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Political Party Affinity and Fear of Conventional and Nuclear War in Germany

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Abstract: Aim: to clarify the association between political party affinity and fear of conventional and nuclear war in Germany. Methods: data were used from a nationally representative online survey (in terms of age bracket, sex and state; n = 3091 individuals; mid-March 2022). Multiple linear regressions were used to investigate the association between political party affinity and fear of conventional and nuclear war in Germany, adjusting for several covariates. Results: while, for example, individuals who had an affinity with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) of Germany reported the highest frequency of severe fear of a conventional war (58.0%), individuals who had an affinity with the Left Party (Die Linken, left-wing) reported a somewhat lower frequency of severe fear (48.2%) and individuals who had an affinity with the Alternative for Germany (AFD, right-wing) reported the lowest frequency (43.7%). Regressions showed that—compared to individuals who had an affinity with the SPD—individuals who had an affinity with the Free Democratic Party (FDP, liberal) and particularly individuals who had an affinity with the Alternative for Germany (AFD) reported a markedly lower fear of war (both fear of a conventional war and fear of a nuclear war). Conclusion: our study showed some interesting associations between political party affinity and fear of war in Germany. This knowledge may assist in characterising individuals at risk for higher levels of fear of war.

Keywords: fear of war; nuclear war; war; political party

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the current humanitarian crisis and military conflict in Eastern Europe (between Ukraine and Russia; for an overview please see [1]), various new challenges have taken place. It appears plausible that particularly individuals living in nearby countries may develop a fear of war. Given Germany's history of war (particularly World War II), German individuals in particular may develop a fear of war. Because fear of war is associated with adverse mental health outcomes [2–5], knowledge about the correlates of fear of war is certainly relevant.

Former studies were mainly performed 30 to 40 years ago (e.g., [2,5,6]) and demonstrated a higher fear of war among women compared to men [6]. However, some recent studies also exist (e.g., [3,7–9]).

As yet, however, studies have not investigated the association between political party affinity and fear of conventional and nuclear war. Thus, our aim was to clarify the association between political party affinity and fear of conventional and nuclear war, based on the general adult population in Germany. This knowledge may help to determine individuals at an increased likelihood of higher fear of war levels. This is important, because fear of war can contribute to worse mental health. Ultimately, this study might help to maintain subjective well-being (e.g., satisfaction with life) in the German society.

Potential reasons for such an association may be that individuals who have an affinity with certain political parties may differ in their risk attitude, general level of aggression,

satisfaction with democracy or level of empathy. More precisely, voters of political parties such as the SPD or FDP differ in terms of social class or occupational group (such as self-employment vs. blue collar worker, for example). Factors such as the decision to enter into entrepreneurship can reflect factors like their risk attitude [10]. It has been shown that such factors are also associated with levels of anxiety.

Moreover, voters of certain political parties can differ in terms of dissatisfaction [11] with democracy and aggressive views [12]. We assume that such factors can contribute to lower levels of fear of war. Additionally, it has been argued that there may be differences in empathy between voters of different parties [13]. Empathy is also positively associated with anxiety symptoms [14,15]. However, overall, we did not have specific hypotheses regarding certain political differences and their associations with fear of war. Thus, it should be noted that our study was exploratory in nature.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Sample

We used cross-sectional data from a nationally representative online survey of individuals aged 18 to 74 years, residing in Germany (n = 3091). This meant that younger (i.e., 17 years or younger) and older adults (i.e., 75 years and over) were excluded. Moreover, individuals not residing in Germany were excluded. The data collection took place between 15 and 21 March 2022. The renowned market research firm Bilendi & Respondi recruited participants from its own online access panel—which was a ISO 26362 certified online sampling provider. Bilendi & Respondi recruited members of this panel by means of campaigns (e.g., cooperation agreements, search engine marketing or online campaigns).

Respondents were drawn from a quota-based online sample, in such a way that their age, gender and state distribution corresponded to the general adult German population [16]. About 11,900 individuals were invited to participate. A potential selection bias could not be calculated, due to the use of an online sample.

All individuals provided informed consent. This study was approved by the Psychological Ethics Committee of the University Medical Center Hamburg–Eppendorf (LPEK-0412).

2.2. Dependent Variables

Fear of conventional war and fear of nuclear war were quantified in line with previous research in this field [6]. Individuals were asked to rate their level of fear on a scale of 0 (not at all worried) to 4 (extremely worried) with only these endpoints being labelled. The two items referred to "my country's involvement in a war" and "the outbreak of nuclear war". Previous research [6] revealed that these two variables are only somewhat correlated (r = 0.28), implying that they are more related to different issues. In our study, however, the correlation between them was more pronounced (r = 0.78). These two variables were trichotomised for descriptive purposes and to ensure readability (0 = no anxiety, 1 to 2 = some anxiety, 3 to 4 = severe anxiety). For the multiple linear regression analyses, on the other hand, continuous outcomes were used.

2.3. Independent Variables

In accordance with other large studies (e.g., the German Socio-Economic Panel), individuals reported their political party affinity ("yes, to ___") to the following parties:

1. Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU)
2. Christian Social Union in Bavaria (CSU)
3. Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD)
4. Free Democratic Party (FDP)
5. Alliance 90/The Greens
6. Left Party
7. Alternative for Germany (AFD)
8. National Democratic Party (NPD) of Germany/Republicans/The Rights
9. Another party (including no affinity with a political party)

Due to the number of cases, we distinguished between: CDU, CSU, SPD, FDP, Alliance 90/The Greens, the Left Party, AFD and others (including the other two options). Ordered from politically "left" to politically "right" [17], the parties were: Left Party (left wing German party), SPD (a center-left party), Alliance 90/The Greens (particularly focusing on environmental issues), the FDP (a center-right party, which has a liberal position), CDU and CSU (CSU in Bavaria as well as CDU in the other 15 states in Germany; a conservative center-right party alliance) and AFD (right-wing populist party, taking a critical position with regard to immigration, the EU and the Euro). An excellent overview has also been provided by Schleunes et al. [18].

As covariates in regression analysis, we included some factors that took into account former studies and theoretical reasoning [6,19]: age, sex (men, women or other), family status (living together in marriage or in partnership, living separated in marriage or in partnership, divorced, single or widowed), at least one child in the same household (no or yes), migration background (no or yes), educational level (in terms of highest school education, the options being upper secondary school, qualification for applied upper secondary school, polytechnic secondary school, intermediate secondary school, lower secondary school, currently in school training/education or without school-leaving qualification) and employment status (full-time employed, retired or other). It should be noted that we dichotomised marital status for reasons of simplicity and readability (0 = living separated in marriage or in partnership, divorced, single or widowed. 1 = living together in marriage or in partnership). Moreover, it should be noted that the question regarding migration background was introduced as follows: "a person has a migration background if he or she or at least one parent not born with German citizenship".

Beyond that, health-related factors were included as covariates in the regression analysis as follows: self-rated health (single item, ranging from 1 = very bad to 5 = very good) and chronic illnesses (single item, distinguishing between absence of chronic illnesses and presence of at least one chronic illness). This simple and self-reported assessment for the presence of at least one chronic illness was in accordance with the German Health Interview and Examination Survey for Adults" (DEGS), which covers the general adult population in Germany [20] and iss conducted by the Robert Koch Institute or the widely acknowledged COVID-19 Snapshot Monitoring (COSMO) [21].

2.4. Statistical Analysis

As a first step, sample characteristics were stratified by political party affinity and prevalence rates for fear of a conventional war and fear of a nuclear war (both trichotomised). Subsequently, multiple linear regressions (using the "regress" command in Stata) were conducted (first case with fear of a conventional war (continuously assessed) as a dependent variable and second case with fear of a nuclear war (continuously assessed) as a dependent variable) in consideration of the scale of measure for our dependent variables. We checked for multicollinearity. However, the variance inflation factors (VIFs) were quite low (the mean VIF was 1.31 and the highest VIF was 1.91 for age), indicating that multicollinearity was not a threat to the study's reliability. We also checked for heteroscedasticity using the Breusch–Pagan test. According to this test (where $Chi^2 = 35.83$, $p < 0.001$ with fear of a conventional war as the outcome measure), the null hypothesis of constant variance should have been rejected. This, in turn, implied the presence of heteroscedasticity in the residuals. Consequently, robust standard errors were calculated (using the "robust" option in Stata). Moreover, we used standardised normal probability plots to check the normality of residuals. The residuals had an approximately normal distribution, following these plots.

The significance level was set at $p < 0.05$. For statistical analyses, Stata 16.1 (Stata Corp., College Station, TX, USA) was used.

3. Results

3.1. Sample Characteristics and Prevalence Rates

In our analytical sample, 49.5% of participants were female and the average age equaled 46.5 years (SD: 15.3 years, the range being 18 to 74 years). Sample characteristics stratified by political party affinity are shown in Table 1. The sample's political party affinities were associated with nearly all variables except for migration background. Using education level as an example, 57.6% of the individuals who had an affinity with Alliance 90/The Greens had completed upper secondary school, whereas 24.1% of the individuals who had an affinity with the AFD had completed upper secondary school). Moreover, while the average age of the individuals who had an affinity with Alliance 90/The Greens was 41.9 years (SD: 15.5 years), it was 50.5 years (SD: 14.8 years) among the individuals who had an affinity with the CSU.

Prevalence rates for fear of a conventional war and fear of a nuclear stratified by political party affinity are shown in Table 2. Individuals who had an affinity with the SPD reported the highest severe fear of a conventional war (58.0%), whereas individuals who had an affinity with the Left Party (left-wing) reported a somewhat lower severe fear of a conventional war (48.2%) and individuals who had an affinity with the Alternative for Germany (right-wing) reported the lowest severe fear of a conventional war (43.7%). A similar picture (with slightly lower prevalence rates) emerged for fear of a nuclear war. There were significant differences in fear of war (both, conventional war and nuclear war, continuously assessed) depending on one's political party affinity. Moreover, there were small differences (in terms of Cohen's d, which was about d = 0.2 in both cases) regarding fear of conventional and fear of nuclear war between individuals who had an affinity with the AFD and individuals who had an affinity with the Left Party.

3.2. Regression Analysis

Results of the multiple linear regressions are depicted in Table 3. R^2 values were as follows: 0.08 with fear of a conventional war as an outcome measure and 0.09 with fear of a nuclear war as an outcome measure. The F-test statistic was 11.5 ($p < 0.001$, with fear of a conventional war as an outcome)—indicating that all the explanatory variables were jointly statistically significant. Analogously, the F-test statistic was 13.5 ($p < 0.001$; with fear of a nuclear war as outcome)—also indicating that all the explanatory variables were jointly statistically significant.

When we only included the covariates in the regression analysis (with fear of a conventional war as an outcome), the adjusted R^2 value was 0.052. The adjusted R^2 value changed to 0.071 when we additionally included political party affinity. Moreover, when we only included the covariates in the regression analysis (with fear of a nuclear war as an outcome), the adjusted R^2 value was 0.067. The adjusted R^2 value changed to 0.081 when we additionally included political party affinity.

The regressions showed that compared to individuals who had an affinity with the SPD, individuals who had an affinity with the FDP (β = −0.24, $p < 0.001$), the Left Party (β = −0.17, $p < 0.05$), the AFD (β = −0.37, $p < 0.001$) and another party (β = −0.45, $p < 0.001$) reported lower levels of fear of a conventional war. Moreover, the regressions showed that compared to individuals who had an affinity with the SPD, individuals who had an affinity with the CSU (β = −0.22, $p < 0.05$), the FDP (β = −0.22, $p < 0.01$), the AFD (β = −0.41, $p < 0.001$) and another party (β = −0.39, $p < 0.001$) reported lower levels of fear of a nuclear war. Moreover, the difference in individuals who had an affinity with the Left Party was marginally significant when fear of a nuclear war served as a dependent variable (β = −0.17, $p = 0.055$). More details are shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Sample characteristics stratified by political party affinity.

	SPD	CDU	CSU	FDP	Alliance 90/The Greens	The Left Party	AFD	Other	*p*-Value
	N = 643	N = 435	N = 159	N = 326	N = 576	N = 247	N = 295	N = 410	
Gender									<0.001
Male	340 (52.9%)	223 (51.3%)	96 (60.4%)	162 (49.7%)	232 (40.3%)	142 (57.5%)	181 (61.4%)	178 (43.4%)	
Female	303 (47.1%)	212 (48.7%)	63 (39.6%)	164 (50.3%)	342 (59.4%)	103 (41.7%)	114 (38.6%)	230 (56.1%)	
Other	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.3%)	2 (0.8%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.5%)	
Age (in years)	49.2 (15.5)	48.0 (15.0)	50.5 (14.8)	43.4 (15.8)	41.9 (15.5)	48.4 (15.1)	47.7 (13.5)	45.7 (14.4)	<0.001
Children in Household									<0.01
No	469 (72.9%)	283 (65.1%)	110 (69.2%)	237 (72.7%)	403 (70.0%)	174 (70.4%)	183 (62.0%)	299 (72.9%)	
Yes	174 (27.1%)	152 (34.9%)	49 (30.8%)	89 (27.3%)	173 (30.0%)	73 (29.6%)	112 (38.0%)	111 (27.1%)	
Marital Status									<0.001
Single/Divorced/Widowed/Living Separated: married or in partnership	261 (40.6%)	145 (33.3%)	53 (33.3%)	121 (37.1%)	266 (46.2%)	118 (47.8%)	111 (37.6%)	191 (46.6%)	
Living together: married or in partnership	382 (59.4%)	290 (66.7%)	106 (66.7%)	205 (62.9%)	310 (53.8%)	129 (52.2%)	184 (62.4%)	219 (53.4%)	
Education									<0.001
Upper Secondary School	232 (36.1%)	158 (36.3%)	61 (38.4%)	158 (48.5%)	332 (57.6%)	100 (40.5%)	71 (24.1%)	122 (29.8%)	
Qualification for Applied Upper Secondary School	68 (10.6%)	59 (13.6%)	18 (11.3%)	44 (13.5%)	65 (11.3%)	26 (10.5%)	26 (8.8%)	50 (12.2%)	
Polytechnic Secondary School	41 (6.4%)	18 (4.1%)	11 (6.9%)	7 (2.1%)	11 (1.9%)	35 (14.2%)	42 (14.2%)	31 (7.6%)	
Intermediate Secondary School	196 (30.5%)	151 (34.7%)	56 (35.2%)	89 (27.3%)	127 (22.0%)	67 (27.1%)	113 (38.3%)	157 (38.3%)	
Lower Secondary School	102 (15.9%)	45 (10.3%)	13 (8.2%)	26 (8.0%)	37 (6.4%)	18 (7.3%)	42 (14.2%)	44 (10.7%)	
Currently in School Training/Education	2 (0.3%)	3 (0.7%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.6%)	4 (0.7%)	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.3%)	3 (0.7%)	
Without School-Leaving Qualification	2 (0.3%)	1 (0.2%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (0.7%)	
Migration Background									0.20
No	568 (88.3%)	375 (86.2%)	148 (93.1%)	290 (89.0%)	493 (85.6%)	221 (89.5%)	263 (89.2%)	363 (88.5%)	
Yes	75 (11.7%)	60 (13.8%)	11 (6.9%)	36 (11.0%)	83 (14.4%)	26 (10.5%)	32 (10.8%)	47 (11.5%)	
Employment Status									<0.001
Full-Time Employed	268 (41.7%)	206 (47.4%)	77 (48.4%)	172 (52.8%)	243 (42.2%)	93 (37.7%)	144 (48.8%)	162 (39.5%)	
Retired	172 (26.7%)	97 (22.3%)	47 (29.6%)	49 (15.0%)	87 (15.1%)	60 (24.3%)	53 (18.0%)	81 (19.8%)	
Other	203 (31.6%)	132 (30.3%)	35 (22.0%)	105 (32.2%)	246 (42.7%)	94 (38.1%)	98 (33.2%)	167 (40.7%)	
Chronic Diseases									<0.001
Absence of chronic diseases	304 (47.3%)	231 (53.1%)	90 (56.6%)	195 (59.8%)	358 (62.2%)	124 (50.2%)	156 (52.9%)	215 (52.4%)	
Presence of at least one chronic disease	339 (52.7%)	204 (46.9%)	69 (43.4%)	131 (40.2%)	218 (37.8%)	123 (49.8%)	139 (47.1%)	195 (47.6%)	
Self-Rated Health (ranging from 1 = very bad to 5 = very good)	3.5 (0.9)	3.6 (0.9)	3.6 (0.9)	3.7 (0.8)	3.7 (0.8)	3.4 (0.9)	3.5 (1.0)	3.5 (0.9)	<0.001

Notes: Oneway ANOVAs or Chi²-tests were conducted, as appropriate (*p*-values). More precisely, the *p*-values for the association between political party affinity and continuous variables (age and self-rated health) were based on Oneway ANOVAs, whereas the p-values for the association between political party affinity and nominal/categorical variables (gender, children, marital status, education, migration background, employment status and chronic diseases) were based on Chi²-tests.

Table 2. Prevalence of fear of conventional war and fear of nuclear war (both trichotomized) stratified by political party affinity.

	SPD	CDU	CSU	FDP	Alliance 90/The Greens	The Left Party	AFD	Other	*p*-Value
	N = 643	N = 435	N = 159	N = 326	N = 576	N = 247	N = 295	N = 410	
Fear of a Conventional War (categories): N (%)									<0.001
No Fear of a Conventional War	22 (3.4%)	11 (2.5%)	7 (4.4%)	19 (5.8%)	14 (2.4%)	13 (5.3%)	38 (12.9%)	41 (10.0%)	
Some Fear of a Conventional War	248 (38.6%)	194 (44.6%)	72 (45.3%)	154 (47.2%)	251 (43.6%)	115 (46.6%)	128 (43.4%)	204 (49.8%)	
Severe Fear of a Conventional War	373 (58.0%)	230 (52.9%)	80 (50.3%)	153 (46.9%)	311 (54.0%)	119 (48.2%)	129 (43.7%)	165 (40.2%)	
Fear of a Nuclear War (categories): N (%)									<0.001
No Fear of a Nuclear War	34 (5.3%)	24 (5.5%)	17 (10.7%)	26 (8.0%)	31 (5.4%)	18 (7.3%)	40 (13.6%)	47 (11.5%)	
Some Fear of a Nuclear War	285 (44.3%)	187 (43.0%)	71 (44.7%)	149 (45.7%)	259 (45.0%)	120 (48.6%)	143 (48.5%)	199 (48.5%)	
Severe Fear of a Nuclear War	324 (50.4%)	224 (51.5%)	71 (44.7%)	151 (46.3%)	286 (49.7%)	109 (44.1%)	112 (38.0%)	164 (40.0%)	

Notes: Chi^2-tests were conducted (*p*-values).

Table 3. Political party affinity and fear of war (both continuously). Results of multiple linear regressions.

Independent Variables	Fear of a Conventional War	Fear of a Nuclear War
Political Party Affinity: -CDU (Ref.: SPD)	−0.06	−0.02
	(0.06)	(0.07)
-CSU	−0.12	−0.22 *
	(0.09)	(0.10)
-FDP	−0.24 ***	−0.22 **
	(0.07)	(0.08)
-Alliance 90/The Greens	−0.03	−0.04
	(0.06)	(0.06)
-Left Party	−0.17 *	−0.17 +
	(0.08)	(0.09)
-AFD	−0.37 ***	−0.41 ***
	(0.09)	(0.09)
-Other	−0.45 ***	−0.39 ***
	(0.07)	(0.07)
Potential Confounders	✓	✓
R^2	0.08	0.09
Observations	3091	3091

Unstandardised beta-coefficients are reported, robust standard errors in parentheses; *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.10$; Potential confounders (✓) include sex, age, family status, having at least one child in own household, having a background involving migration, highest educational level, employment situation, chronic illnesses and self-rated health.

4. Discussion

Based on data from the general adult population, our aim was to explore the association between political party affinity and fear of conventional and nuclear war in Germany. Our key findings were as follows: while, for example, individuals who had an affinity with the SPD reported the highest severe fear of a conventional war, individuals who had an affinity with the AFD reported the lowest severe fear of a conventional war. Regressions showed that—compared to individuals who had an affinity with the SPD—individuals who had an affinity with the FDP and particularly individuals who had an affinity with the AFD reported markedly lower fear of war levels.

Traditionally, individuals who have an affinity with the SPD tend to be blue- or white-collar workers [22]. Such workers are often more risk-averse compared to, for example, self-employed individuals. To expand, voting for the FDP is popular with entrepreneurs and self-employed individuals [22]. Such employment groups are more likely to be risky and self-confident [10] which, in turn, is associated with lower anxiety levels [23]. Such underlying factors may explain the differences in fear of war levels between individuals who had an affinity with the SPD and individuals who had an affinity with the FDP. However, future research is required to test our hypotheses. Another way to explain these differences between individuals who had an affinity with the SPD and individuals who had an affinity with the FDP may be that political party affinity is often associated with personality factors. For example, a recent study showed that individuals who had a voting intention for the FDP had a lower neuroticism score, compared to individuals who had a voting intention for the SPD [17]. Neuroticism refers to the tendency to experience distress [24] and is associated with higher levels of anxiety symptoms [25,26].

By contrast, individuals who had an affinity with the AFD tend to be discontented voters [11]. As stated by Hansen and Olsen [11], they "tend to identify as further right on the political spectrum than voters for almost every other party" (p. 12). Furthermore, they often have higher levels of anti-immigrant attitudes compared to other parties and are less satisfied with democracy (compared to voters of other established parties) [11]. The AFD is often perceived as aggressive in its views [12]. According to Chou et al. [27] "AFD

voters do not shy away from supporting candidates endorsing violence against refugees" (p. 2,235).

It has been suggested that there may be a lack of empathy among voters for the AFD [13]. Empathy refers to one's attempt to understand the subjective experiences of another being. Scoring low in empathy can contribute to lower anxiety scores [14,15]. These factors may explain the comparably low level of fear of war among individuals who had an affinity with the AFD.

It should be noted that in various countries, a sizable proportion of the electorate is not informed about happenings in the world (this s particularly the case for individuals who do not use the internet or read newspapers). Factors such as accumulation of virtual communications (e.g., forums) may promote a fear of war. Similarly, it has been shown that social media can contribute to a fear of pandemics [28]. Thus, future research could clarify whether reading comments or articles on the internet is associated with a fear of war.

We would like to highlight some strengths and limitations of our study. This was the first study to examine the association between political party affinity and fear of war. We used data from a large, representative sample (in terms of state, age group and sex) of the adult German population. Upcoming research, nevertheless, is still required, particularly regarding individuals aged 75 years and over. Additionally, while we showed the association between our key variables, more in depth research is still required (i.e., research that takes into account the intensity of one's party affinity). Moreover, longitudinal studies are required in this area to clarify directionality (since fear of war may also contribute to political party affinity). Furthermore, an online survey was performed and the possibility of an online bias cannot be dismissed. While the educational level of our sample was mostly in accordance with findings from the general adult population (taken from micro-censuses) [29], it should be noted that individuals with a poor school education were underrepresented in our study. Additionally, the proportion of individuals with at least one chronic condition was higher in our study (about 46%) compared to the nationally representative DEGS study (33%). Upcoming research can further explore details such like differences and associations in terms of associations between the influence of factors such like first- and second-generation migration.

In conclusion, our study showed some interesting associations between political party affinity and fear of war in Germany. This knowledge may assist in characterising individuals at risk for higher levels of fear of war.

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