SSOAR

Open Access Repository
www.ssoar.info

Who were the voters behind the Schulz effect? An analysis of voter trajectories in the run-up to the 2017 German federal election

Wuttke, Alexander; Schoen, Harald

Preprint / Preprint

Sammelwerksbeitrag / collection article

gesis
Leibniz-Institut
für Sozialwissenschaften

Mitglied der

Leibniz-Gemeinschaft

Who were the voters behind the Schulz effect? An analysis of voter trajectories in the run-up to the 2017 German federal election

Alexander Wuttke and Harald Schoen

Abstract

In early 2017, after the nomination of Martin Schulz as candidate for chancellor, the SPD experienced a rapid surge in public support as measured in public opinion polls. Yet, the upward trend proved short-lived and the SPD ended up with the worst election result since 1949. Using data from a multi-wave panel survey, this analysis examines the voting trajectories of eight thousand German citizens over the course of one year in order to investigate the processes underlying the so called 'Schulz effect'. The voter trajectories show that the surge and decline of public support for the SPD was accompanied by some reshuffling in the composition of its electorate. Moreover, different explanations of the party's swaying in the polls are tested, showing that the SPD achieved the activation of dormant party identifiers but attracted and then lost other voters with diverse characteristics and policy preferences.

Key words

Bundestagswahl; Wählerwanderung; voting behavior; federal elections; German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES); vote switching; campaign effects

1. Introduction[1]

Among other features of the 2017 election the so-called "Schulz effect" deserves scholarly attention. Early in 2017, quite surprisingly, SPD chairman Gabriel announced that Martin Schulz would become the party's chancellor candidate (for an account of the flow of the events see Feldenkirchen 2018; SPD 2018). In the wake of this announcement, Mr. Schulz gained tremendously in popularity as did the SPD. The Social Democrats unanimously made Mr. Schulz their new chairman and attempted to keep the momentum ("Schulz-Zug" ["Schulz train"]) as long as possible. Yet, the SPD's surge in public support proved not durable. Rather, the SPD support declined again and the Social Democrats ended up with the worst result in federal elections since the founding of the Federal Republic.

From a public opinion perspective, this process squares nicely with the notion of a volatile electorate (e.g., Weßels et al. 2014). Taking a closer look, it raises questions about the underlying dynamics, however. Contemporaneous accounts and prior research on the dynamics of public opinion suggest different explanations. We shall focus on four of them. According to the floating voter hypothesis (Daudt 1961), less involved voters are particularly prone to volatility and will switch between parties that manage to get public attention (see also, e.g., Converse 1962; Zaller 1989, 1992). From this perspective, the so-called Schulz effect was a publicity effect that had nothing to do with the candidate's qualities or policies but probably reflected effects of the availability heuristic. In addition, if the SPD had managed to sustain the public attention until September, it would have fared well on Election Day.

The nomination of Mr. Schulz could also be read as the start of a long campaign preceding the 2017 federal election. This signal could have caused an activation effect (e.g., Lazarsfeld et al. 1944: 75f., Finkel/Schrott 1995), leading some SPD supporters back to the fold who before had

---

[1] Appendices (Question wordings, additional information on the analysis) and replication material (Stata syntaxes) can be retrieved from http://osf.io/gdms6. Readers without the necessary software can run and extend the analysis in the browser at https://dx.doi.org/10/cqsg.

switched to a different party, indecision, or abstention. This effect is unlikely to fade away until Election Day. By implication, the decrease in support for the SPD was not caused by the same voters that caused its surge. Instead, partisan independents and supporters of other parties may have left the SPD, probably in response to the unfolding campaigns of competing parties.

Focusing on the substantive implications of Mr. Schulz's nomination, the new candidate may have been perceived as changing key attributes of the SPD – and voters may have responded to these changes by switching their votes to the SPD (see Feldenkirchen 2018). Leaving aside the personality of the candidate, the new leader may have signaled a policy change of the SPD. As a high-profile politician at the EU level, Mr. Schulz may have established a more pro-European stance of the SPD or a stronger focus on this topic. When Mr. Schulz was nominated, the SPD talked much about social justice, thereby signaling a different policy focus – and attracting voters with these policy preferences. Fourth, Mr. Schulz was widely perceived as a newcomer to the national political scene. Aside from a genuine novelty effect, he may thus have succeeded in attracting politically disenchanted voters.

These four accounts suggest that the SPD attracted voters for quite different reasons.[2] Though not completely impossible, combining these different appeals over the course of a campaign is quite difficult. It is thus little wonder that after a few weeks, Mr. Schulz made policy choices. Under his leadership, the SPD did not focus on European integration during the campaign (Schoen 2018). Social justice was more central to the campaign, but the party did not come up with clear policy proposals (Feldenkirchen 2018). Given the policy accounts, staunch supporters of European integration among the new SPD supports may have left the party again. Likewise, Mr. Schulz was no longer an outsider to the national political scene. The SPD may thus have faced difficulties capitalizing on anti-politics feelings in the electorate. Finally, as the

---

[2] These explanations may interact as, e.g., some policy arguments may be of particular importance for highly involved voters or partisan independents.

SPD surge ended and the other parties started their campaigns, the SPD may have run into difficulties capitalizing on popularity effects and keeping adherents of other parties.

Against this backdrop, we aim at shedding light on the dynamics of public opinion that gave rise to the increase in support of the SPD in the wake of Mr. Schulz's nomination and the ensuing decline. The analysis starts by addressing the question from which partisan sources the SPD attracted new supporters and for whom they cast their final vote. We then turn to the question how the four selected accounts perform in explaining the increase and the ensuing decrease in SPD support. We conclude by summing up key findings and discussing implications, limitations, and suggestions for future research.

2. The flow of voters

In our analysis of the anatomy of the so-called Schulz effect, we start by addressing the question from which (partisan) sources the sharp increase in SPD support derived and which voters left the Social Democrats until Election Day. To tackle these questions, we draw on data from the online (campaign) panel survey conducted in the framework of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES). Respondents were drawn from an online-access panel maintained by the service provider Respondi AG, using a quota design (combined marginal distributions of age, sex, and education). The respondents were first interviewed in fall 2016. Six additional interviews took place before the 2017 federal election; another survey wave was carried out immediately after Election Day (Roßteutscher et al. 2018). These data are thus well-suited to analyze the dynamics of attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behavior (as reported by respondents) at the aggregate and the individual level.

For this analysis, we rely on information from three survey waves. The interviews conducted in fall 2016 (October 6th–November 10th, 2016) provide information about attitudes and behavioral intentions well before the nomination of Mr. Schulz. The second survey wave was

carried out from February 16th to March 3rd, 2017 when the surge of public support (as measured in published polls) almost peaked. Finally, we use information from the post-election survey carried out from September 27th 2017 to October 9th 2017. This set-up serves to address our research question concerning the surge of SPD support and its decline until Election Day. At the same, we omit information from four additional pre-election waves conducted from May to September 2017 and thereby we underestimate the intra-individual volatility in attitudes and behavior in the run-up to the 2017 election (see Steinbrecher and Schoen 2013). In the 2016 survey 18,079 persons participated. For 9,658 of these participants we also have information from the surveys carried out in February 2017 and after the 2017 election. This decline in the number of respondents indicates considerable panel attrition and, alongside with the non-probability based selection of respondents and panel conditioning, suggests caution when generalizing findings.

Using data on respondents who participated in the three selected survey waves, in a first step we analyzed the intra-individual trajectories of voting intentions (in the two pre-election surveys) and reported voting behavior (in the post-election survey). Specifically, we focused on those respondents that reported the intention to vote for the Social Democrats in the survey conducted in February 2017. For these voters, we figured out voting intentions in fall 2016, i.e., before the nomination of Mr. Schulz, and voting behavior in the 2017 election, as measured in the post-election survey. Using this information, we distinguish between four trajectories of voting behavior. First, some voters already intended to vote for the Social Democrats in fall 2016 and actually did so in September 2017. The second category contains voters who switched to the SPD after the nomination of Martin Schulz and voted for it in September 2017. As some kind of mirror image, a third category intended to vote for the SPD in fall 2016 and in February 2017 but defected until Election Day. Finally, we consider voters who switched to the SPD from fall 2016 to February 2017 but did not vote for the Social Democrats in September 2017.

Examining these types of voter trajectories toward and away from the Social Democrats, we find that the party's surge and decline in the popular support derived from a more complex pattern than a simple flow-and-ebb model. To begin with, a significant portion (38 percent) of voters who intended to cast a ballot for the SPD in February 2017 had already voiced this intention in fall 2016 and ultimately voted for this party in September 2017. Among voters with changing voting trajectories, a sizable number switched to the Social Democrats after the nomination of Mr. Schulz but defected again until September 2017 (31 percent of all SPD voters in February). At the same time, the SPD attracted new voters in the wake of the nomination of its chancellor candidate. 19 percent of all respondents with SPD vote intention in February 2017 had reported a different voting intention in fall 2016 but ended up voting for the SPD in the federal election. Adding to the complexity of individual-level trajectories, the party also lost a sizable portion of voters who intended to vote for the SPD in fall 2016 and February 2017 until Election Day (13 percent of all SPD voters in February). Altogether, in 2017 the aggregate-level polls displayed an increase and ensuing decrease of SPD party shares which suggests that some voters turned to the SPD and then defected from it. In fact, the individual-level trajectories are more diverse than that. The party retained some of its new supporters but simultaneously lost old and new supporters in the run-up to Election Day.

In an attempt to take a closer look at the dynamics underlying the surge and decline in public support of the SPD, we investigated the individual-level trajectories of respondents who intended to vote for the SPD in February 2017 by their voting intention in fall 2016 and their ultimate electoral decision. In Figure 1, the percentages in brackets on the x-scale report how many voters the SPD won from each party. Not surprisingly, 50 percent who reported an intention to vote for the SPD in February had already intended to vote for this party some months before. Turning to party switchers, a large share of SPD voters came from the Greens (eleven percent) and the Left party (eight percent). Another large source of new voters came to SPD from the pool of voters who previously exhibited no voting intention, i.e., wanted to

abstain or did not know whom to vote for (16 percent). In addition, in early 2017 the SPD attracted some voters from parties which may not be considered usual suspects when it comes to the partisan sources of SPD voters. Five percent of SPD voters in February 2017 previously intended to vote for CDU/CSU, another five for the AfD, and three percent for the FDP. Hence, it is impossible to pinpoint the origins of the SPD's surge in popularity to a specific partisan source or to a specific set of parties. Instead, voters with diverse partisan backgrounds saw reason to switch to the SPD after the nomination of Mr. Schulz.

Figure 1: Voting trajectories from Sep16–Sep17 among SPD voters in Feb 2017
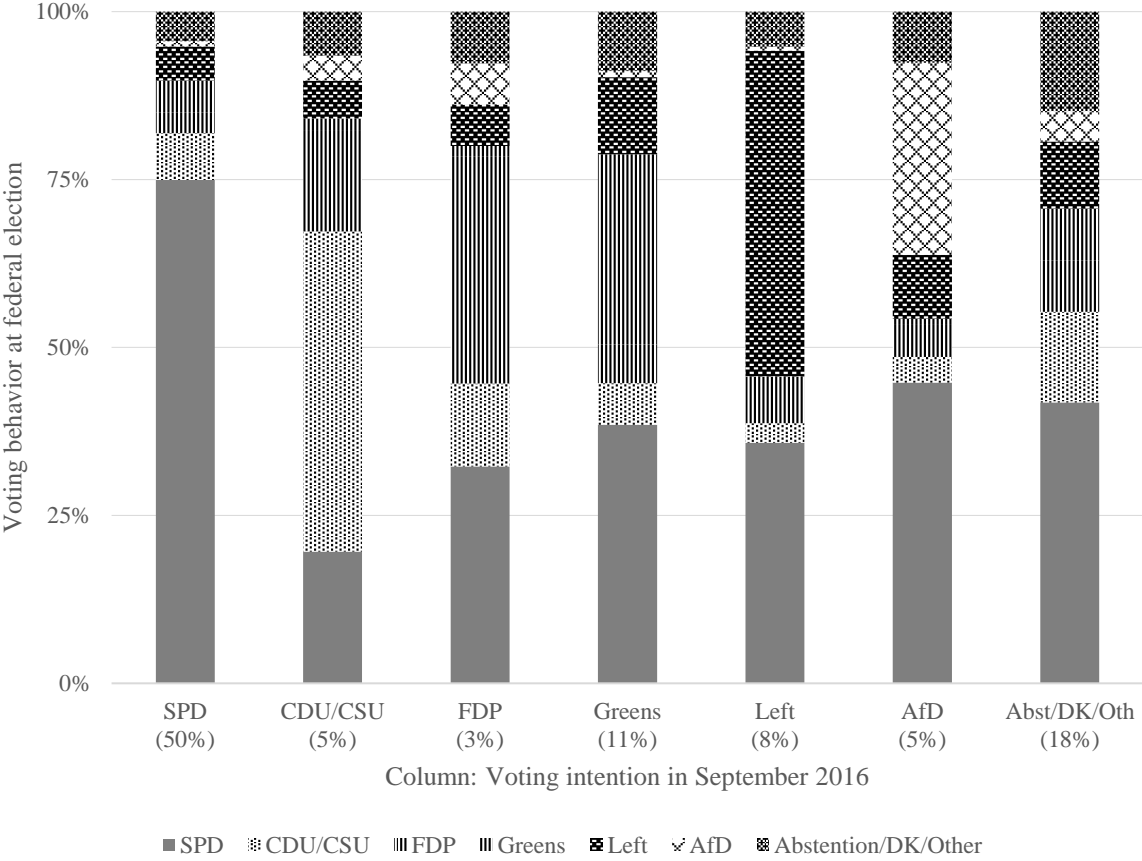
Note: The analysis only includes respondents who intended to vote SPD in February 2017. Columns indicate voting intentions in October 2016. The segments in each column indicate the respective voters' ultimate vote choice in September 2017. The residual category contains voters who intended to abstain, to vote for one of the smaller party, or who did not know whom to vote for. N=2,275.

We now turn to the question of how these voters ended up voting in September 2017. In Figure 1, the segments of each column indicate which parties the respective voters finally cast their ballot for. The first column presents the results for voters who already intended to vote for the SPD in the fall of 2016. It shows that three out of four of these respondents stayed with the

party until Election Day. About seven percent of voters with an SPD voting intention in fall 2016 and early 2017 decided to vote for the CDU/CSU, another five percent for the Greens. This means that there is not a specific party that attracted all SPD defectors in this group.

Turning to those respondents who did not already intend to vote for the SPD in the fall of 2016, the analysis yields two groups of voters which deserve particular attention. First, roughly one in three voters was persuaded to favor the SPD by early 2017 and stayed with the party until Election Day. For a second group of voters, sympathy with the SPD was only a brief interlude. After switching to the SPD in the wake of Mr. Schulz's nomination, these voters returned to their previous vote choices until Election Day. The respondents who intended to vote for the FDP in fall 2016 are a case in point. One out of three previous FDP voters stuck with the SPD, another third returned to the FDP until Election Day, and the remaining third cast a vote for one of the other parties.

In summary, the evidence lends credence to the notion that the aggregate-level increase and decline of popular support of the SPD in 2017 resulted from a complex pattern of individual-level trajectories. In early 2017, the SPD attracted new voters from diverse partisan sources. Some of these voters ended up casting their vote for the SPD, while others returned to their previously preferred party or defected to another one. Likewise, some of the voters who intended to vote for the SPD both in fall 2016 and in early 2017 ended up not casting an SPD vote. The remarkable level of volatility in popular support of the SPD goes hand in hand with considerable partisan heterogeneity of its sources.

3. Exploring determinants of switching to and defecting from the SPD

The heterogeneity of individual-level trajectories that gave rise to the surge and decline in popular support for the SPD fits with the existence of various accounts for the up and down in SPD support. It is tempting to conclude that one account applies to one type of partisan trajectories, while others help to explain other trajectories. Yet, the number of individual-level

patterns does not say anything about the explanatory power of the four models outlined above. In this section we explore the explanatory power of the different accounts presented in the introduction.

We begin by analyzing the question of how the four accounts perform in explaining the vote changes to the SPD from fall 2016 to early 2017. We ran a logistic regression with the dependent variable indicating whether a person switched to the SPD or not. Given the possibility that some accounts may apply to some partisan subgroups but not to others, we include interaction terms that indicate if specific effects are stronger based on the respondent's prior voting intention. To test the floating voter hypothesis, we utilized the self-reported level of political interest as an indicator of involvement. In attempt to explore activation effects, we considered whether a respondent reported identifying with the SPD or not. Turning to the notion that Mr. Schulz's nomination helped the SPD to attract voters with specific policy convictions, we relied on respondents' attitudes toward European integration ('promote European integration' vs. 'European integration has gone too far') and social policy ('lower taxes and fewer welfare state benefits' vs. 'higher taxes and more welfare state benefits'). As the refugee crisis increased the saliency of immigration as an issue, we included attitudes toward immigration policy ('relax immigration restrictions' vs. 'make immigration restrictions tougher') as a control variable in order to avoid biased estimates. Finally, to assess the role of political disenchantment in accounting for the surge in popular support of the SPD, we created a summary index of four indicators measuring disenchantment with the political parties (e.g., 'The parties' only concern is their power').

Each explanatory variable was measured in October 2016, i.e. before the nomination of Mr. Schulz and the ensuing increase in support of the SPD took place. For ease of interpretation, continuous variables were dichotomized at the scale mid-point or the sample average (political disenchantment). Replicating the analyses with continuous variables, however, yields results that do not differ substantially from the ones presented here (see Appendices 2 and 4).

9

Employing this analytical strategy, we compare, e.g., the likelihood of switching to the SPD among politically highly and lowly interested respondents. All independent variables were included in the same model in order to tease out the variables' unique explanatory power while holding all others constant. Question wordings and operationalization details are documented in Supplement 1.

In order to make the results of the analysis easily accessible, Figure 2 reports the main results in graphical form.[3] The markers in the figure reflect the difference in the likelihood of switching to the SPD from fall 2016 to early 2017 between the two groups each independent variable comprises. In order to account for the statistical uncertainty of the results, each marker is enclosed in 95% confidence intervals. In this vein, Figure 2 shows consistent and large effects for party identification in the decision to switch a vote to the SPD. For example, among those voters who had intended to vote for the CDU/CSU in fall 2016, SPD identifiers were by some 24 percent more likely to switch to the SPD than other voters. The influence of party identification applies to all subgroups alike. The fact that party identifiers switched to the party they identify with might seem like a truism, but it is by no means self-evident. Sometimes, voters feel long-standing ties to a party but still decide not to vote for this party for one reason or the other. Regarding the SPD, in fall 2016, four out of ten SPD identifiers did not intend to vote for the SPD. After Schulz was declared the party's candidate, this share fell to 27 percent. The evidence thus appears to lend support to the idea that the nomination of Mr. Schulz helped the SPD to lead some adherents back to the fold.

---

[3] Appendix 2 contains the full regression tables and shows the predicted probabilities of switching to the SPD for each category of the explanatory variables.

Figure 2: Determinants of switching to the SPD in February 2017, by voting intention in fall 2016
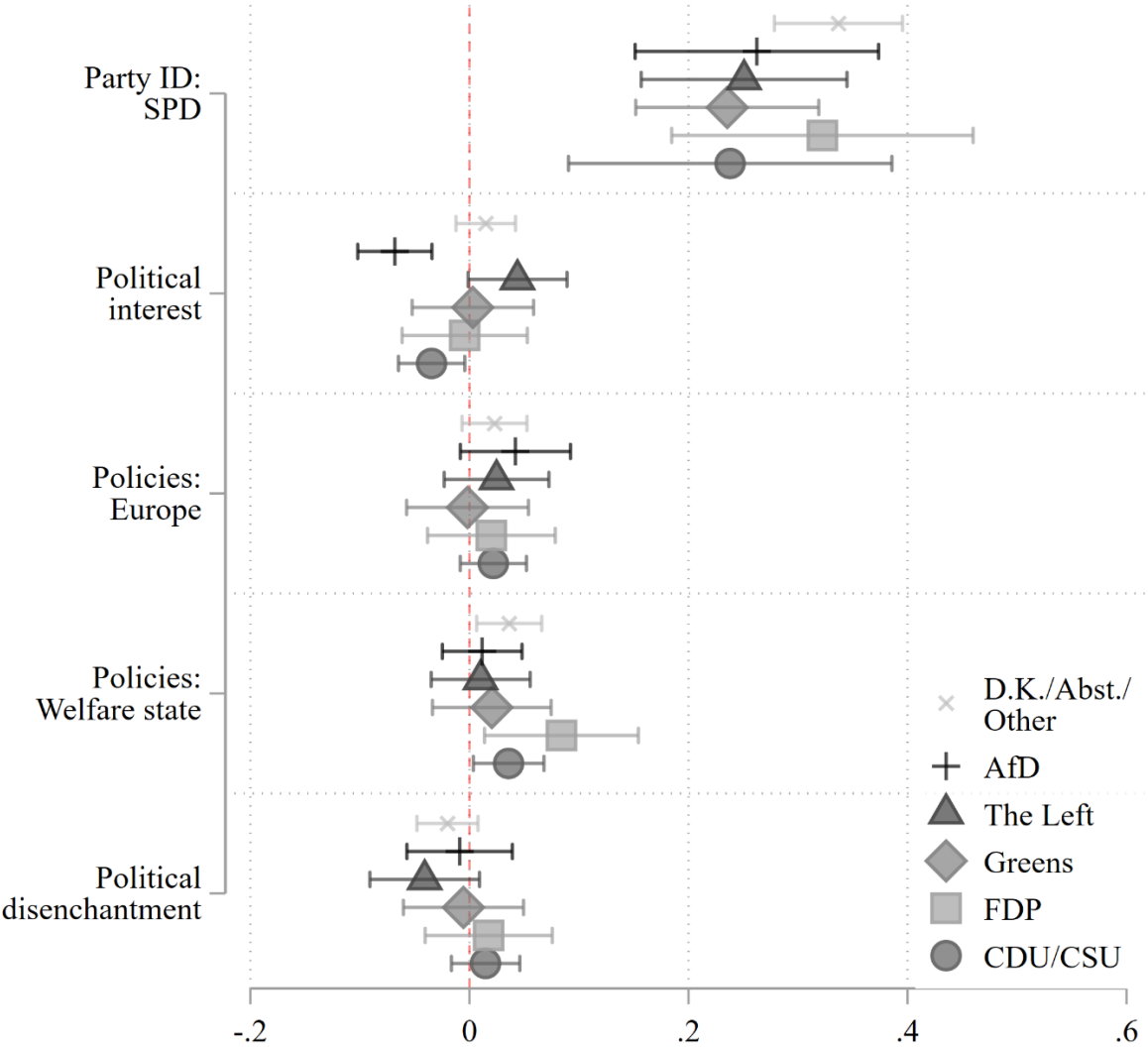
Note: The graph shows differences in predicted mean probabilities to vote for the SPD in early 2017 comparing the explanatory variables' binary categories (e.g. high/low). Baseline of party switching toward SPD: 14 percent of all respondents. Based on logistic regressions among respondents who did not intend to vote for the SPD in October 2016, N=8,019, Pseudo R²=.09. The residual category contains voters who intended to abstain, to vote for one of the smaller party or who did not know who to vote for. Full regression tables are reported in Appendix 2. Interpretation example: Among respondents who previously intended to vote for the FDP, the probability to switch to the SPD in February 2017 is eight percentage points higher when they support a larger welfare state than among respondents who oppose a larger welfare state.

Where the remaining accounts are concerned, the evidence is less supportive. The markers in

Figure 2 show inconsistent associations of political interest with changing vote intentions in

favor of the SPD. Among voters who intended to cast a vote for the CDU/CSU or the AfD, high

levels of political involvement appear to be associated with a lower likelihood of switching to

the SPD. In other words, the SPD could disproportionately draw support from lowly involved

voters among adherents of these parties. Among respondents who intended to vote for the Left, the direction of the relationship is the opposite. In any case, the effects of political interest are small and hardly distinguishable from zero (see Appendix 2, table 2 for average marginal effects in the full sample). Accordingly, the idea that Schulz mainly attracted floating voters with low levels of political involvement does not receive strong support. Political disenchantment also is not a strong predictor of switching to the SPD. Even within specific partisan subgroups (e.g., AfD voters) political disenchantment does not make much of a difference in predicting vote switching to the SPD.

Turning to policy attitudes, the evidence provides rather weak support for their relevance as drivers of vote switching between fall 2016 and early 2017. Voters who support the European integration were a bit more likely to switch to the SPD after the nomination of Mr. Schulz. However, even though Mr. Schulz's background as the former president of the European Parliament was widely discussed in the first days of his campaign (Schoen 2018), pro-European attitudes were not the defining characteristic of his supporters. In fact, the far-from-strong statistical relationships imply that many voters who oppose further EU-integration also switched to the SPD.[4] Likewise, support for higher taxes and more welfare state expenses is associated with a slightly increased likelihood to switch to the SPD in early 2017. This relationship is most pronounced, albeit not strong, among former supporters of the FDP, probably the party which is most skeptical of high welfare expenses. This pattern suggests that some people learned that their policy preferences were at odds with the positions of their then preferred party and switched to SPD which appeared to be a better fit.[5] These results suggest that Mr. Schulz did not attract a group of like-minded voters with common policy preferences

---

[4] The distributions of the responses on the original seven-point scale show that policy attitudes of vote switchers to the SPD were almost normally distributed (i.e., comprising supporters and opponents) and did not deviate substantially from other groups of voters (see Appendix 3).
[5] Attitudes toward immigration have no effect on vote switching (not plotted, see Appendix 2).

but that the SPD's chancellor candidate assembled a coalition with diverse and sometimes contradictory points of view on important political issues.

Thus far, the analysis demonstrated that the increase in popular support of the SPD in the wake of the announcement of Mr. Schulz's candidacy was driven by SPD adherents returning to their fold. The nomination of the chancellor candidate activated dormant party attachments. In comparison, political involvement, policy attitudes, and political disenchantment did not play an important role, if any. This does not imply that there are no individuals who exhibited behavioral trajectories in line with the selected theories. Even if some voters were driven by the theoretically suggested motivations, many others also exhibited the opposite pattern. Put differently, Mr. Schulz and his statements may have meant different things to different people and people with quite different political views switched to the SPD.

In a final step of our analysis we turn to the question whether the selected arguments help to account for the decrease of popular support the SPD experienced in the run-up to the 2017 election. We ran a logistic regression model for all respondents who intended to vote for the SPD in early 2017. The dependent variable indicates whether respondents ended up voting for the SPD or not. As decline was driven by some of the switchers in early 2017 but also by voters who supported the SPD before the nomination of Mr. Schulz (see section 2 above), we included both groups of SPD voters into the analysis. The independent variables are the same as in the previous analysis. The only exception is a variable capturing whether respondents identified with any party other than the SPD. It was included as an additional control variable to explore whether the evolving campaigns led some party identifiers from the SPD back to their original predisposition (not shown in the main text, see Appendix 4, Figure 1). Because the analysis does not reveal meaningful differences depending on the respondents' prior voting intention, to ease the interpretation we show only the variables' average effects (see appendix 4 for results by subgroups). Figure 3 reports the main results in graphical form.

The results strongly support the idea that identifying with the SPD increased the likelihood of casting an SPD vote. SPD identifiers are 25 percentage points more likely to stick with the party until Election Day than voters without long-standing ties to the SPD. This finding is note-worthy because during campaigns even party identifiers may defect (e.g., Schoen et al. 2017: 137-139). Moreover, we should keep in mind that SPD attachments facilitated some voters' decision to switch their votes to the SPD in early 2017. The evidence thus suggests that SPD identifiers brought their voting intentions in line with their predispositions and often remained with the party until Election Day.

Figure 3: Determinants of final vote choice for SPD, by voting intention in October 2016
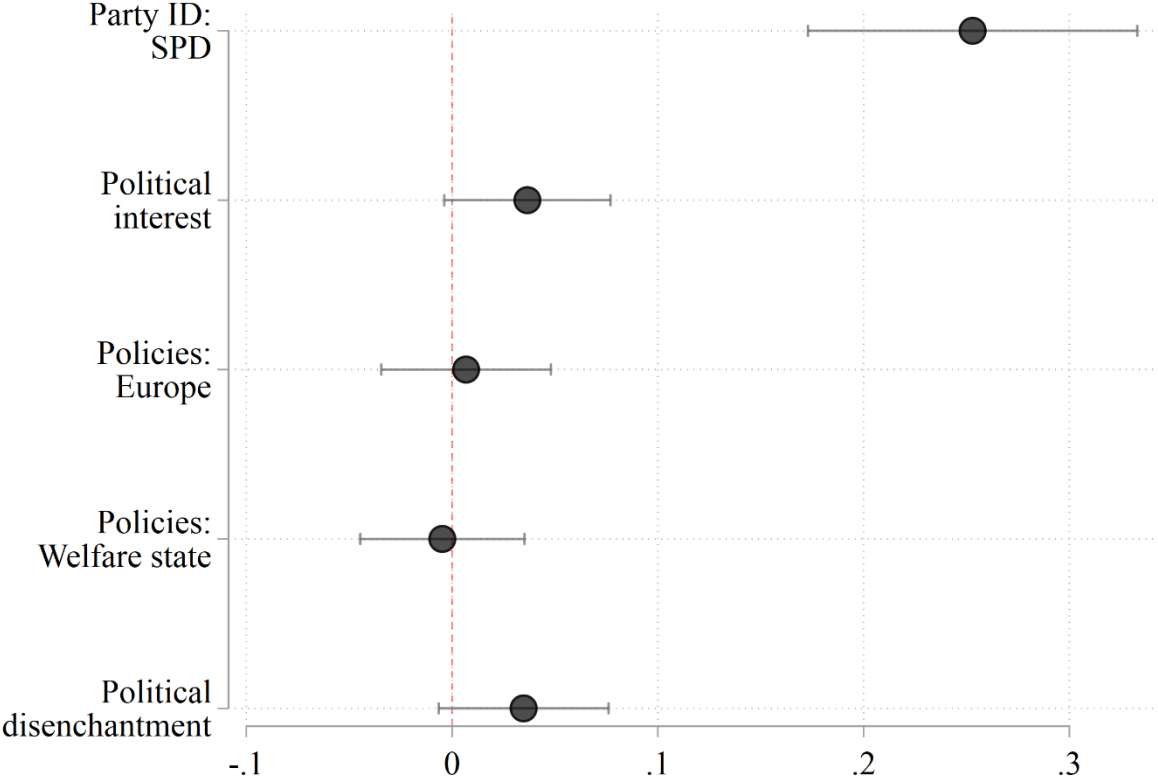
Note: The graph shows differences in predicted mean probabilities to vote for SPD at the federal election comparing the explanatory variables' binary categories (e.g., high/low). Based on a multivariate logistic regression on respondents with SPD vote intention in February 2017, N=2,120, Pseudo R²=.16. SPD vote share among these respondents: 57 percent. Full regression table in Appendix 4.

The other accounts on the Schulz effect do no contribute much to the explanation of which voters left the SPD between early 2017 and the federal election. There is only limited evidence for the argument that Martin Schulz had built his short-lived success on floating voters with

low levels of political involvement. The analysis shows that politically interested voters tended to be more likely to stay with the SPD than voters who are not interested in politics. However, a closer examination reveals that the positive effect of political interest is driven primarily by SPD voters who intended to vote for the party even before the Schulz effect, whereas political interest does not explain final vote choice among voters who had switched to the SPD in early 2017 (see Appendix 4, Figure 1). The small role of political interest coincides with the absence of meaningful associations between political disenchantment and SPD voting. Politically frustrated voters were no more likely to switch their vote choices to a different party or to abstain from voting altogether. Altogether, the analysis does not provide evidence for the idea that the party's quick decline in the polls could be attributed to voters who are more distant to and disenchanted with politics and left the party (again) after the initial elation in early 2017.

Policy opinions are not associated with a vote choice for the SPD among the investigated group of voters. What someone thinks about European integration or the welfare state does not predict whether he or she will remain with the SPD or switch to another party. Even though the SPD had made the strategic decision not to emphasize the European experiences of the chancellor candidate (cf. Feldenkirchen 2018), thereby possibly alienating adherents with pro-European attitudes, the evidence does not support such an interpretation. Even when the electorate is broken down by partisan groups, there is no association between attitudes towards European integration and stability in SPD voting intentions (see Appendix 4, Figure 1). Likewise, whether SPD adherents from early 2017 finally cast their votes for the party did not depend on welfare state preferences. Opponents and supporters of a larger welfare state were equally likely to turn their backs on the party. Altogether, policy orientations do not have great explanatory value with regards to the final voting decision for the SPD.

In testing the explanatory power of the four theoretical accounts, the analysis investigating vote choices in the federal election suggests similar conclusions as the analysis investigating party switching in February 2017. Party identification plays an important role in explaining both the

ups and downs of the social democrats as the party achieved the activation of dormant adherents in the beginning of the year and party identification functioned as a stabilizing force of voting behavior in the year's remainder when public opinion turned against the party. However, neither policy preferences nor levels of political disenchantment or involvement distinguish SPD voting decisions.

4. Conclusion

Early in 2017, after the nomination of Martin Schulz as candidate for chancellor, the SPD experienced a rapid surge in public support as measured in public opinion polls. For a short period of time, the SPD seemed capable of becoming the largest party in the 2017 German federal election. Yet, the upward trend proved short-lived and the SPD ended up with the worst election result since 1949. Using data from a multi-wave panel survey, this analysis demonstrated that the party's surge and decline in public support was not solely driven by voters switching to the SPD and then leaving it again. Rather, the party also attracted a substantial number of voters who stayed with the party until Election Day and, at the same time, lost voters who had intended to vote for the Social Democrats before the nomination of Martin Schulz. Put differently, the surge and decline of public support for the SPD was accompanied by some reshuffling among the composition of its electorate.

Taking a closer look at the individual-level trajectories, voters from diverse partisan sources switched to the SPD or left it again. We furthermore found considerable heterogeneity when it comes to voter attitudes and characteristics that predicted switching to the SPD and finally voting for this party. To be sure, some of the selected theoretical accounts proved valuable in accounting for voter trajectories. Activation effects appear to have played a role as SPD attachments made voters more likely to switch to this party in early 2017 and to stick to it until Election Day. However, even though one popular explanation attributes the party's rapid rise and decline to lowly involved voters who were attracted by spectacle rather than political

substance, there is no evidence for a significant role of political interest in voting decisions for the SPD. Likewise, politically disenchanted voters were not more likely to turn to or away from the party at any stage of the electoral campaign. Policy-based accounts did not have much explanatory value either as voter attitudes towards Europe or towards the welfare state did not significantly predict SPD voting behavior. This means, e.g., that almost as many opponents as supporters of further European integration switched to the SPD. Put differently, aside from the activation of SPD adherents, the surge of SPD support in the wake of Mr. Schulz's nomination brought together a broad coalition of voters from diverse sources and holding quite diverse attitudes. There appears to be no overriding theme that united these voters. Hence, the party managed to activate dormant party adherents and to assemble a heterogeneous coalition of different segments of the electorate but failed to uphold this alliance until the federal election took place.

The rather poor performance of most arguments we put to test in this analysis may be accounted for in different ways. First, these arguments may actually play a role, but we did not manage to include the appropriate indicators in the analysis. Second, these arguments simply did not matter for voting trajectories. Other forces, not covered by our analysis, may have driven them. If, e.g., overall trends in media coverage affected all switchers alike, then this effect would be invisible in an analysis that focuses on individual differences. Finally, the poor performance may reflect our decision to not take a close look at additional subgroups. Consider the possibility that Martin Schulz served as an object of projection for diverse and even contradictory hopes. One segment of the switchers to the SPD might have comprised politically highly involved European federalists who expected Mr. Schulz to fulfill a visionary agenda for transnational politics, whereas other lowly involved voters supported Mr. Schulz even though they were skeptical of the European project and politics in general but were driven by the expectation that an outsider might stir up the status quo. The heterogeneity of origins and

attitudes among voters who switched to the SPD in the wake of the candidate's nomination suggests that this line of reasoning deserves further investigation in future research.

As is every empirical analysis, this study also is subject to various limitations. First, the analyses are based on an online sample of self-selected individuals in which respondents with higher education and higher levels of political involvement are over-represented. Because individuals are not equally likely to respond to survey invitations, further biases in the sample might have arisen from panel attrition. These observations call for caution in generalizing findings to the electorate as a whole. Even though the original data source measured voters' attitudes and behaviors eight times in the run-up to the federal election, this study only used measurements at three points in time to reduce complexity. Therefore, this analytical strategy assumes stability when a respondent reports the same attitude between two survey waves and thereby might under-estimate the extent of attitudinal dynamics. Thus, a more fine-grained analysis may have revealed even more changes in voting intentions and higher degrees of complexity in voter trajectories than suggested by the results presented here. Finally, the research design warrants caution in making causal claims about the origins of voting decisions. On one hand, theoretically plausible statistical associations between voter characteristics and voter behavior as those shown in this study do not constitute sufficient evidence of causal relationships. Moreover, we should keep in mind that not all dynamics in voting behavior regarding the SPD are due to its chancellor candidate as many other events and considerations might have influenced voting decisions during the electoral campaign. Despite these limitations, this article demonstrated the potential of panel data to investigate voter trajectories over long periods, which may refine and enhance the insights from polling methods that take snapshots of political attitudes at only one point in time.

5. References

Converse, Philip E. 1962. Information Flow and the Stability of Partisan Attitudes, in: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 26: 578-599.

Daudt, Harry. 1961. *Floating Voters and the Floating Vote. A Critical Analysis of American and English Election Studies*, Leiden: Stenfert Kroese.

Feldenkirchen, Markus. 2018. *Die Schulz-Story*, München: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt.

Finkel, Steven E./Schrott, Peter R. 1995. Campaigns Effects on Voter Choice in the German Election of 1990, in: *British Journal of Political Science* 25: 349-377.

Lazarsfeld, Paul F./Berelson, Bernard/Gaudet, Hazel. 1944. *The People's Choice: How Voters Make Up Their Mind in a Presidential Campaign*. New York, Columbia University Press.

Roßteutscher, Sigrid/Schmitt-Beck, Rüdiger/Schoen, Harald/Weßels, Bernhard/Wolf, Christof/Preißinger, Maria/Kratz, Agatha/Wuttke, Alexander. 2018. Wahlkampfpanel (GLES 2017). GESIS Datenarchiv, Köln: ZA6804 Datenfile Version 4.0.0, doi: 10.4232/1.12971.

Schoen, Harald. 2018. Not a powerful electoral issue yet: On the role of European integration in the 2017 German federal election, in: *Journal of European Public Policy* (forthcoming), doi: 10.1080/13501763.2018.1478444.

Schoen, Harald/Rattinger, Hans/Preißinger, Maria/Gavras, Konstantin/Steinbrecher, Markus (assisted by Elena Werner). 2017. *Election Campaigns and Voter Decision-Making in a Multi-Party System: The 2009 and 2013 German Federal Elections*. Baden-Baden, Nomos.

SPD (Faus, Jana/Knaup, Horand/Rüter, Michael/Schroth, Yvonne/Stauss, Frank). 2018. Aus Fehlern lernen. Eine Analyse der Bundestagswahl 2017. Retrieved from https://www.spd.de/fileadmin/Dokumente/Sonstiges/Evaluierung_SPD__BTW2017.pdf, last time accesses 06/14/2018.

Steinbrecher, Markus/ Harald Schoen. 2013. Not All Campaign Panels Are Created Equal: Exploring How the Number and Timing of Panel Waves Affect Findings Concerning the Time of Voting Decision. In: *Electoral Studies* 32: 892-899.

Weßels, Bernhard /Rattinger, Hans/Roßteutscher, Sigrid/Schmitt-Beck, Rüdiger (eds.). 2014. *Voters on the Move or on the Run?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zaller, John R. 1989. Bringing Converse Back. In: Modeling Information Flow in Political Campaigns. In: *Political Analysis* 1: 181-234.

Zaller, John R. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.