

Electoral Campaigns and Attitudes toward Immigration: Evidence from Germany

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Extended Abstract

Introduction, Motivation and Research Question

In recent years, support for far-right and anti-immigrant parties has risen across many advanced democracies, raising concerns about the evolution of public attitudes toward migration (Alesina and Tabellini, 2024). At the same time, empirical evidence suggests that individual attitudes toward immigration tend to be remarkably stable over time (Kustov et al., 2021). This apparent coexistence of political volatility and attitudinal stability raises a central question: what shapes attitudes toward migration, and under which conditions do they change? Electoral campaigns represent one potential mechanism through which attitudes may shift. Campaign periods constitute structured episodes of intensified political communication, characterized by heightened media coverage, sharper party rhetoric, and increased issue salience (Dekeyser and Freedman, 2023; Carreras et al., 2025). Yet increasing the salience of immigration does not necessarily worsen natives' attitudes (Schneider-Strauszynski and Valette, 2025; Colussi et al., 2021), creating ambiguity about whether election cycles translate into measurable changes in expressed concerns. Immigration provides a particularly salient case to study these dynamics. This paper investigates how electoral campaigns influence immigration worries in Germany. Our research questions are twofold:

- (i) Do immigration worries move systematically in the months before and after elections?
- (ii) Does this election-cycle pattern become stronger after the 2015 refugee crisis?

The German case is particularly informative, as the refugee crisis plausibly marked a structural break in the politicization and salience of migration. Exploiting longitudinal data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), we document three main findings. Tracking individuals over time,

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we identify a statistically significant negative pre-election effect: individuals interviewed within 120 days before a federal election are less likely to report immigration worries. This pattern runs counter to the expectation that campaigns mechanically intensify anti-immigrant concerns. Second, election-cycle effects become more pronounced in the post-2015 period, suggesting that increased politicization heightened the sensitivity of attitudes to electoral proximity. Third, these dynamics display substantial regional heterogeneity across German Länder, indicating that the stability of immigration attitudes depends on local political and demographic contexts. Taken together, the results show that electoral campaigns do not uniformly amplify anti-immigrant concerns; rather, their impact depends on both the broader political environment and regional patterns of issue attention.

Methodology

The empirical analysis relies on individual-level longitudinal data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), a nationally representative annual household survey that has been continuously fielded since 1984. We restrict the sample to German-born respondents aged 18-82 observed between 1998 and 2024, with non-missing information on immigration attitudes. The main outcome variable, $Worries_{it}$, is a binary indicator equal to one if individual i in year t reports being at least somewhat worried about immigration and 0 otherwise. All specifications include a rich set of time-varying individual controls X_{it} (gender, age-group dummies, education, income categories, employment status, political interest, marital status, and children). Survey weights are applied to restore representativeness under the SOEP sampling design. Our identification strategy exploits quasi-random variation in interview timing relative to federal election dates. Because the SOEP is fielded continuously throughout the year, respondents are interviewed at different distances from election days for reasons unrelated to political preferences. Conditional on individual fixed effects and observed covariates, we assume that survey timing within year is exogenous to time-varying determinants of immigration attitudes. This design allows us to isolate campaign exposure effects from pre-existing attitudinal differences and constitutes a key contribution relative to existing studies that rely primarily on aggregate rhetoric or media measures (Dekeyser and Freedman, 2023; Carreras et al., 2025). Our empirical strategy progressively strengthens identification through three complementary specifications. We begin with a transparent benchmark specification exploiting within-year interview timing variation across the full sample period:

$$Worries_{it} = \beta_1 D_{it}^{pre} + \beta_2 D_{it}^{post} + X'_{it}\gamma + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it}, \quad (1)$$

where $Worries_{it}$ denotes immigration worries, D_{it}^{pre} is an indicator equal to one if the individual is interviewed within 120 days before a Bundestag election, and D_{it}^{post} captures interviews conducted shortly after the election. Year fixed effects δ_t absorb aggregate time trends, including post-2015 shifts in attitudes. The reference category consists of early-year interviews. While equation (1) exploits within-year variation in interview timing, it does not account for unobserved

individual heterogeneity that may correlate with both interview timing and baseline immigration attitudes. Our main specification addresses this concern by leveraging the longitudinal structure of the SOEP. Specifically, equation (2) introduces individual fixed effects, thereby identifying election-cycle effects from within-individual variation across election and non-election years. This approach absorbs all time-invariant characteristics, including stable ideological predispositions and baseline anti-immigrant sentiment, and compares how the same individual reports immigration worries in election versus non-election contexts. In doing so, it strengthens identification relative to the baseline specification and isolates campaign exposure effects from persistent individual traits. Let E_t denote an election-year indicator. Define treated months as interviews conducted in the pre-election window, i.e., within 120 days before the Bundestag election (approximately June–September). Let T_i be a time-invariant indicator equal to one if individual i is interviewed in treated months in an election year, and zero if interviewed in the baseline period (January–March) in an election year. We estimate:

$$Worries_{it} = \beta(T_i \times E_t) + X'_{it}\gamma + \alpha_i + \pi_{P(t)} + \varepsilon_{it}, \quad (2)$$

where $\pi_{P(t)}$ denote fixed effects for election–non-election year pairs. Specifically, for each federal election year, we construct a pair consisting of the election year and its adjacent non-election year. These fixed effects absorb macroeconomic shocks, seasonal patterns, and other aggregate trends common to both years within each pair. As a result, identification comes from differential within-individual changes across election and non-election years within the same local time window. This specification isolates campaign exposure effects net of permanent individual characteristics and slow-moving aggregate shocks. To assess whether election-cycle effects differ across political regimes, we interact election exposure with a post-2015 indicator:

$$Worries_{it} = \beta_1(T_i \times E_t) + \beta_2(T_i \times E_t \times Post2015_t) + X'_{it}\gamma + \alpha_i + \pi_{P(t)} + \varepsilon_{it}, \quad (3)$$

where $Post2015_t = 1$ for $t \geq 2015$. The coefficient β_2 captures whether election-cycle effects strengthen after the refugee crisis, consistent with a structural break in migration politicization. In all specifications, standard errors are clustered at the region–election level. We further explore regional heterogeneity by interacting election exposure with time-invariant regional characteristics, such as baseline migrant share, AfD vote share, and the East–West distinction, and by estimating specifications across different Länder groups. These additional analyses allow us to assess whether campaign effects vary systematically across local political and demographic contexts. Identification relies on three assumptions. First, interview timing within year is not systematically driven by unobserved, time-varying determinants of immigration attitudes. Second, seasonal patterns would evolve similarly in election and non-election years absent campaigns. Third, treated and control individuals would follow parallel within-person trends in the absence of electoral exposure. To assess the plausibility of these assumptions, we conduct extensive balancing tests. We test whether proximity to elections predicts observable characteristics (education, age, gender, income, employment status, political interest, marital status, and children) conditional on fixed effects.

We perform these tests both at the national level and allowing for regional heterogeneity across German Länder. In addition, we compare election versus non-election years to verify that seasonal patterns are not systematically different outside campaign periods. Finally, we implement placebo tests using alternative outcome variables available in the SOEP (e.g., worries about the economy, health, crime, and environment).

Findings

The main results can be summarized in three points. First, in the baseline model, we observe a statistically significant negative effect in the period immediately preceding the elections: the probability of reporting immigration worries is about 3 percentage points lower for individuals interviewed in the 120 days prior to the election compared to the reference months. This pattern suggests that campaign dynamics may temporarily shift attention away from immigration or reshape the evaluative frame through which respondents report concerns. Second, the heterogeneity analysis shows that electoral effects change after 2015. The interaction between election proximity and the post-2015 indicator is positive and statistically significant, indicating that post-election increases in immigration worries emerge only after 2015. This is consistent with the idea that the increased politicization of the migration issue has made attitudes more sensitive to the electoral cycle. Third, the effects are not uniform across the country. Regional heterogeneity, along dimensions such as baseline migrant share, AfD vote share, and East vs. West Germany distinction, suggests that the impact of campaigns depends on the political and demographic context of the Länder. In other words, the stability of attitudes toward immigration appears to be conditioned by regional factors that modulate the intensity of politicization.

Conclusion and Next steps

This paper provides evidence that electoral campaigns do not uniformly intensify anti-immigrant concerns. Exploiting within-individual variation over time, we show that immigration attitudes in Germany, while broadly stable, respond systematically to electoral proximity. In particular, we document a significant negative pre-election effect: the same individuals report lower immigration worries in the months preceding federal elections relative to non-election periods. Importantly, election-cycle effects strengthen after the 2015 refugee crisis and vary substantially across German regions, highlighting the role of local political environments and issue salience. These findings suggest that the interaction between electoral competition and public attitudes toward immigration is conditional rather than mechanical, depending on both temporal dynamics and regional context. The current analysis focuses on reduced-form election-cycle effects without fully disentangling underlying mechanisms. Future work will integrate external measures: (i) time-varying media-based proxies for salience at weekly and daily frequency, and (ii) political framing measures using candidate and party-position data at relevant geographic levels, to test whether election-cycle effects are amplified when immigration is more visible in public discourse (salience) or when local rhetoric shifts toward more restrictive narratives (framing).

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