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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Civic associations, populism, and (un-)civic behavior: evidence from Germany

Bogdan G. Popescu<sup>1</sup>  and Marlene Jugl<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Political Science & International Affairs Department, John Cabot University, Rome, Italy and <sup>2</sup>Department of Social and Political Sciences, Bocconi University, Milano, Italy

**Corresponding author:** Bogdan G. Popescu; Email: [bogdan.popescu@johncabot.edu](mailto:bogdan.popescu@johncabot.edu)

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## Abstract

Civic associations are expected to foster civic, pro-social behavior, but this optimistic view is increasingly contested. We argue that populist radical right parties can strategically target and infiltrate associations to diffuse anti-establishment rhetoric and anti-democratic attitudes. We illustrate this phenomenon by examining the relationship between civic associations and compliance with government rules during Germany's first Covid-19 lockdown with a difference-in-differences design. Results show that areas with denser sport, nature, and culture clubs recorded higher mobility under lockdown. We document the infiltration mechanism and the spreading of anti-democratic attitudes within associations, using survey and election data and qualitative evidence including interviews. In doing so, we shed light on a negative effect of social networks and an understudied strategy of challenger populist parties.

**Keywords:** comparative political economy; comparative politics: industrialized countries; political sociology and culture

## 1. Introduction

A flourishing civil society is often considered a prerequisite for the success of democracy and effective governing. Voluntary associations, including neighborhood committees, interest groups, and choral societies, have traditionally been seen as key ingredients for creating civiness, tolerance, and cooperation and for mobilizing citizens for social causes (de Tocqueville, 1835; Putnam *et al.*, 1993).

Against these optimistic expectations, this paper examines a paradoxical empirical regularity in Germany. People display lower compliance with recent lockdowns in places with denser civic associations (hence, higher social capital). We argue that the effect of civic associations depends on the political context and the supply of norms and attitudes that can spread through associations' networks. In the case of Germany, we argue that the negative effect of associations can partly be explained by their extensive penetration by the populist radical right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party. The positive effects of civic associations are undermined in such a context where populist radical right parties, in their role as challenger parties (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020), target civic associations to spread anti-establishment views and attract more voters.

As such, our argument is related to recent scholarship that highlights the “dark side” of social capital (Berman, 1997; Fitzgerald and Lawrence, 2011; Satyanath *et al.*, 2017; Villalonga-Olives and Kawachi, 2017). Recent studies have explored the effect of social capital on compliance with government policies, such as lockdowns. Two dimensions of social capital, civiness (Borgonovi and Andrieu, 2020; Elgar *et al.*, 2020; Barrios *et al.*, 2021; Colombo and Dinas,

2021) and trust (Bai *et al.*, 2020; Arriola and Grossman, 2021; Devine *et al.*, 2021) are clearly connected with stronger compliance. In contrast, evidence on the effects of the third dimension of social capital, civic associations, is limited and inconclusive (Bai *et al.*, 2020; Elgar *et al.*, 2020). We bridge these arguments with studies that connect less compliance to populism in the USA (Painter and Qiu, 2020; Barrios *et al.*, 2021), in Europe (Ansell *et al.*, 2021; Barrios *et al.*, 2021), or Latin-America (Mariani *et al.*, 2020). Scholars in this strand argue that people who vote for the extreme or populist right are also more cynical and resentful of the elites (Mudde, 2007; Inglehart and Norris, 2016; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020), which means that they comply less with rules and recommendations coming from these elites.

We bridge these two literatures and argue that civic associations can undermine compliance if there is a substantial supply of populist, anti-government views. We demonstrate that populist radical right parties strategically target civic associations such as soccer clubs, cultural associations, and nature societies to spread anti-establishment views. The diffusion of such views among club members has consequences beyond the ballot box: it can foster uncivic behavior and subvert citizens' willingness to collaborate with the government. In doing so, we document an understudied strategy of radical populist parties—infiltration of civil society organizations. This complements previous literature that focuses on the origins and strategies of populist radical right parties (Mudde, 2007; Fitzgerald, 2017; De Vries and Hobolt, 2020; Colombo and Dinas, 2021) and their effects (Bischof and Wagner, 2019; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020; Chou *et al.*, 2021; Valentim and Widmann, 2021).

To provide empirical evidence for our argument, we focus on Germany, a country with rich empirical data on over 500,000 registered civic associations (Franzen and Botzen, 2011). Germany is also a country where votes for extreme right-wing parties have risen since the 2008 economic crisis (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020; Anelli *et al.*, 2021).

Our empirical strategy proceeds in several steps, combining aggregate data with individual-level and qualitative data. First, we assess the relationship between association density and compliance with lockdown rules using a difference-in-differences (DiD) estimation. We find that “bridging associations” (Putnam *et al.*, 1993; Putnam, 2000) such as sport, culture, and nature clubs are systematically linked to less compliance and higher mobility, while “bonding” associations with an explicitly political or social purpose are related to more compliance. In the next step, we explore the mechanisms. We use document analysis and interviews with association representatives to understand the spreading of anti-establishment attitudes.

Our research offers several key contributions. First, it advances social capital literature by highlighting how different association types, bonding and bridging, influence civic behavior within varying political contexts. Unlike previous studies (Bai *et al.*, 2020; Elgar *et al.*, 2020), which often overlooked these distinctions, our work underscores their significance. Additionally, we echo earlier arguments (Foley and Edwards, 1996; Berman, 1997) regarding the politicization of bridging associations, revealing the “dark side” of social capital in crisis management scenarios (Satyanath *et al.*, 2017). Second, we enrich the discourse on challenger party strategies (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020) by demonstrating how radical right-wing parties strategically target civic associations. This complements localist theories of radical right voting (Fitzgerald and Lawrence, 2011; Fitzgerald, 2017), which emphasize local cohesion and ties. Third, we bridge the gap between two dominant paradigms explaining compliance with Covid policies: the positive role of social capital and the negative role of populism. Finally, our findings have policy implications, revealing the highly localized nature of compliance.

The paper continues with the theoretical argument. We then describe the German political context and the social distancing measures introduced in 2020. In the empirical section, we begin with our DiD analysis and then explore the infiltration mechanism. We end with the implications of our findings.

## 2. Theory: linking civic associations and non-compliance

Research on social capital follows in the footsteps of de Tocqueville (1835) contending that democracy results from a vibrant civic society. Scholars such as Putnam argued that social capital is what is “making democracy work” and documented positive effects of social capital for economic and institutional performance (Putnam *et al.*, 1993; Knack and Keefer, 1997; Putnam, 2000; Guiso *et al.*, 2008). Other studies find adverse effects of social capital for socio-economic outcomes (Pillai *et al.*, 2015; Villalonga-Olives and Kawachi, 2017) and for undermining democracy in historical contexts (Berman, 1997; Satyanath *et al.*, 2017).

Our study is very close to the insights by Fitzgerald (2017), according to whom people who feel tied to their communities are likely to consider radical-right programs alluring. Unlike Fitzgerald, we focus on the strategic targeting by right-wing parties of local associations to gain votes. Civic associations are a central dimension of social capital that is crucial for the spread of norms. What emerges from these debates is that the exact effect of civic associations, whether positive or negative, depends on the economic (Colombo and Dinas, 2021) and political context (Foley and Edwards, 1996).

### 2.1. Political context and the populist targeting of associations

The political context of civic associations consists of factors both on the demand and supply sides. The specific context that we study is that of populism. In line with the literature, we define populism to be, at its core about, anti-establishment rhetoric that emphasizes the division between the people and the corrupt elite (Mudde, 2007: 29). For spreading populism, the critical element on the demand side is a part of society that feels left out. Such feelings could result from exogenous shocks, like an economic crisis, increased levels of automatization linked to globalization (Stanig and Colantone, 2018; Anelli *et al.*, 2021) or the influx of migrants (Dancygier *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, those who vote for the populist radical right tend to have lower levels of education, come from lower social classes (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006), are often unemployed (Lubbers *et al.*, 2003), and are distrusting of the establishment (Berning and Ziller, 2017). The spreading of populism and anti-establishment rhetoric is more likely to happen in these communities.

This links to a particular dynamic on the supply side. On the one hand, there is an unresponsive government led by mainstream parties that are unable to address the electoral dissatisfaction (O’Grady and Abou-Chadi, 2019; Abou-Chadi and Krause, 2020). On the other, on the supply side, an opportunistic challenger party uses the emergence of a group with similar grievances and rhetorical innovation (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020) to gain electoral support. In particular, we study a party from the “populist radical right wave” (*ibid.*, 29) of challenger parties that combine populism with a right-wing ideology and nativist elements.

Political parties pursue multiple strategies to gain votes, including online, TV, mail, or newspaper campaigns or door-to-door canvassing. We focus on an understudied strategy of targeting civic associations (see also Greskovits, 2020). Given the ostracism that many populist radical right parties experience, being accused of aggressive, offensive, and anxiety-fueled rhetoric, they may resort to more *covert* ways of contact with the community. This also aligns with the idea that challenger parties choose unconventional strategies and channels to spread their message (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). While the status as a challenger party is the reason for adopting an infiltration strategy, the message spread through civil society networks is inherently populist and anti-elitist. In practice, infiltration can vary: contacts with clubs and associations can be initiated, or existing membership positions can be exploited by party members or supporters without party membership.

### 2.2. Types of associations and spreading of non-compliance

We contend that both the supply of populist ideas and the nature of targeted associations are crucial for understanding compliance with government measures. When parties with anti-establishment messages target civic associations, their networks become conduits for spreading these views. Many associations serve as meaningful social networks built on longstanding

relationships and mutual trust. Within closely connected networks, the high reputational costs of transgression limit opportunistic behavior, fostering greater trust and facilitating the transmission of ideas with minimal scrutiny.

However, not all clubs are equal. Putnam (2000) famously distinguished between “bridging” and “bonding” social networks. Bridging networks bring together individuals from diverse backgrounds, while bonding networks reinforce existing social divisions. For example, a handball club represents a bridging association with few social or financial barriers to entry, whereas women’s shelter associations and elitist male student fraternities exemplify bonding clubs with distinct social structures.

The fact that bridging associations bring together extensive local population makes them even more conducive to spreading norms. Because political views are not salient in bridging clubs, anti-elitist attitudes may be applied covertly without discussion. Instead, bonding clubs with a more homogeneous membership should reinforce members’ existing attitudes, either in line with mainstream or populist parties, as opposed to the spreading of new ideas. Ultimately, the answer to which type of associations will spread populist views will depend on whether specific associations are directly targeted by populist parties or instead aligned with other non-populist political forces.

In a political context with populist supply, (bridging) associations can accelerate the spread of anti-establishment views. Through infiltration, populist parties can covertly shift boundaries toward anti-establishment attitudes, entrenching resentment of the government, mainstream parties, intellectual elites, and the privileged rich (Mudde, 2007; Inglehart and Norris, 2016).

Previous studies have confirmed the relationship between populism and distrust in scientific elites in the case of climate change denial (Huber *et al.*, 2021) and anti-vaccination movements (Kennedy, 2019). Such distrust can also result in sub-optimal outcomes in emergencies like Covid-19 (Lasco and Curato, 2019; Ansell *et al.*, 2021). Our study focuses on compliance with Covid-19 lockdowns. We argue that mobility during lockdown is a potent behavioral indicator of the spread of anti-establishment attitudes (for individual-level correlates of compliance behavior see Mahdavian *et al.*, 2022). If people are willing to break lockdown policies at the cost of risking their health, this is a much stronger indicator of anti-establishment attitudes than a survey response.

Taken together, in a political context with populist supply, we expect to see: (1) less compliance in places with more (bridging) clubs. If our proposed mechanism works, we should also find (2) evidence of strategic targeting of (bridging) clubs by radical populist forces and (3) a clear relationship between (bridging) associations and votes for populist parties.

### 3. The German case

In Germany, *Vereine* (associations or clubs) are part of national culture (Berman, 1997; Franzen and Botzen, 2011). In the Weimar Republic (1919–1933) and still today, there is talk of *Vereinsmeierei* (translated as associational fetishism) and a common joke that whenever three or more Germans gather, they will create by-laws and form an association (Berman, 1997). Revealingly, Max (Weber, 1924, p. 442) characterized modern man, particularly in Germany, as a *Vereinsmensch* (associational man).

#### 3.1. The political context

In the years leading up to the 2020 Covid pandemic, the German context was conducive to the development of anti-establishment sentiments. Societal divisions and government dissatisfaction heightened following the financial crisis of 2008, the European debt crisis of the 2010s, and the migration crisis in 2015–2016. These events bred resentment toward elites, particularly the CDU and SPD. Consequently, segments of German society became more open to messages from parties that echoed their concerns. However, the government and major parties failed to address

these grievances adequately. The CDU's leftward shift before 2017 and Angela Merkel's policies left some former CDU (and SPD) voters feeling neglected.

The *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) is one of the "populist radical right wave" challenger parties emerging in Europe (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020, p. 29–33). It was founded in 2013 as an explicit "alternative" to mainstream parties and has since moved to the right. The party increased the supply of anti-establishment rhetoric and aimed to normalize their views further and attract more voters.

### **3.2. Mobility restrictions and compliance as civic behavior**

Germany in 2020 is a relevant setting for studying civic behavior. Despite uniform social-distancing measures throughout the country, compliance varied. After the first domestic case of SARS-CoV-2 on January 27, 2020 and the accelerating spread of the virus, politicians reacted to reduce infections. Despite Germany's federal system, the national and sub-national state (*Länder*) governments jointly imposed a "lockdown" on March 16, 2020. This included limits on gatherings in private and public spaces and closures of schools, workplaces, restaurants, etc.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the government explicitly asked citizens to limit their mobility, emphasizing that the common good depended on individuals' collaboration. In a televised statement on March 18, 2020, Chancellor Merkel said:

Those who avoid non-essential encounters will help all those who have to confront more cases daily in the hospitals. [...] We are a democracy. We do not live on coercion but on shared knowledge and participation. This is a historic task, and it can only be overcome together. (Handelsblatt, 2020)

Lockdown measures were uniformly implemented across Germany, leading to a consistent decrease in mobility after week 11 (see Appendix section 7). These restrictions eased gradually between late April and early May 2020, with the government continuing to advise against unnecessary travel throughout the year. As infection rates rose in the fall, national and regional governments reintroduced restrictions. On November 2nd, a "lockdown light" was imposed, requiring the closure of non-essential shops, restaurants, and cultural venues, along with a call for reduced social interactions. A second, stricter lockdown was enforced on December 16th, imposing tighter limits on private gatherings and urging citizens to stay at home. Mobility restrictions and mask-wearing faced increasing criticism. Initially, AfD politicians advocated for stricter measures until April 2020, before later condemning containment policies. Nonetheless, our research indicates an immediate and sustained decline in compliance from March onward, consistent with our argument that anti-government attitudes predated the pandemic.

## **4. DiD analysis**

### **4.1. Measuring associations and compliance**

We begin our analysis by examining the relationship between compliance and different types of associations. We focus on 2020, the first year of the pandemic. To measure compliance with lockdown policies, we rely on mobility data that the German Federal Statistical Office provides based on mobile phone data (see Table 2 in the Appendix). The data capture daily mobility changes compared to the 2019 baseline and measure all entries to and mobility within a jurisdiction. We aggregate the data as weekly means. The mobility data are available at the level of administrative counties (*Kreise*). The complete sample of 401 jurisdictions comprises rural counties (*Landkreise*) and urban counties (*Kreisfreie Städte*). Table 2 in the Appendix shows details on all data sources.

<sup>1</sup>For a chronology of policies, see Imöhl and Ivanov (2021).

To explore the impact of associations, we utilized data on modern clubs and their density per 1000 inhabitants at the county level from 2008 (Franzen and Botzen, 2011). This dataset encompasses all registered non-profit associations in 2008, totaling 553,394 associations across various categories such as nature/environment, culture, social welfare, sports, and more (Franzen and Botzen, 2011). Although detailed membership data are unavailable, association density serves as a reliable proxy for membership (Satyanath *et al.*, 2017: 491). We assume these data accurately reflect active club membership leading up to 2020, with club numbers remaining relatively stable over time.

Indeed, stability is evident in the number of sports clubs and members between 2005 and 2017, with minimal fluctuations (Breuer *et al.*, 2020: 19). Overall association numbers saw slight changes from 2009 to 2019 (Schubert *et al.*, 2022: 3), which we interpret as negligible. We address concerns regarding club stability and potential bias in our analysis in more detail in the Appendix. While stable club and membership figures do not guarantee unchanged active membership since 2008, there is no systematic evidence suggesting otherwise.

We use principal component analysis to create additive indices to increase conceptual clarity. In section 3.2 of the Appendix, we show the presence of three latent variables corresponding to (1) sport, nature, and culture clubs; (2) social/welfare, political/economic, and special interests clubs; and (3) other free-time (leisure) clubs. This confirms the categorization of clubs in earlier studies on Germany (Franzen and Botzen, 2011; Satyanath *et al.*, 2017).

While bonding and bridging may not be perfectly distinguishable theoretically, on an empirical level the latent variables point in the direction of the classification proposed by Putnam (2000). The first latent variable corresponding to sport, nature, and culture clubs broadly reflects bridging associations. The second latent variable describing social/welfare, political/economic, and interest clubs reflects bonding associations with a distinct socio-political identity. Finally, free-time clubs are their independent latent category. Free-time clubs include organized leisure activities unrelated to another category, such as model railroad, card games, or rabbit breeding. As a robustness check, we rerun the analysis with culture clubs included in the bonding rather than the bridging category in Table A.7: results are highly similar.

#### 4.2. Estimation strategy

To investigate the relationship between bonding and bridging associations and social-distancing behavior, we employ a DiD strategy. We classify counties along the mean density of civic associations as high density and low density (see robustness checks—section 4.5 where we also use a continuous measure for density). We use this classification for three groups of associations: all associations, bridging, and bonding. In the first specification, we pool the weekly observations and compare mobility patterns (a) before and after lockdown and (b) in counties above and below the mean density of clubs. The DiD baseline equation of interest is:

$$\Delta Mobility_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Networks_i \times Lockdown_t + \beta_2 Lockdown_t + \beta_3 Networks_i + \mathbf{X}'_{i,t} \beta + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \delta_{m,t} + \epsilon_{i,t} \tag{1}$$

where  $i$  defines the county,  $m$  the state (*Land*), and  $t$  the week.  $Mobility_{i,t}$  is the dependent variable and evaluates mobility changes in 2020 compared to the previous year.  $Networks$  takes the value of one if the county's association density is above the mean and zero otherwise.  $Networks_i \times Lockdown_t$  is an indicator variable for the interaction between association density,  $Networks$ , and an indicator variable  $Lockdown$  for the period starting in week 11. Recommended mobility restrictions started in mid-March and continued throughout the year, so for all weeks after week 11, we coded the dummy  $Lockdown_t$  as 1. The specification includes county-fixed effects ( $\alpha_i$ ) for time-invariant heterogeneity at the county level, week-fixed effects ( $\gamma_t$ ) for common shocks across counties, and state-week-fixed effects ( $\delta_{m,t}$ ) to capture structural differences in reaction to lockdown across the different states  $m$ .  $\epsilon_{i,t}$  is the error term of the model.

Counties with a high density in associations may differ from those with lower density on various characteristics. One could be the degree of urbanization or the urban/rural divide. We run additional models in which we use the vector  $\mathbf{X}'_{i,t}$  to define a set of control variables that might impact mobility (Barrios *et al.*, 2021). These include turnout as a standard measure for civicness, log total population, GDP per capita, population above the age of 60, gender ratio, percentage of people with a college degree, employment shares in sectors that hardly allow for work-from-home such as hospitality, transport, and manufacturing, a dummy for East Germany, and lagged number of Covid cases, a measure that featured prominently in German media coverage as “case incidence.” For urbanization, we follow Haffert (2021) and include a variety of indices: population density, percentage of people below the age of 35, percentage of students, and university-to-population ratio. To further alleviate the potential confounding effects of urbanization, we split our sample into two, based on (1) the distinction between free cities (“Kreisfreie Stadt” or “Stadtkreis”) and rural counties (“Kreis” or “Landkreis”) and (2) the presence of universities (either above or below the mean university–population ratio). Results are displayed in Table A.6 of the Appendix.

We aim to estimate the coefficient  $\beta_1$  for  $Networks_i \times Lockdown_t$ . This parameter captures different trends in mobility between counties above and below the mean density of associations after the introduction of the lockdown. Lockdown generally decreased mobility across German territory (see Figure 1). Therefore, positive values of the parameter  $\beta_1$  indicate a less severe drop in mobility for counties with denser clubs (all/bridging/bonding) compared with counties where they are relatively scarcer.

In the second specification, we consider an event study. The specification takes the following form:

$$\Delta Mobility_{i,t} = \beta_0 + \sum_{\tau \in (-5,16), \tau \neq -1} \beta_\tau Networks_i \times \text{I}(t + \tau) + \mathbf{X}'_{i,t} \boldsymbol{\beta} + \alpha_i + \gamma_t + \delta_{m,t} + \epsilon_{i,t} \quad (2)$$

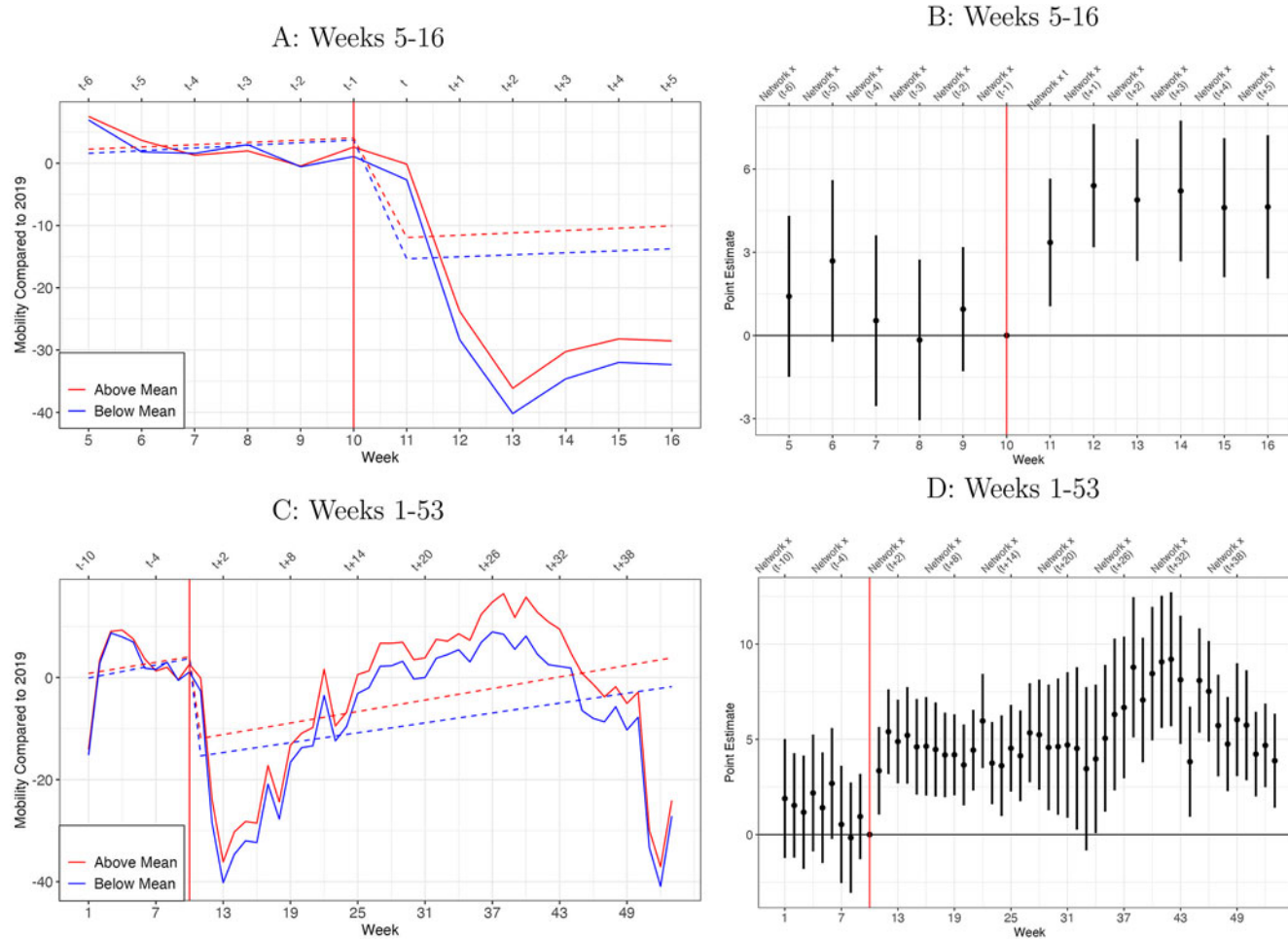
The event study setup is similar to Equation 1. Still, instead of pooling different weeks in a pre-lockdown versus a post-lockdown period, we interact associations (bridging and bonding above-the-mean value) with an indicator variable for each week ( $t + \tau$ ). We label  $t$  the week when lockdown is introduced: week 11. The pre-lockdown period covers the weeks from  $t - 10$  to  $t - 1$ , while the post-lockdown period covers the weeks from  $t$  to  $t + 42$ . As the reference week, we consider the last pre-lockdown week  $t - 1$ , week 10 of 2020.

### 4.3. DiD assumptions

The DiD estimation strategy is based on the parallel trends assumption: the trends in mobility for counties with high and low density of associations must be parallel in the pre-lockdown period. Figure 1 provides a graphical test of this assumption. Panels A and C show the evolution of mobility over time in counties with a higher and lower density of bridging associations. The second test in panels B and D is based on the event study setup. Specifically, we regress mobility at the county level on interactions between *Networks* and indicator variables for each week. The event study specification only includes county-, week-, and state-fixed effects. Panels A and C report results for the weeks 5–16, around the start of the lockdown. One possible concern is that this pre-lockdown period may not be able to capture secular trends. In panels C and D of Figure 1, we replicate the same analysis focusing on the broader pre-lockdown period starting in week 1 of 2020.

The graphical analysis in Figure 1 suggests that the parallel trends assumption holds in our setting. In panel A, the dotted lines for the linear interpolation in the pre- and post-lockdown periods indicate that the trends for counties above and below the mean bridging clubs are parallel and increasing before the crisis. The event study setup in panel B corroborates the presence of parallel trends.





**Figure 1.** DiD and event study for bridging associations: (A) weeks 5–16, (B) weeks 5–16, (C) weeks 1–53, and (D) weeks 1–53.

Concerning the last pre-lockdown week (week 10,  $t - 1$ ), almost all pre-lockdown coefficients are statistically insignificant and close to 0. The only exception is week 6. These patterns also hold when including trends for additional individual control variables and all control variables simultaneously, as indicated in Figure A.10 of the Appendix.

Panels C and D also confirm the existence of parallel trends when going back to the first week of 2020. We also include a variety of controls in our main specifications as indicated in Table A.4 and interactions between these controls and the time units as in Figure A.10 in the Appendix.

#### 4.4. Results

Figure 1 documents the mobility trends in the pre- and post-lockdown periods. The divergence at the beginning of the lockdown indicates a less severe reduction in mobility in counties with denser bridging associations.

Table 1 reports the DiD estimates of Equation 1 in an abridged format. We estimate two different specifications for each of the three types of associations (all, bridging, bonding). Specifications in columns 1, 3, and 5 of Table 1 include county-fixed effects to capture the time-invariant characteristics of the counties. County-fixed effects are replaced by control variables in columns 2, 4, and 6. We present two types of standard errors: standard errors clustered at the county level and Conley spatial heteroscedasticity and autocorrelation consistent (HAC) standard errors (Conley, 1999) to consider both spatial correlations of association density. We set the spatial lag to the distance that minimizes the Moran  $I$  statistics (indicated in the table footnotes). The correlogram in Figure A.12 in the Appendix suggests the appropriate distance band for the spatial lag. We also address the potential for temporal autocorrelation within counties. We include a temporal lag of 10 weeks after investigating Akaike information criterion (AIC) values for mobility and selecting the lag that minimizes AIC.

Estimates in columns 1 and 2 of Table 1 show that counties with an above-the-mean density of all civic associations seem related to more mobility during the lockdown. Still, the interaction term is only mildly significant. A clearer picture emerges from the disaggregated association types. After the introduction of lockdown measures, mobility dropped less in places with a high concentration of bridging clubs (columns 3 and 4) and more in places with denser bonding clubs (columns 5 and 6). The effects do not change substantially once we remove county-fixed effects and include control variables (columns 4 and 6). The full results with all controls are included in the Appendix in the extended Table A.4. We cannot compute Conley standard errors, when we include both university-to-population and parks-to-population ratios, due to the high level of multicollinearity introduced. Thus, we also include all the variables in Table A.5, which does not contain Conley standard errors.

The estimates for bridging associations are similar in size in columns 3 and 4 and statistically significant. In counties with a below-average density of bridging associations, mobility dropped by 10.4 percentage points compared to pre-lockdown. Still, it dropped only by 6.5 percentage points in counties with dense bridging associations. Finally, results of the event study for bridging associations in panels B and D of Figure 1 provide a similar picture: the difference in mobility remains statistically significant throughout the year. We present similar graphs in Figures A.7 and A.8 of the Appendix showing the effect of bonding clubs and all types of clubs. While counties with more bonding clubs are mildly associated with more substantial decreases in mobility, there is no statistically significant effect when investigating all types of clubs together.

#### 4.5. Robustness and alternative explanations

Our results are robust to sample selection: excluding East Germany or the areas in the north bordering the sea (the results might be driven by changed vacation behavior). The results are presented in Figure A.9 of the Appendix. The conclusions hold when controlling for additional interactions between independent variables and weeks (see section 4.4 of the Appendix) to

**Table 1.** DiD estimates

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Post week 11 × all networks	2.035 (1.231) [0.979]*	0.671 (1.49) [1.22]				
Post week 11 × bridging			5.748 (1.544)*** [1.426]***	5.24 (2.001)** [1.67]**		
Post week 11 × bonding					-2.358 (1.185)* [0.896]**	-3.796 (1.355)** [1.073]***
Mean mobility	-5.362	-7.207	-5.362	-7.207	-5.362	-7.207
SD mobility	18.402	17.175	18.402	17.175	18.402	17.175
No. of cross-sections	389	211	389	211	389	211
No. of time units	53	53	53	53	53	53
County FE	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Week FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Week × Land FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Adj. $R^2$	0.84	0.787	0.842	0.788	0.84	0.789
Observations	20,617	11,183	20,617	11,183	20,617	11,183

Note: This table shows the effect of networks on mobility in the post-lockdown period. The standard errors are clustered at a county level in round brackets and adjusted for spatial (all networks – 455 km; bridging – 538 km; bonding – 455 km) and serial (10 weeks) correlation in the square brackets. Significant at \*10%, \*\*5%, and \*\*\*1%.

deal with possible trends in other relevant factors. Finally, the results are not sensitive to the classification of bridging club density; in Table A.11 in the Appendix, we also use mean, median, upper quartile, and continuous measures of associational density.

We also examined whether the results are driven by more people needing to go to work during the lockdown in regions with denser bridging clubs. As already indicated, in Table 1 and Table A.4 in the Appendix, we control for the employment share in services (hospitality and transport), and manufacturing. We also control for local GDP per capita and the percentage of people with a college degree. Neither the occupation variables nor local income is statistically significant, while counties with more college-educated people experienced significantly more mobility reduction.

The results in section 4.7 of the Appendix indicate that higher mobility during the lockdown in areas with denser bridging associations is spread across various places and activities: retail and recreation, transit, and workplaces. Reassuringly, people in areas with denser bridging clubs are less likely to stay home, as indicated by their lower mobility in residential areas. No significant differences exist in mobility to pharmacies and grocery stores (basic necessities) or parks. The null result for parks renders little plausibility to the mechanical effect of bridging clubs; the mobility patterns are not driven by sports club members simply practicing sports in parks.

### 5. The infiltration mechanism

The results of the DiD analysis confirm a systematic negative relationship between bridging associations and compliance. In this section, we elucidate the mechanism. We argue that one explanation is the systematic *targeting and infiltration* of these associations by populist radical right parties. While a burgeoning literature confirms partisanship as the single most consistent factor explaining differences in individuals’ health behaviors during Covid (Mariani *et al.*, 2020; Painter and Qiu, 2020; Ansell *et al.*, 2021; Barrios *et al.*, 2021), we contend that associations can accelerate the spread of anti-establishment views and norms of non-compliance. To demonstrate this causal mechanism, we present: (1) qualitative evidence from document analysis and interviews about the

intentional infiltration of such associations by the radical right, (2) survey data on the spread of anti-compliance views among club members, and (3) quantitative evidence on the relationship between bridging associations and increases in AfD votes between 2013 and 2017.

### 5.1. Qualitative accounts of infiltration and spreading

After its foundation in 2013, the AfD quickly acknowledged the strategic value of civil organizations for expanding its vote share. According to a leaked strategy paper by the federal board of the AfD, cited in the German press (Rosbach, 2020), AfD must improve connection between the party and “interest groups, *citizens associations*, and medium-sized companies” (emphasis added) to “anchor the AfD in the middle of society” (Alternative für Deutschland, 2016: 15). They should keep track of “which members of the AfD work in societies and associations voluntarily. On this basis, a strategy will be developed” (p. 16). Infiltration of associations and clubs should be seen as an “opportunity for the AfD [...] to approach their target groups like a ‘fish in water.’” AfD members “must also be encouraged to participate in clubs or to use their club membership *discreetly but consciously* for the AfD” (emphasis added) (p. 16). The AfD working “discreetly” and “like a fish in water” suggests that they focus on spreading populist views compatible with the demand side and in a covert way in line with their challenger status.

Besides evidence of infiltration on the supply side (AfD), there are further indications of infiltration from the clubs and associations themselves. Many sports and nature clubs and their umbrella organizations throughout Germany have recognized the problem and developed various forms of training, information, and legal advice against radicalization. A brochure from a regional organization for sports clubs draws attention to infiltration:

Right-wing extremists [...] participate as coaches, referees, and board members to gain societal acceptance, become active as sponsors, [...] participate in the everyday sports life of clubs, and use sport as a stage for their inhumane ideology. (State Sports Association of Thuringia, 2015)

To further understand infiltration strategies and their success, we conducted semi-structured interviews with eight representatives of umbrella or peak associations of nature and sports clubs from across Germany. Section 5 of the Appendix details the interview methodology and relevant quotes supporting the proposed mechanisms: infiltration and spreading. While we expect representatives of umbrella organizations to be more open to interviews than representatives of single (infiltrated) clubs, we acknowledge that our interview material is limited insofar as it does not identify a specific case or club where infiltration occurred.

Overall, the interviewees acknowledged the presence of populist attitudes and anti-democratic influences in their associations. They come out in the form of racist comments during sports matches or outdoor excursions (racist language is marked as anti-establishment in the German discourse) or in the form of association members promoting extremist or populist views. For instance, one interviewee recalled the case of a youth coach who tried to “spread his ideology regarding ‘no masks and vaccines’ and conspiracy theories” in the sports club’s chat group (Representative of *Netzwerk Sport & Politik*). The interviews reveal that these influences are not limited to AfD members but that other, even more extremist far-right parties and organizations also attempt infiltration.

To combat the spread of such attitudes, most associations developed programs to inform instructors in local clubs about the presence of “infiltrators” to train them to react effectively. Despite these efforts, one sports club representative argued that much remains to be done because “for a large part [of the sports clubs], the problem seems peripheral, and they do not see the urgency.” (Representative of *Landessportverband für das Saarland*).

One point to note is that AfD’s strategy has not always stayed the same. In fact, it changed significantly between 2013 and 2017. Pytlas and Biehler (2023) discuss how intra-party

competition influenced nativist party radicalization. The extremist grouping *Der Flügel* gained momentum within AfD by portraying itself as “the true party within the party,” moving the AfD further to the right (Pytlas and Biehler, 2023: 6) and permeating mainstream discourse.

Irrespective of the dominating faction with the AfD, the AfD’s declared strategy of targeting such associations is unsurprising. The personal and informal relations cultivated in bridging clubs facilitate the spread of norms and attitudes. German sports clubs are an excellent example of horizontally organized clubs that stress equality and community (Putnam, 2000); they actively nurture bonds among their members. According to a report for the National Sports Association (Breuer *et al.*, 2020), German sports clubs “attach importance to community” (p. 25) and “offer an important space for social exchange” (p. 9), with 93 percent of clubs organizing celebrations and social events.

We argue that these continuous interactions, based on a shared sense of belonging, foster the spread of attitudes and ideology. Although interviewees highlighted that club members are “a mirror of society” and that sports club members may have more right-wing or populist attitudes *ex-ante*, they also described club structures conducive to spreading such views. One interviewee compared the social interactions in clubs to a family celebration where an aunt’s racist comments are met with silence: he argued that many sports club members have known and respected each other for decades and, therefore, avoid discussing controversial topics. The interviewee acknowledged the “danger” that “[extremist] attitudes can gain ground within the club” if no action is taken (Representative of *Landessportbund Niedersachsen*).

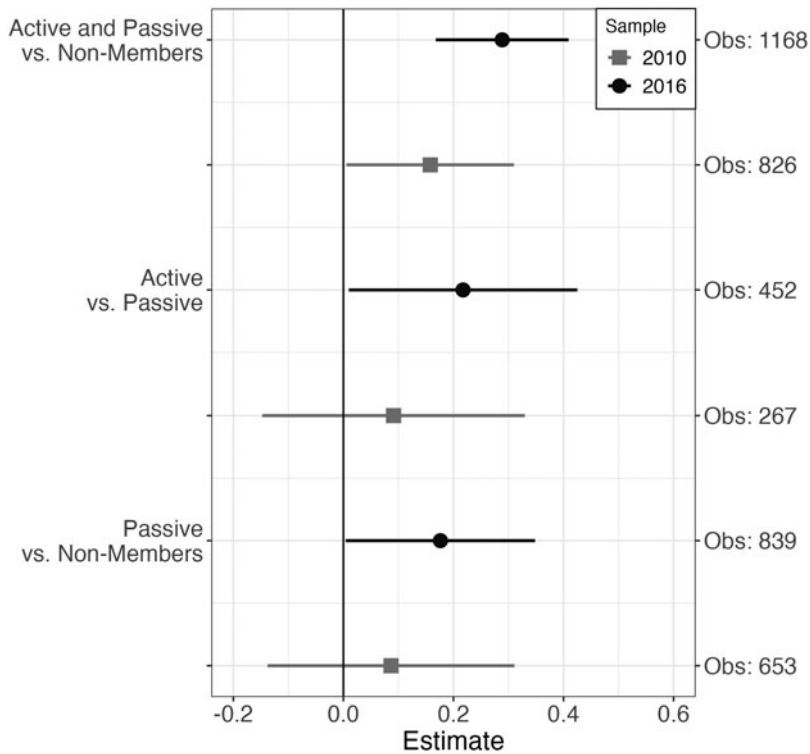
A structural factor that hampers clubs’ decisive action is a legal requirement for clubs to remain neutral politically to keep their non-profit status and related tax benefits (see the brochure by the State Sports Association of Thuringia, 2015). Although this clause does not exclude action against radical behavior, it is often misread. Several interviewees referred to this “misinterpreted neutrality” as potentially conducive to the spread of anti-establishment views. The apolitical appearance of bridging clubs and their focus on the community can prevent dissent with in-group opinion leaders and spread anti-establishment views. As a result of infiltration and spreading, populist and radical right attitudes permeate sports, hunting, nature, and other (bridging) clubs (Rosbach, 2020).

### 5.2. Individual-level evidence on the spread of attitudes

To bolster our proposed mechanism and distinguish between socialization within clubs and self-selection, we investigate norms regarding non-compliance at the individual level. We utilize nationally representative data from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development’s Life in Transition Survey. Respondents are categorized as active or passive members of a sport club or non-members. Active members engage in club activities, while passive members are nominal members. To gauge non-compliance with government regulations, we employ a scale where respondents rate their agreement with the statement “People should obey the law without exception” from 1 to 10.

While club members may differ from non-members, we assume no significant distinctions between passive and active members apart from exposure to fellow club members. If socialization within clubs is influential, active members, exposed to club dynamics, should exhibit more lenient attitudes toward rule adherence compared to passive members. Conversely, if self-selection prevails, differences between passive members of bridging clubs and non-members should emerge, with passive members showing a higher tendency to disregard rules. To address potential differences in attitudes toward obeying the law, we control for age, income, education, and state-fixed effects. Control variables’ results are omitted to streamline the presentation.

Results in Figure 2 support both hypotheses and add a temporal dimension. While in 2010, few differences existed between sports club members and non-members, disparities became more pronounced in 2016, aligning with our expectations. Sports club members, both active and passive, were notably more inclined to justify breaking the law. Furthermore, the data support



**Figure 2.** Sports club membership and agreement with breaking the law. *Notes:* Standardized effect of sports club membership on agreement with the question that “There are times when people have good reasons to break the law.” Control variables include age, income, education, and state-fixed effects.

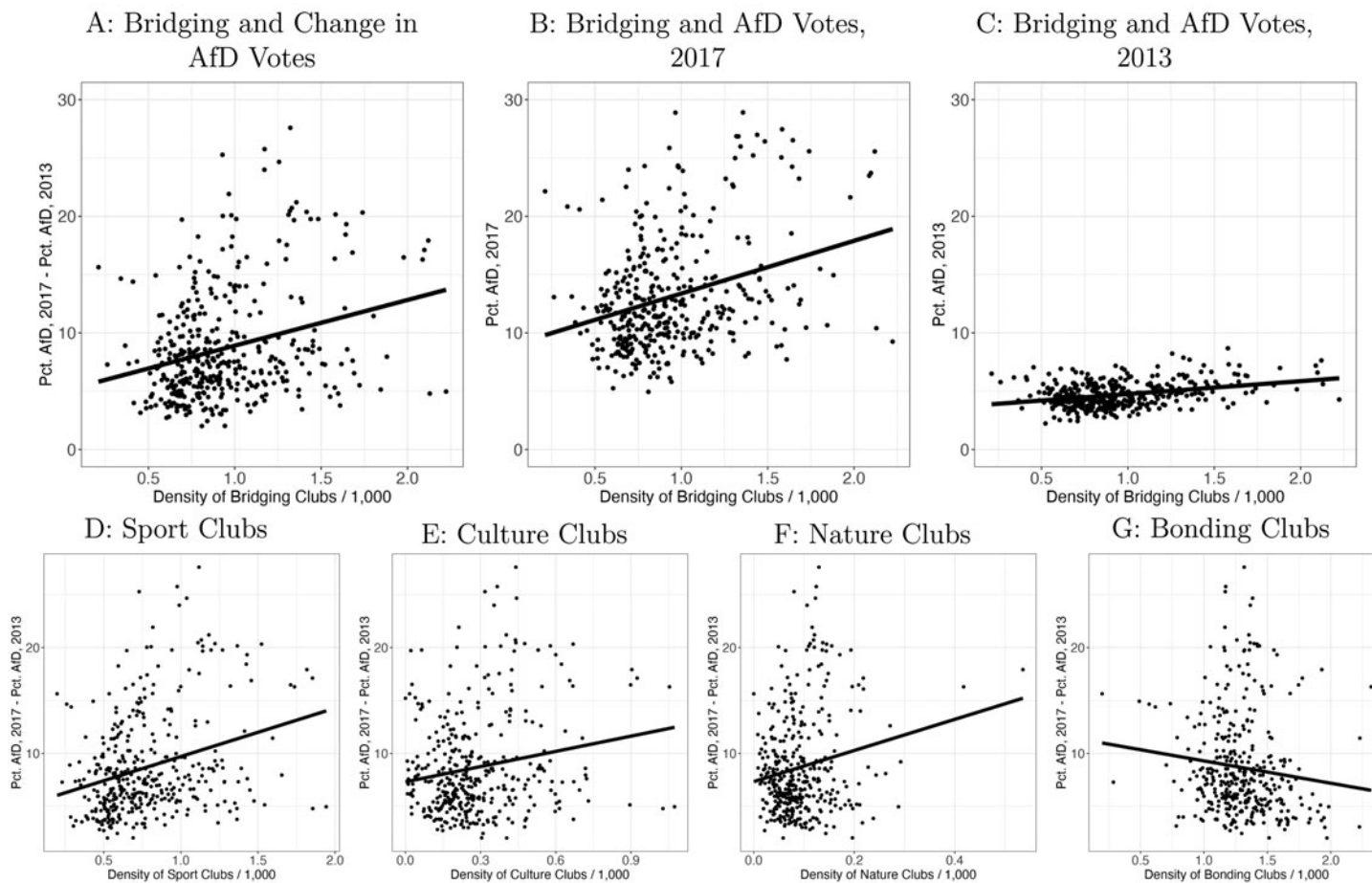
the socialization hypothesis: in 2016, active sports club members were significantly more prone to endorsing law-breaking compared to passive members. This suggests that active participation in club activities may shape attitudes, possibly through exposure to club dynamics. Additionally, some evidence backs the self-selection hypothesis; in 2016, passive members were more inclined than non-members to justify breaking the law.

Overall, the individual-level results support our proposed mechanism’s socialization effect but cannot rule out self-selection. Bridging clubs act as meeting points for people who already question government rules and places where government questioning becomes even more widespread, which is in line with the interview results. The different findings for 2010 and 2016 support our argument that the decisive infiltration and spreading of anti-establishment attitudes occurred between the foundation of the AfD in 2013 and the onset of the Covid pandemic in 2020.

### 5.3. County-level evidence on the spread of political views

We explore another implication of our theory to substantiate the proposed mechanism. Suppose anti-establishment views were diffused through bridging associations. In that case, we should not only see that people in counties with more associations complied less with the lockdown but also that they voted more for the main populist party, AfD. Here, we investigate the relationship between the density of bridging associations and votes for AfD in the national elections of 2013 (right after the AfD was founded) and 2017 and the change between 2013 and 2017 in a bivariate setting.

Panel A in Figure 3 confirms that counties with denser bridging clubs saw sharper rises in AfD vote share. Panels B and C reveal a nearly flat relationship between bridging club density and AfD



**Figure 3.** Associations and AfD infiltration: (A) bridging and change in AfD votes, (B) bridging and AfD votes, 2017, (C) bridging and AfD votes, 2013, (D) sport clubs, (E) culture clubs, (F) nature clubs, and (G) bonding clubs.

vote share in 2013, contrasting with a much steeper correlation in 2017. This suggests a significant diffusion role for bridging clubs preceding the 2017 election, aligning with the AfD's infiltration strategy. However, we acknowledge the possibility of the AfD's increasing radicalization and changes in messaging influencing these trends. Encouragingly, disaggregating different bridging clubs (sport, culture, and nature) in panels D, E, and F shows similar effects on AfD vote increases. In contrast, the negative relationship in panel G implies that bonding clubs may not spread these political views and could even protect communities from them.

We also investigate the change in votes for AfD in the DiD framework. Figure A.14 in the Appendix shows the interaction between AfD (continuous measure) and indicator variables for each week in 2020 over mobility in an event-study format. The positive results suggest that bridging associations and the change in votes for AfD are almost interchangeable, indicating a close link between bridging clubs, change in AfD votes, and compliance.

To further illustrate the relative importance of the change in votes for AfD for non-compliance with lockdown, we perform a mediation analysis, following the procedure proposed by Tingley *et al.* (2014). The results presented in section 6 of the Appendix indicate that between 17 and 25 percent of the total effect of bridging clubs on mobility is mediated by the change in AfD votes.

## 6. Conclusion

This study challenges and extends existing research on social capital, compliance with government rules, and populism. We provide quantitative and qualitative evidence from Germany showing how civic associations can diffuse anti-establishment views. Our findings strongly point to a lower level of compliance in regions with denser bridging associations. When populist radical right parties target specific associations, they can elicit members to vote for them. At the same time, they exploit the clubs' character as social networks to spread anti-establishment views, fostering an environment of generalized distrust toward authorities. In the German case, we find evidence that the populist radical right party AfD and other extremist forces actively infiltrated bridging associations such as sports, nature, and culture clubs. This plausible mechanism connects bridging clubs with higher mobility during lockdown. We are *not* claiming that active infiltration by anti-establishment forces was all-encompassing or the only source of non-compliance, but rather that it helps reconcile the seemingly paradoxical pattern: places with high social capital were less compliant.

Regarding the generalizability of our findings, it is essential to highlight the contextual characteristics of the modern German case. In this case, bonding clubs are mainly associated with mainstream parties and shielded communities against spreading anti-establishment views. Bridging associations, on the other hand, are rarely affiliated with any parties, which left members more receptive to anti-establishment messages. The effects of bridging and bonding associations may differ in other historical contexts. For example, communist regimes in the 20th century usually controlled bridging as well as bonding associations, from labor unions to youth organizations, sports, and culture clubs, as an instrument to control large parts of the population and instill compliance (Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2017). In yet another, more recent context, the Right in Hungary did not so much attempt to infiltrate existing organizations but created its informal associations to gain political and cultural hegemony (Greskovits, 2020).

Our study has critical implications for debates about the role of social capital and democratic behavior. We have provided fine-grained evidence for the network character of civic associations, which fosters the diffusion of attitudes. In particular, we challenge one-sided, optimistic views on civic associations (Putnam *et al.*, 1993; Putnam, 2000) and show how they can play a crucial role in spreading anti-democratic views (Foley and Edwards, 1996; Berman, 1997; Satyanath *et al.*, 2017). We link this "dark side" of social capital to a central feature of the current political context in many countries: growing polarization and the rise of anti-establishment parties. In this regard, we have detected the infiltration strategy on the party-level supply side—one important but



understudied part of populist strategies (De Vries and Hobolt, 2020). Our study suggests that this strategy has not only measurable effects on populist vote shares but much broader detrimental effects, for example, on public health outcomes.

Thus, understanding how populist messages are transmitted through associations and other means is of crucial policy relevance. More research is needed to investigate how clubs can successfully prevent populist infiltration and spreading in their midst.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2024.19>. To obtain replication material for this article, <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/WZMMFJ&version=DRAFT>.

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