positively, as their view of what constitutes a "normal" coalition is less fixed. In addition, different historical configurations of The Left seem to be connected to differences in the evaluation of coalitions including the party.

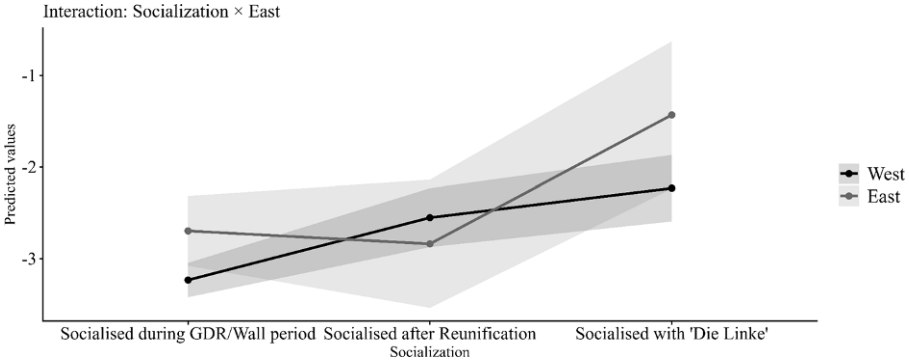

Fig. 3 Visualisation of the interaction effect between birth cohorts based on phases of political socialisation and place of residence based on a linear regression model. Full model specifications can be found in the Appendix (Table A4, model 5). $N = 1504$; N-WEST = 1228; N-EAST = 276. Subgroup sample sizes are rather small (e.g. 41 people living in eastern Germany had been socialised with The Left). *GDR* German Democratic Republic

tion remains distinctly negative. This finding makes the suggestion by Neuenfeld and Lewandowsky (2025) of a potential CDU/CSU–The Left rapprochement on the state level appear politically implausible, given that parties are known to rely on the coalition preferences of their electorates when forming governments (Debus and Müller 2013). The subsequent regression analysis examined whether these cohort effects persisted once additional factors were taken into account.

As Fig. 2 shows, respondents born between 1980 and 1991 hold significantly more positive attitudes towards the analysed coalition than those born earlier. The same applies to those born after 1991, for whom the effect size is even larger.

Beyond these likely socialisation-based effects, we observe a small but statistically significant negative effect for the anticipated coalition range between the three parties, which aligns with previous findings in the literature (Armstrong and Duch 2010; Welz 2023; Wurthmann and Krauss 2024). Residents of eastern Germany are more likely to hold less negative attitudes towards cooperation between The Left and the CDU/CSU than those living in western Germany. This effect is unsurprising, given the long-standing electoral strength and social embeddedness of The Left and its predecessor, the PDS, in the eastern states, where the party has historically been perceived as a legitimate political actor rather than a marginal or protest party (Welz and Huber 2022; Pickel and Pickel 2023; Walke and Wurthmann 2024). Apart from sex, none of the remaining control variables show statistically significant effects. The full regression results are reported in the Online Appendix (Table A4).

We also tested for an interaction between birth cohort and place of residence as a robustness check (Online Appendix, Table A4, model 5) since previous research has found different cohort patterns for support of The Left in the East and the West (Steiner 2023). Figure 3 presents a visualisation of this interaction effect, showing meaningful variation between socialisation and place of residence. However, when taking conventional significance levels into account, the pronounced width and overlap of the confidence intervals suggest that the observed trends should be interpreted with caution. This pattern may reflect the limited subgroup sample sizes rather than

the absence of meaningful cohort-based differences between eastern and western Germans. Nevertheless, the observed variation warrants further investigations in the future.

Given that we cannot analytically differentiate between age (or life cycle) and cohort/generational differences due to the well-known identification problem in age-period cohort analyses (Bell 2021), we replicated the base model as well as the model including control variables using linear age as an alternative measure (Online Appendix, Table A5). Although age as a linear indicator also yielded significant results, we believe that from a theoretical perspective, the observed differences in the evaluation of a potential CDU/CSU–The Left coalition are more likely to be cohort based than age based.

Additionally, one may assume that ideological distance—specifically, an individual's position relative to the party located furthest away from them within a given coalition model—can be perceived as a form of ideological veto player (see, e.g., Wurthmann and Krauss 2024). Building on this idea, we included the two-dimensional ideological distance between each respondent and their most distant coalition party as an additional measure. In a further robustness check, we replaced the overall perceived coalition range with this individualised distance to disentangle the effects more clearly. Notably, our cohort effects remain robust across these specifications (Online Appendix, Table A4).

To check for potential multicollinearity, we calculated variance inflation factors for all predictors included in the regression models. All values remain well below conventional thresholds of concern, suggesting that multicollinearity is not a relevant issue in the models and that the estimated associations can be considered statistically distinct from one another.

The findings from both the rank-sum tests and the linear regression models suggest that individuals socialised under the former East German regime differ markedly in their evaluation of potential cooperation between The Left and the CDU/CSU compared with those whose political orientations were shaped in postreunification contexts. Respondents born after 1991 display noticeably less negative attitudes towards such a coalition. These results align with expectations derived from the formative years model and extend the literature on coalition preferences by demonstrating that perceptions of coalition desirability are shaped not only by coalition familiarity and ideological proximity but also by generationally anchored political experiences. The findings further indicate that evaluations of politically unlikely coalitions mirror the gradual transformation of collective political memory and the fading of Cold War–era divisions. As in other areas of political behaviour, overall coalition preferences in Germany thus appear to be influenced by the broader process of cohort replacement, through which newer generations reinterpret the boundaries of political cooperation.

5 Conclusion

The growing difficulty of forming stable governments has become a defining challenge for German politics. Increasing fragmentation and ideological polarisation

have constrained coalition options both at the state and federal level, fuelling debates about the country's "inability to govern". Against this backdrop, Neuenfeld and Lewandowsky (2025) argue that the Christian Democrats and The Left might, at least at the state level, eventually need to reconsider their relationship to prevent the far-right AfD from entering government. Similar arguments have emerged in political and the wider media discourse, often framed as pragmatic responses to an increasingly fragmented party landscape.

Our central argument is that attitudes towards unlikely or normatively contested coalitions, such as between the CDU/CSU and The Left, are rooted in historically anchored perceptions of what constitutes legitimate political cooperation. These perceptions at least partially stem from collective political memory and generational socialisation rather than short-term strategic considerations. For those socialised during the Cold War, cooperation between Christian Democrats and The Left still evokes moral and ideological limits stemming from the legacy of the SED regime (Holzhauser 2019). Younger generations, by contrast, have grown up in a unified and pluralistic political landscape in which The Left is, nowadays, a regular democratic actor rather than a successor of an authoritarian regime. We argue that coalition preferences therefore reflect socially transmitted ideas of political acceptability, evolving through generational turnover and the decline of Cold War cleavages.

Drawing on original survey data collected shortly before the 2021 federal election, we find that individuals socialised in times of German division express the strongest rejection of such cooperation, whereas those who grew up after reunification, especially those born after 1991, hold comparatively more moderate views. These findings indicate that the moral and ideological barriers separating the CDU/CSU and The Left remain salient but are less pronounced among younger generations.

The implications for German politics are considerable. As older cohorts with Cold War experiences gradually leave the electorate, the symbolic weight of historical boundaries between parties is likely to fade. Although a CDU/CSU–The Left coalition remains highly unlikely in the near term, its strong rejection is no longer uniform across generations. This gradual normalisation of cross-bloc thinking may, over time, widen the perceived coalition opportunities available to parties. For The Left, this might offer the opportunity to strengthen its coalition potential on the federal level, particularly among younger voters.

Overall, generational dynamics seem to be meaningful in shaping attitudes towards party competition. Future research might, therefore, also address whether one may observe such patterns with regard to nondemocratic parties such as the far-right AfD, especially since in the 2025 German federal election, a majority of young voters preferred either the AfD or The Left.

The AfD's consolidation, partial normalisation in local politics (Schroeder et al. 2024), and the gradual erosion of the cordon sanitaire (Gonzatti and Völker 2025) have already altered the political landscape in parts of eastern Germany. Younger voters are socialised in an environment in which the AfD's parliamentary presence feels routine, and their views of what constitutes legitimate cooperation may therefore differ from those of older generations. Whether this will mirror the gradual attitudinal shift observed for The Left remains uncertain, but it illustrates how socialisation could continue to redefine the boundaries of acceptable coalition behaviour.

Recent developments, such as the formation of the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) as a splinter party from The Left, could further impact future attitudes.

Germany's case also provides broader insights for future investigation. It is a highly likely setting for detecting socialisation effects on coalition preferences: a highly institutionalised party system with strong programmatic traditions and a unique history of division and reunification. Nonetheless, comparative and longitudinal studies could further explore how collective memory and regime legacies shape coalition acceptance over time.

Several caveats remain. Because our data are cross-sectional, the observed cohort differences cannot be interpreted causally. They represent correlational patterns consistent with theoretical expectations. We are also unable to draw any conclusions about individuals who were socialised before the building of the Berlin Wall, due to the fact that our oldest respondents were born in 1947. Moreover, age and cohort effects are difficult to disentangle: Some variation may reflect life-cycle rather than socialisation influences. Future research using panel data could address this more rigorously. Nevertheless, the persistence of cohort-based differences, even when controlling for ideological distance and sociodemographic factors, suggests that socialisation legacies continue to inform how citizens evaluate potential political cooperation.

In sum, our findings point to a gradual transformation of the moral and symbolic cleavage that structures German coalition politics. Although Cold War divisions continue to resonate, their relevance is steadily diminishing through generational turnover. The shift does not signal an immediate change in coalition strategies but marks a new political normal where formerly taboo alliances can be discussed, if not yet accepted. Whether this shift enhances governability or generates new tensions will depend on how parties respond to an electorate increasingly shaped by the formative experiences of younger generations.

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