

## Do Recall Elections Undermine Political Support? Insights from the Recall of the Mayor of Frankfurt in 2022

Frederik Springer, Markus Klein & Christoph Kühling

To cite this article: Frederik Springer, Markus Klein & Christoph Kühling (31 Jan 2024): Do Recall Elections Undermine Political Support? Insights from the Recall of the Mayor of Frankfurt in 2022, German Politics, DOI: [10.1080/09644008.2024.2308891](https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2024.2308891)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2024.2308891>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

---



Published online: 31 Jan 2024.

---



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

---



View related articles [↗](#)

---



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

---

# Do Recall Elections Undermine Political Support? Insights from the Recall of the Mayor of Frankfurt in 2022

FREDERIK SPRINGER, MARKUS KLEIN and CHRISTOPH KÜHLING

Department of Political Science, Leibniz University Hannover, Hannover, Germany



## ABSTRACT

Concerns about the impact of recall referendums on political support have not been empirically examined so far. For this purpose, we conducted a post-election survey of around 800 respondents in Frankfurt after the mayoral election in March 2023 which followed a successful recall in November 2022. First, there is overwhelming support for recall elections, with 87% of respondents in favour. Even supporters of the recalled candidate rarely dislike the instrument and see little need for electoral reform. Second, only a few respondents are concerned about the impact of recalls on political support, but when they are, it often leads them to disapprove of recalls. Third, political support by the recall electoral losers – as measured by satisfaction with democracy and turnout in the successor election – is at worst only slightly reduced. Taken together, these findings do not suggest that recalls damage people's views of the political system.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 5 October 2023; Accepted 17 January 2024

## Introduction

What impact do recall elections have on political support in society? To answer this question, we need to consult public opinion. However, '[j]ust about the only systematic evidence on public attitudes towards the recall process comes from the recent [2003] election in California' (Bowler 2004, 210). Little has changed since then, as only some poll results for the 2021 California recall election have since been published and they barely have been analysed (PPIC 2021a; 2021b). Essays on the pros and cons of recalls often rightly address the question of how popular political attitudes – especially those connected to support for the political system – are affected

**CONTACT** Frederik Springer  f.springer@ipw.uni-hannover.de  Department of Political Science, Leibniz University Hannover, Schneiderberg 50, Hannover 30167, Germany

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

by the use of recall elections (see recently Vandamme 2020, 4–5). In the absence of empirical data, however, these considerations ultimately must remain speculative.

Relevant empirical research is limited to other elements of direct democracy (for an overview, see Leininger 2015, 24–25). While arguments made for and against referendums and initiatives may overlap, they do not fully apply to recall elections and vice versa. It is the focus on perceived failures of politicians that critics argue has a spillover effect on opinions about politicians in general and about the quality of political representation. Most prominently, Richard Katz (2022, 79) answers the titular question of his recent article ‘If the Cure for the Ills of Democracy Is More Democracy, Might the Cure Be Worse than the Disease?’ essentially with a yes and is particularly sceptical about recalls, as they ‘feed the story line that politicians are all insensitive to public needs, if not flat out corrupt’. Being confronted with the (alleged) missteps of elected officials in recall electoral campaigns might ‘aggravate the collective sense of misgovernment by an out-of-control “political class”’ (Welp and Whitehead 2020b, 6) which can be fuel for the ‘electorates’ cynicism and distrust’ (Welp and Whitehead 2020a, 21).

In the aftermath of the successful mayoral recall referendum in Frankfurt on 6 November 2022 and following its subsequent election of a new mayor on 26 March 2023, we conducted a survey to empirically illuminate these issues. We gathered a representative random sample of about 800 citizens eligible to vote in the two months after the latter election. With a voting population of over half a million people, Frankfurt (Hesse) is the biggest German city which has had a recall election to date.

In this article, we analyse the topic from different angles: First, we examine how popular recall elections are. While the general idea of direct democracy is well-liked (Balestrini 2023), our respondents were under the immediate impression of a recall procedure producing electoral winners and, most importantly for political support, losers. Second, we test how many respondents see recalls as a threat to political support and how much respondents factor such concerns into their general evaluation of recalls. Third, we analyse whether indicators of political support are diminished in the short run. Here, we take a look at satisfaction with democracy and turnout at the mayoral election that followed the recall election. Even for analysing turnout, we need to use survey data once again because contrasting electoral losers and winners reveals the relevant patterns. Before we address these topics in their own sections and eventually conclude our article, we first provide a short overview of the arguments for an impact of recall elections on political support as well as introduce our case in more detail.

## Direct Democracy and Political Support – Arguments and Empirical Findings

In discussions on how to deal with crises of democracy direct democratic instruments are often understood as an opportunity to increase support for the political system (Katz 2022). The idea is that citizens appreciate additional ways to participate and are ultimately better represented by political decisions due to their higher influence on political actors and policies (Leininger 2017, 110–111). This might contribute to the remarkable popularity of referendums and initiatives with the voting population in Europe (Baldassare 2021) and the United States (Dyck and Baldassare 2009).

There are several articles showing that better political representation – operationalised via ideological congruence – indeed increases satisfaction with democracy which is the most commonly used indicator to examine political support (most recently, Ferland 2021). However, central points of criticism of direct democracy, such as the protection of minority rights (Gamble 1997) and the influence of interest groups (Gerber 2011), also focus on the quality of representation. This may explain why the empirical evidence on the effects of the provision and use of referendums and initiatives is mixed: in their international analyses, Bernauer and Vatter (2012) show a positive effect on satisfaction with democracy, while e.g. Leininger (2017) documents a null finding (see Leininger 2015, 24–25 for an overview).

While the above arguments are certainly made with referendums and initiatives in mind, they can, to a lesser extent, be applied to recalls. Although recalls do not directly change specific policies, the greater degree of control that this mechanism gives the electorate to hold politicians accountable may increase the sense of being represented (Vandamme 2020, 4). In general, however, the debate on recalls and political support is conducted differently. Here, the focus is more on the potential dangers. Bowler (2004, 207) warns that ‘there *are* reasons for thinking that recall elections are simply bad ideas that help damage good governance or, quite possibly, some aspects of civil society’. He criticises the ‘violent rhetoric’ of recall campaigns, which can create divisions, especially in small communities (Bowler 2004, 206–207). Furthermore, if individual elected officials are portrayed as incompetent and even corrupt during the recall campaign, there is a fear that these attributes will to some extent be ascribed to politicians as a whole (Katz 2022, 79). This could create an ‘atmosphere of permanent suspicion toward representatives’ (Vandamme 2020, 4). Finally, there are complaints about misappropriation of recalls, with political actors using them to damage their rivals thereby promoting polarisation (Annunziata 2017, 131).

To the best of our knowledge, the only surveys on recall elections whose results have been published in English refer to California gubernatorial recall

elections. They show that while recalls are popular as a concept, the specific implementation in California is widely criticised, especially by supporters of the incumbent Governor (Baldassare 2005; 2021). More detailed empirical analyses of the impact of recalls on citizens' attitudes towards elements of the political system do not yet exist, but Qvortrup (2011, 164) found that average turnout in US states – as a behavioural indicator of political support – is higher when provisions for recall are implemented. In addition to these numerical findings, various authors leading in this field of research have made relevant assessments. For the US states, Qvortrup (2021, 172) tends to believe that elected officials represented the voting population better when recalls were provided. Whitehead (2020, 240–241) arrives at different results for Western Europe and the USA, where experiences are positive, and Latin America and Eastern Europe, where it is on average negative. While in the former cases, recalls tend to act as an error-correction mechanism, 'dampening confrontations', in the latter, they have an overall polarising effect, particularly 'where representative institutions are not very firmly implanted'. Especially in Peru, the extremely high frequency of recalls has contributed to a 'state of permanent campaigning which may lead to the erosion of governability as well as democratic legitimacy' (Welp 2016, 1174).

The proliferation of recalls is partly attributed to a lack of political support. Welp and Whitehead (2020a, 14) see the spread of the instrument in Latin America as a consequence of 'for example erosion of political party systems, disillusion with parliaments and political parties'. If recalls are already implemented, we see that they are also used more frequently where satisfaction with democracy is lacking, as Geißel and Jung (2018, 1372) show in a comparison between German *Bundesländer*. If one agrees that recalls erode trust in the political system, it is only logical to expect a vicious circle (see e.g. Katz 2022, 79–80): recalls lower political support, reduced political support makes recalls more frequent, and so on. However, the question of whether recalls actually help to rebuild political support or increase negative feelings remains unanswered on an empirical basis (Vandamme 2020, 5).

## Case and Dataset

Recall elections are mostly used for local executive authorities (Welp and Whitehead 2020a, 15), especially directly elected mayors. This is also the case in Germany. Here, the direct election of mayors (and district councilors) was gradually introduced across the federal states (*Bundesländer*) after German reunification. Its introduction was usually accompanied by the establishment of the recall procedure (with the exception of Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria). As we are examining a recall election in Frankfurt, our focus lies on Hesse which implemented recalls in 1993.

Although the requirements for a recall to take place and be successful in Hesse are pretty average among the *Bundesländer* (Geißel and Jung 2020, 118), they are high by international standards. Most importantly, a recall can only be initiated by political actors, which is referred to in the literature as an ‘indirect recall’ (Qvortrup 2011, 163). This is the standard in Germany, from which only Brandenburg, North Rhine-Westphalia, Schleswig-Holstein and Saxony deviate with the possibility of a citizen-initiated recall (Geißel and Jung 2020, 118). As a 2/3 majority in the municipal assembly is required to initiate the process, broad coordination between the parties is usually necessary. Thus, it takes multiple parties to disengage the safety catch before voters can pull the trigger on this ‘weapon of last resort against politicians who are out of touch with the electorate’ (Qvortrup 2021, 174). Another hurdle is that the recall election operates with a quorum. In Hesse, it is 30 per cent of the voting population. High thresholds reduce the frequency of recalls being used (Geißel and Jung 2018). Considering that Hesse has 423 mayors (and 21 district councils), the average of 0.43 recalls per year is quite low (Geißel and Jung 2018, 1365). Furthermore, the electoral quorum shapes the nature of the electoral campaign as ‘the strategy of mayors facing recall is to do nothing and rely on the protection given by a low level of turnout’ (Welp and Whitehead 2020a, 22).

The case we study is the successful recall of mayor Peter Feldmann (from the SPD) in Frankfurt in November 2022 and the subsequent election of the new mayor, Mike Josef (SPD), in March 2023. This was only the second recall in a German city with a population of around 500,000 or more, after the recall in Duisburg in 2012. In an international comparative study, Serdült and Welp (2017, 150) identified a trend of ‘levelling up’ from small municipalities to cities, i.e. recalls used to be triggered mainly in small territorial units and are now increasingly happening in large cities as well. If this trend persists, more cases like the Frankfurt recall may occur in Germany in the years to come.

Peter Feldmann was elected as Frankfurt’s mayor in the 2012 run-off election and was confirmed in office in the run-off of the 2018 election. After he refused to resign in response to an indictment by the Frankfurt public prosecutor’s office for accepting an advantage in office (‘Vorteilsannahme im Amt’),<sup>1</sup> five parties in the council, including the SPD, decided to initiate the recall. However, this was only the endpoint of a series of political missteps publicly attributed to Feldmann that began three years before the actual recall election (for a detailed account of the events leading up to the recall, see Klein, Kühling, and Springer 2023). Serdült and Welp (2017, 140) put such cases, in which elected officials are held accountable for (perceived) political scandals, in a category labelled ‘direct accountability’. Fittingly, in the *Bundesländer*, the recall was introduced primarily with the stated aim of increasing accountability (Geißel and Jung 2020, 119). Other

reasons given by Serdült and Welp for initiating a recall do not apply for the recall of mayor Feldmann: It was not a matter of a specific policy ('indirect accountability'), of breaking gridlock between political actors ('institutional struggle') or of being instrumentalised by parties to damage their rivals ('party competition').

The recall election was held on 6 November 2022. Although observers had expected that the quorum might not be reached (Klein, Kühling, and Springer 2023, 407), in the end the turnout was relatively high at 41.9 per cent, with 95.1 per cent voting with 'yes' in favour of the recall. Thus, 39.7 per cent of those eligible to vote voted against Feldmann, easily exceeding the quorum of 30 per cent. Only 4.9 per cent voted for Feldmann because the 'most efficient strategy for opponents of the recall was simply not to go to the polls' (Serdült and Welp 2017, 147). The high hurdles in Hesse, and in most other *Bundesländer*, favour cases like this, where representatives lost their support among the electorate, making it a fairly typical case in this regard. The new mayor is selected through a successor election. The first round, in which no competitor received over 50 per cent of the vote, took place on 5 March 2023, with Mike Josef (SPD) and Uwe Becker (CDU) advancing to the second round on 16 March, won by Josef with a vote share of 51.7 per cent.

We decided to survey the public after the recall procedure had been completed with the election of the new mayor. For this purpose, the administration of the city of Frankfurt drew a random sample of 5,000 people from all those eligible to vote. We sent out an invitation letter on 27 March and a reminder a week later to those who had been drawn. In these letters, we provided potential respondents with a URL (and a QR code) that would take them to the survey. Participation was online only. By 30 June, 764 people completed the questionnaire. As 236 letters were undeliverable, this equates to a response rate of 16 per cent for the completed survey. Most respondents participated shortly after the election: two thirds had responded after two weeks, and over 90 per cent after four weeks.

Online surveys are no exception in that it makes a difference how the sample is recruited. Samples drawn from population registers generally have lower response bias than non-probability samples (e.g. Yeager et al. 2011). This gives our data an advantage over most (political) online surveys. Nevertheless, access to the internet is by no means randomly distributed among the population, with age differences arguably being most important. Particularly in the over-65 age group, there is still a notable proportion of people who have never used the Internet (for statistics on Germany, see Statistisches Bundesamt 2023). Fortunately, as we know the age distribution of the original sample drawn by the city of Frankfurt, we can compare it with the age distribution of our respondents. As Table A1 in the Appendix shows, the differences are moderate overall. Surprisingly, young people are to some

degree underrepresented. Hence, we have calculated all our analyses with a weight that adjusts for differences in age distribution.<sup>2</sup>

## How Popular are Recall Elections?

Since local recall elections are part of the existing political system, a positive evaluation by the general public can be seen as an expression of, at least partial, support for the system. On the contrary, having an instrument implemented that people generally dislike might directly – not just indirectly through the mechanisms outlined above – sour them on the way democracy works.

If one agrees that ‘the crucial issue is whether the result of the recall is accepted by the losers, as well as the winners’ (Welp and Whitehead 2020a, 24) both groups always need to be reported separately. In the context of a recent recall election, it is obvious that opponents of the (former) incumbent should be more positive towards recalls in general than her or his supporters. In Frankfurt, an impressive 97 per cent of those who voted against Major Feldmann are in favour of recalls, with only 1 per cent against (2 per cent no opinion; see Table 1). By contrast, among those who either voted for him to stay in office or who abstained, stating ‘because I am against the recall of Peter Feldman’ or ‘because I am against recall elections in principle’ as their reason for abstaining, the figures were 74 per cent and 15 per cent respectively – but still, that only one out of seven people who just witnessed the mayor being recalled against their own preferences dislikes recalls, is remarkable, too. Considering the whole voting population, we find that 87 per cent support the recall and 5 per cent oppose it.<sup>3</sup>

How do these numbers compare? As stated before, we only have figures for California. These are very favourable too, but not quite to the same extent: Support for the general ability to recall the Governor was two

**Table 1.** Overall opinion on recall elections being used in Hesse.

	Voting population <sup>a</sup>	Against Feldmann <sup>b, c</sup>	Neutral <sup>b</sup>	For Feldmann <sup>b</sup>
‘I think this is good’	87%	97%	81%	74%
‘I think this is bad’	5%	1%	6%	15%
‘I have no opinion on this’	8%	2%	13%	11%
<i>N</i>	740	604	84	52

Question: ‘Regardless of how you feel about Peter Feldmann: Do you think it is good or bad that the local bylaws in Hesse provide for the option to remove elected officials by means of a recall?’

<sup>a</sup>Weighted by the actual voter turnout for the recall election in Frankfurt 2022 and by the age distribution in the original sample drawn by the city of Frankfurt.

<sup>b</sup>Weighted by the age distribution in the original sample drawn by the city of Frankfurt.

<sup>c</sup>Against Feldmann: voted for Feldmann to be recalled; neutral: abstained from recall election for other reasons than to support Feldmann; for Feldmann: voted for Feldmann in the recall election ( $n = 32$ ), abstained from recall election to support Feldmann ( $n = 18$ ) or abstained in general disagreement with the recall election ( $n = 2$ ).



months before the 2003 recall election at 76 per cent and right before the election at 73 per cent (Baldassare 2005, 175). Before (July) and after (October) the 2021 recall election (September) support was higher with 83 per cent proponents of recall elections in a pre-election and 82 per cent in a post-election poll (PPIC 2022a; 2022b). Because only a few respondents proved to be indifferent here ('don't know'), the disapproval rates are practically derived from the difference to 100 per cent, and thus stand out even more from our data (e.g. 17 per cent in October 2021 in California vs 6 per cent in Frankfurt).<sup>4</sup>

That Feldmann's supporters are considerably outnumbered by his opponents surely contributed to these positive values that even top the positive evaluations known from California, i.e. the recall election accomplished what many people wanted. However, this is not a random characteristic of the case under study as the institutional setting in Hesse favours exactly this constellation: When parties need to join forces across political camps to reach the two-thirds majority in the municipal assembly and the electoral quorum is high, the recall process should rarely be triggered when a mayor enjoys broad support among the population.

Regarding the current implementation of the recall procedure in Hesse, only 9 per cent see a need for change and 55 per cent think it is fine as it is (Table 2). Compared to a general assessment, more detailed knowledge is needed to judge the specific implementation, which may explain the indifference of the remaining third of respondents. Looking at our sub-groups, around two-thirds of those who voted Feldmann out do not want to see any changes (64 per cent), with only 7 per cent of them in favour of reforming the recall process. This is very different among Feldmann's supporters, but there is still a relative majority of 41 per cent for the status quo compared to 30 per cent who want change.

Again, the California figures provide valuable context. In the 2021 post-election survey, 76 per cent thought change was needed (91 per cent of the governor's supporters and 55 per cent of those who wanted to recall him). This huge difference points to well-known problems with the recall process in California (e.g. simultaneous recall of the incumbent and selection of a new candidate from a broad field without the need for an absolute majority),

**Table 2.** Opinion on the need to change how the recall is practiced in Hesse.

	Voting population <sup>a</sup>	Against Feldmann <sup>b</sup>	Neutral <sup>b</sup>	For Feldmann <sup>b</sup>
'Yes, changes needed'	9%	7%	6%	30%
'No, changes needed'	55%	64%	48%	41%
'I have no opinion about it'	36%	29%	46%	29%
N	738	600	85	53

Question: 'Do you think that the recall procedure how it is practiced in Hesse should be changed or is it basically fine as it is?'

<sup>a</sup>Weighted by the actual voter turnout for the recall election in Frankfurt 2022 and by the age distribution in the original sample drawn by the city of Frankfurt.

<sup>b</sup>Weighted by the age distribution in the original sample drawn by the city of Frankfurt.

which have already been discussed in the academic literature (Stone and Datta 2004; van Vechten 2023). Despite this, the figures for Frankfurt can be interpreted even more as a tendency towards satisfaction with the functioning of the recall procedure, when taking California's values into account. The required shared agreement in the city council also makes it unlikely that recalls get (mis)used for 'short term partisan objectives' (Welp and Whitehead 2020a, 21). This is precisely the accusation being made in California and probably the reason for the extreme discrepancy in the assessment of the need for reform in California between supporters and opponents of the governor.

### **Do People Perceive Recall Elections as a Threat to Political Support?**

Researchers tie the pros and cons of recalls to a fundamental question of democratic theory: should elected politicians be seen primarily as trustees or delegates (Bowler 2004)? As we are interested in people's assessments of arguments for and against recalls, some of our six items for rating recalls reflect these poles, while the remaining items are more directly related to political support (see Table 3).

If elected officials are understood as *delegates* who must always be guided by the will of the voters, recall elections can function as a tool to ensure that politicians' actions do not contradict public opinion. Item D1 in Table 3 reflects the notion that recalls might contribute to elected officials being held accountable at any point in their term – this is the main goal given in Germany for the introduction of recall referendums (Geißel and Jung 2020, 119). Item D2 also takes up the delegate perspective by asking about the importance of whether voters should be able to correct a mistake in their voting decision sooner rather than at the next regularly scheduled election; this is the idea of recall as an 'error-correction mechanism' (Welp and Whitehead 2020a, 18).

As *trustees*, politicians should be strong leaders, true to their principles, committed to their consciences and courageous in their actions (Bowler 2004, 205). If recall elections are perceived as a sword of Damocles, incumbents should feel limited in their ability to fulfil this role. Thus, our first statement reflecting this perspective is that the potential threat of a recall encourages politicians to follow public opinion in a populist and opportunistic manner, i.e. to duck sensible but unpopular decisions (item T1; for a more detailed description of this risk, see Katz 2022, 79). *Ceteris paribus*, recall elections reduce the impact of the election that put the targeted person in office (Witte 2001, 71). To act as trustees, elected officials need strong legitimacy from those elections. We therefore asked whether respondents feel that recalls call into question the (results of the) initial direct election (item T2).

**Table 3.** Evaluating statements about recall elections.

	Overall <sup>a</sup>	Against Feldmann <sup>b</sup>	Neutral <sup>b</sup>	For Feldmann <sup>b</sup>	Diff. Contra- Pro
The possibility of being recalled by the electorate helps to ensure that politicians act in the interest of the people' (D1) (accountability)	4.1	4.2	4.2	3.4	0.7
Voters should not have to wait until the next election if they overwhelmingly believe that the election of the elected official was a mistake' (D2) (error correction)	4.0	4.0	4.1	3.1	0.9
'Recalls of public officials undermine trust in politics' (-) (PS3) (political trust)	3.9	4.2	3.6	3.3	0.8
The results of direct elections must be respected and should not be called into question by recall elections' (-) (PS1/T2) (direct election)	3.6	3.9	3.5	3.1	0.8
The possibility of being voted out of office by the electorate prevents politicians from making necessary but painful political decisions' (-) (T1) (opportunism)	3.3	3.5	3.1	3.0	0.5
'Recalls are equivalent to publicly destroying the person in question' (-) (PS2) (destroyed reputation)	3.2	3.4	3.1	2.5	0.9
Mean	3.8	3.9	3.6	3.1	0.8
N	729–740	596–605	81–84	52–53	648–655

Respondents have indicated the extent to which they agree with the statements given. The response categories were 'strongly disagree' (1), 'somewhat disagree' (2), 'partly agree' (3), 'somewhat agree' (4), 'strongly agree' (5). Negative statements about recall elections, indicated by '(-)', were recoded to achieve that 5 is always the most positive assessment of recalls, with 1 being the most negative.

<sup>a</sup>Weighted by the actual voter turnout for the recall election in Frankfurt 2022 and by the age distribution in the original sample drawn by the city of Frankfurt.

<sup>b</sup>Weighted by the age distribution in the original sample drawn by the city of Frankfurt.

As direct elections are part of the political system, this item also deals with the issue of *political support* (item PS1). Additionally, we asked whether respondents think that recalls destroy the reputation of the politician who is (potentially) being recalled (item PS2). Bowler (2004, 206) concludes that 'the rhetoric of recall elections can often be quite violent', before listing telling anecdotes of personal attacks in recall campaigns. In Hesse in particular, this may be perceived as true because of the quorum requirement. As a result, the incumbent has no incentive to defend himself publicly, since drawing attention to the election increases voter turnout. Finally, we requested our respondents to directly assess the potential of recalls to undermine political trust (item PS3).

For the six statements presented above, we always gave the highest value on a scale of one to five to the most positive assessment of recalls (Table 3). The approval ratings differ between our respondent groups in the expected

way, with generally increasing support going from pro Feldmann over neutral to contra Feldmann. However, with the exception of Feldmann's supporters who are more likely to agree that the reputation of the (potentially) recalled elected official will be tarnished (value of 2.5), all items in each group are on average rated in favour of recalls (values higher than three). In general, agreement with the positive statements, representing the delegate point of view, is stronger than disagreement with the negative statements, reflecting the trustee perspective and concerns about political support, i.e. respondents do not neglect the potentially negative attributes to the same extent as they appreciate the positive ones. In particular, concerns about the undermining of political trust are shared by few.

While we have already shown the distribution of supporters and opponents of recalls in Table 1, we are now interested in which of the supposedly positive and negative attributes of recalls are most important for forming an overall opinion on the subject. As documented in Table 4, only concerns about opportunistic political decision-making are irrelevant for the evaluation of recalls. The other items have the expected positive effects on support for recalls. With the exception of concerns for the reputation of the (potentially) recalled politician, the coefficients are statistically significant at the 99.9 per cent level. Most notably, concerns about political trust are the best predictor of respondents not approving of recalls. Thus, there are only a few who see this negative potential in recalls, but these few are precisely those who do not support recalls. Given the importance of political support for the functioning of democracy, this is arguably the most consequential concern we have asked about, and it makes it plausible for those who share this concern to not support the instrument.

**Table 4.** Determinants of overall opinion on recall elections being used in Hesse.

	Unstandardised coefficients	X-standardised coefficients
Accountability (D1)	0.767*** (0.184)	0.714
Error correction (D2)	0.790*** (0.178)	0.857
Political trust (PS1)	1.118*** (0.205)	1.177
Direct election (PS2/T2)	0.758*** (0.188)	0.812
Opportunism (T1)	-0.254 (0.194)	-0.278
Destroyed reputation (PS3)	0.387* (0.172)	0.459
Constant	-9.892*** (-1.211)	
McFadden's Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.488	
N	706	

Binary logistic regression, dependent variable: 1: 'I think this is good', 0: 'I think this is bad' or 'no opinion about it' (for the specific question, see Table 1); standard errors in parentheses; +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; weighted by the actual voter turnout for the recall election in Frankfurt 2022 and the age distribution in the original sample drawn by the city of Frankfurt.

## Do Recall Elections Diminish Turnout and Satisfaction with Democracy?

Voter turnout is often interpreted as an indicator for satisfaction with the political system (Grönlund and Setälä 2007) and the perceived legitimacy of elections is strengthened by high participation rates (Cześniak 2006). Our analysis of the connection between recall elections and political support therefore includes whether Feldmann's supporters felt discouraged from participating in the re-election. As shown in Table 5, Feldmann's supporters were almost 10 percentage points less likely to participate in both rounds of the 2023 election, that determined his successor, than those who previously voted for Feldmann's recall.

However, Feldmann has presented himself as a representative of the socially disadvantaged (Klein, Kühling, and Springer 2023, 399). Is the turnout difference thus only an expression of the generally reduced political participation among his electorate? First, we reject this idea based on a multivariate model in which we control for, among other things, social status in the form of the highest level of education and subjective class affiliation (Table A2 in the Appendix). Here, too, we find that Feldmann's supporters have a lower propensity to vote compared to those who voted against him in the recall election. Second, looking back at turnout at the 2018 mayoral election and the 2021 municipal election, we see that those who later proved to be Feldmann's supporters at the recall election turned out at least as much as his (soon to be) opponents. Crucially, comparing the mayoral elections of 2018 and 2023 also reveals that it is not a decrease in Feldmann's supporters' willingness to participate (round 1:  $\pm 0$  Pp., round 2:  $-3$ Pp.) that explains the 2023 turnout discrepancy. It is rather that his opponents are now voting more frequently than before (round 1:  $+ 25$  Pp., round 2:  $+ 24$  Pp.).

**Table 5.** Voter turnout differentiated by recall election voting decision.

	Voted?	Against Feldmann <sup>a</sup>	Neutral <sup>a</sup>	For Feldmann <sup>a</sup>
Turnout mayoral elect. 2023, rd. 1	Yes	90%	35%	82%
Turnout mayoral elect. 2023, rd. 2	Yes	84%	34%	74%
Recall election				
Turnout municipal election 2021	Yes	73%	30%	74%
	No	16%	53%	9%
	Don't remember	11%	17%	17%
Turnout mayoral elect. 2018, rd. 1	Yes	65%	28%	82%
	No	26%	54%	14%
	Don't remember	9%	18%	4%
Turnout mayoral elect. 2018, rd. 2	Yes	60%	21%	77%
	No	31%	67%	15%
	Don't remember	9%	13%	8%
<i>N</i>		548–628	72–86	51–55

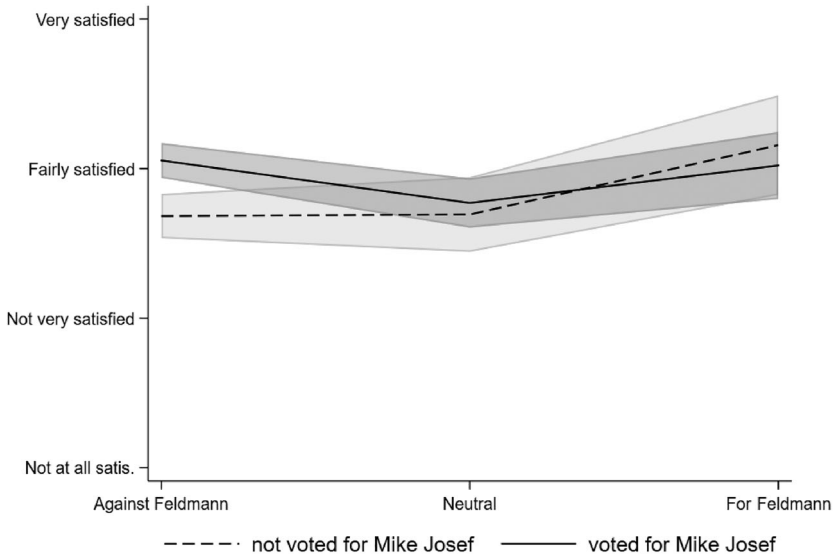
<sup>a</sup>Weighted by the age distribution in the original sample drawn by the city of Frankfurt.

Are recall losers more dissatisfied with democracy? The negative impact of losing a general election on satisfaction with the functioning of democracy is well-established. The winner-loser gap has been observed across countries (Anderson and Guillory 1997) and it persists throughout the entire legislative period (Dahlberg and Linde 2017). Due to the lack of individual data, the respective effects of recall elections have not yet been determined. If the mayor is voted out of office, it makes sense to look at the effects on political support after the new election, as the replacement of the old mayor is an obligatory part of the process. Observing respondents' political attitudes at this point in time, we see a slightly higher level of satisfaction with democracy<sup>5</sup> among Feldmann's opponents (78 per cent satisfied) compared to his supporters (69 per cent satisfied). This difference is mainly due to the group of those who voted for Mike Josef. Among Josef-voters, 69 per cent of Feldmann's supporters are politically satisfied, while an impressive 87 per cent of Feldmann's opponents are. Thus, the usual boost from voting for the election winner is basically absent for those who wanted the recalled mayor to stay in power.

There is no obvious reason to assume that taking into account other predictors of satisfaction with democracy can explain the missing winner effect among recall losers. Thus, a corresponding interaction effect in our regression analysis to explain respondents' satisfaction with democracy has the expected negative sign and is statistically significant (Table A3 and Figure 1).<sup>6</sup>

This ties in with recent literature on the winner-loser gap. Analysing 62 general elections, Singh (2014, 322) found that 'satisfaction levels among non-optimal winners are often indistinguishable from those of electoral losers'. In his case, 'non-optimal winners' were individuals who voted for a winning party or candidate who they did not like best (e.g. strategic voters). Feldmann was obviously the first preference of those who voted against his removal. For them, any other candidate can therefore only be a second-best solution. While at a policy level the benefits might be decreased compared to someone voting for her or his preferred choice, there is also an affective component. Those who voted for a non-preferred option 'may feel a sense of defeat in having abandoned their most favoured party, even if their choice was electorally victorious' (Singh 2014, 310). Our results are compatible with the idea that this feeling might even hold when there is no choice but to defect from the preferred option. They also contribute to the knowledge on how previous experience of winning and losing moderates the effect of the most recent election on satisfaction with democracy (Curini, Jou, and Memoli 2012).

To summarise, from a political support perspective, these findings are not a cause for concern. While the (exclusive) turnout boost for recall winners can even be seen as positive, the differences in democratic satisfaction between recall winners and losers are only marginal. They are driven by the fact that recall losers are not uplifted by winning the successor election and not by any resignation on the part of the recall losers.



**Figure 1.** Voting for the winner and satisfaction with democracy.

## Conclusion

Recall elections become more and more prevalent (Serdült and Welp 2017, 142; Welp and Whitehead 2020a, 14), yet, we know little about their impact on political support (Vandamme 2020, 5). This is largely due to the fact that they are most common at the local level and survey data on municipal elections rarely exists. By analysing survey data on the recent successful mayoral recall election 2022 in Frankfurt and the subsequent election of a new mayor in 2023, we have shed some light on the issue at hand.

We found that the opportunity for recall elections was very popular with the voting population in Frankfurt. Even the recalled mayor's supporters did not question the concept itself, but rather the specific implementation in Hesse was critiqued, albeit only by a minority of these recall losers. Thus, even among those whose preferences are (subjectively) represented to a lesser degree after the recall, recall elections are a well-liked part of the political system. Consistent with this, respondents overwhelmingly do not believe that recalls can be harmful to political support. However, those who oppose recalls in principle often do so because of perceived problems in this regard such as the devaluing of the direct election of mayors and the supposed undermining of political trust. Finally, indicators of political support are unobtrusive: neither satisfaction with democracy nor voter turnout in the election of the new mayor are lowered among supporters of the recalled mayor. It is merely the case that, unlike the winners of the recall election, they did not experience an increase in their voter turnout in the new election, and that

the outcome of the first round of the successor election was not reflected in their satisfaction with democracy, which is consistent with research on the winner-loser gap in regularly scheduled elections (Singh 2014).

Our findings contribute to the literature on recall elections, direct democracy, local elections and the winner-loser gap. However, only so much can be learned from a single recall procedure. Many patterns remain undetected without analyses on subgroups in multiple elections. Relevant research rightfully points out that the impact of recall elections depends on the specific rules of the recall procedure and on the political system as a whole, as it provides the institutional context in which recalls are embedded. The high institutional hurdles for the initiation and success of recalls in Hesse (and other German *Bundesländer*) limit the political dangers of recall elections such as a misuse by political opponents. Our results suggest that this is reflected in a more favourable evaluation of recall elections (even among recall losers). Local election surveys are a tool to be considered for generating such knowledge, as they are necessary to directly measure political attitudes and to analyse those who are for and those who are against the incumbent separately. For other elements of direct democracy, there is already some knowledge about how the effects on political support depend on other institutions within the political system (Balestrini 2023) – findings that need to be tested for applicability to recalls. Considering the importance of the institutional setting, our positive results do not contradict Welp and Whitehead (2020a, 22–24), who have identified disruptive potential in various recall elections in South America. We also agree with Welp and Whitehead (2020a, 25) in their assessment that recalls will not go away and that further research is therefore needed to help ‘finding recall procedures that work’.

## Notes

1. Specifically, Feldmann was charged with various counts of accepting an advantage in office. The charges were all related to his close relationship with his former employer, the local branch of the Workers’ Welfare Association (‘Arbeiterwohlfahrt’, AWO). The accusation that attracted the most public attention was that he had helped his then-partner Zübeyde Temizel get an overpaid job at the AWO. After he was already recalled, Feldmann was finally found guilty of accepting an advantage in two instances and sentenced to a fine (for a detailed chronology of events and accusations, see Klein, Kühling, and Springer 2023).
2. All of the key statements in this article are valid with or without weighting. In fact, weighting has only a marginal effect on our findings.
3. People who abstained in the recall election in Frankfurt are underrepresented in our survey. Thus, in order not to artificially inflate the measured popularity of recalls in the electorate, we have applied a weight based on the actual turnout in the recall election. With it, especially those categorised as ‘neutral’ become more relevant, i.e. people whose abstention was not based on support for Feldmann (e.g. they were being too busy to vote).



4. In our survey, we presented the three response categories as equally valid alternatives resulting in 8 per cent having ‘no opinion’ on it. In contrast, for every question in the PPIC Statewide Survey in California, including those on recall elections, there are few ‘don’t know’-answers (1–2 per cent). This is of note because the difference in support for recall elections between voting populations in Frankfurt and California would have likely be more pronounced, if respondents in Frankfurt would be less explicitly presented with the possibility to state indifference, i.e. some of the respondents in question would have chosen the like- and some the dislike-option instead.
5. Question: ‘All in all, how satisfied are you with the way democracy works in Germany?’ Respondents could answer this item on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 ‘not at all satisfied’ to 4 ‘very satisfied’.
6. To facilitate the interpretation of the results, we have estimated a linear regression of satisfaction with democracy. We additionally used an ordinal as well as a binary logistic regression, reducing the initial four categories to two. In both cases, the interaction term is also negative and statistically significant (not documented).

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

*Frederik Springer* is a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Political Science, Leibniz University Hannover. His research focuses on party members, electoral systems and voting behaviour.

*Markus Klein* is a professor of political science at the Leibniz University Hannover. He is mainly interested in voting behaviour, party members and value change.

*Christoph Kühling* is a doctoral candidate at the Department of Political Science, Leibniz University Hannover. His research interests are political participation, voting behaviour and the radical right. In his dissertation he investigates individual and contextual determinants of voting for the radical right populist AfD.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, C. J., and C. A. Guillory. 1997. “Political Institutions and Satisfaction with Democracy: A Cross-national Analysis of Consensus and Majoritarian Systems.” *American Political Science Review* 91 (1): 66–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2952259>.
- Annunziata, R. 2017. “Recall, Political Representation and Citizen Participation: Reflections Based on the Latin American Experience.” In *Let the People Rule? Direct Democracy in the Twenty-first Century*, edited by S. P. Ruth, Y. Welp, and L. Whitehead, 121–136. Colchester: ECPR press.
- Baldassare, M. 2005. “The Role of Public Opinion on the California Governor’s Recall in 2003: Populism, Partisanship, and Direct Democracy.” *American Politics Research* 33 (2): 163–186. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X04271680>.

- Baldassare, M. 2021. "After the Recall, More Californians Want Changes to the Process." <https://www.ppic.org/blog/after-the-recall-more-californians-want-changes-to-the-process/>.
- Balestrini, P. P. 2023. "Interrogating the Popularity of Direct Democracy among European National Publics." *Territory, Politics, Governance* 11 (5): 894–914.
- Bernauer, J., and A. Vatter. 2012. "Can't Get No Satisfaction with the Westminster Model? Winners, Losers and the Effects of Consensual and Direct Democratic Institutions on Satisfaction with Democracy." *European Journal of Political Research* 51 (4): 435–468. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2011.02007.x>.
- Bowler, S. 2004. "Recall and Representation: Arnold Schwarzenegger Meets Edmund Burke." *Representation* 40 (3): 200–212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344890408523266>.
- Curini, L., W. Jou, and V. Memoli. 2012. "Satisfaction with Democracy and the Winner/Loser Debate: The Role of Policy Preferences and Past Experience." *British Journal of Political Science* 42 (2): 241–261. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123411000275>.
- Czeńnik, M. 2006. "Voter Turnout and Democratic Legitimacy in Central Eastern Europe." *Polish Sociological Review* 156 (4): 449–470.
- Dahlberg, S., and J. Linde. 2017. "The Dynamics of the Winner–Loser gap in Satisfaction with Democracy: Evidence from a Swedish Citizen Panel." *International Political Science Review* 38 (5): 625–641. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512116649279>.
- Dyck, J. J., and M. Baldassare. 2009. "Process Preferences and Voting in Direct Democratic Elections." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 73 (3): 551–565. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfp027>.
- Ferland, B. 2021. "Policy Congruence and its Impact on Satisfaction with Democracy." *Electoral Studies* 69:102204. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102204>.
- Gamble, B. S. 1997. "Putting Civil Rights to a Popular Vote." *American Journal of Political Science* 41 (1): 245–269. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2111715>.
- Geißel, B., and S. Jung. 2018. "Recall in Germany: Explaining the Use of a Local Democratic Innovation." *Democratization* 25 (8): 1358–1378. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1398735>.
- Geißel, B., and S. Jung. 2020. "Explaining Institutional Change towards Recall in Germany." In *The Politics of Recall*, edited by Y. Welp and L. Whitehead, 117–141. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gerber, E. R. 2011. *The Populist Paradox: Interest Group Influence and the Promise of Direct Legislation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Grönlund, K., and M. Setälä. 2007. "Political Trust, Satisfaction and Voter Turnout." *Comparative European Politics* 5 (4): 400–422. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cep.6110113>.
- Katz, R. S. 2022. "If the Cure for the Ills of Democracy is More Democracy, Might the Cure be Worse than the Disease?" *Scandinavian Political Studies* 45 (1): 68–85. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.12218>.
- Klein, M., C. Kühling, and F. Springer. 2023. "Der Bürgerentscheid über die Abwahl des Frankfurter Oberbürgermeisters Peter Feldmann vom 6. November 2022: Vorgeschichte, Ablauf, Ergebnis, Verfahrensdefizite und Reformvorschläge." *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen* 54 (2): 354–375. <https://doi.org/10.5771/0340-1758-2023-2-354>.
- Leininger, A. 2015. "Direct Democracy in Europe: Potentials and Pitfalls." *Global Policy* 6 (S1): 17–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.12224>.
- Leininger, A. 2017. *Direct Democracy and Representative Government*. Berlin: Hertie School.

- PPIC. 2021a. "PPIC Statewide Survey: Californians and the Environment." <https://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/2021-july.zip>.
- PPIC. 2021b. "PPIC Statewide Survey: Californians and Their Economic Well-being." <https://www.ppic.org/wp-content/uploads/2021-november.zip>.
- Qvortrup, M. 2011. "Hasta la Vista: A Comparative Institutional Analysis of the Recall." *Representation* 47 (2): 161–170. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2011.581067>.
- Qvortrup, M. 2021. *Democracy on Demand: Holding Power to Account*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Serdült, U., and Y. Welp. 2017. "The Levelling up of a Political Institution: Perspectives on the Recall Referendum." In *Let the People Rule? Direct Democracy in the Twenty-first Century*, edited by S. P. Ruth, Y. Welp, and L. Whitehead, 137–154. Colchester: ECPR press.
- Singh, S. P. 2014. "Not all Election Winners are Equal: Satisfaction with Democracy and the Nature of the Vote." *European Journal of Political Research* 53 (2): 308–327. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12028>.
- Statistisches Bundesamt. 2023. "Zahl der Woche Nr. 15 vom 11. April 2023. Knapp 6% der Bevölkerung im Alter von 16 bis 74 Jahren in Deutschland sind offline." Accessed December 13, 2023. [https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/Zahl-der-Woche/2023/PD23\\_15\\_p002.html](https://www.destatis.de/DE/Presse/Pressemitteilungen/Zahl-der-Woche/2023/PD23_15_p002.html).
- Stone, W. J., and M. N. Datta. 2004. "Rationalizing the California Recall." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 37 (1): 19–21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096504003555>.
- van Vechten, R. B. 2023. "California's 2021 Gubernatorial Recall: Field Notes." *State and Local Government Review* 55 (2): 153–169. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0160323X231166660>.
- Vandamme, P.-E. 2020. "Can the Recall Improve Electoral Representation?" *Frontiers in Political Science* 6: 1–13.
- Welp, Y. 2016. "Recall Referendums in Peruvian Municipalities: A Political Weapon for Bad Losers or an Instrument of Accountability?" *Democratization* 23 (7): 1162–1179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2015.1060222>.
- Welp, Y., and L. Whitehead. 2020a. "The Politics of Recall Elections." In *The Politics of Recall*, edited by Y. Welp and L. Whitehead, 1–7. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Welp, Y., and L. Whitehead. 2020b. "Recall: Democratic Advance, Safety Valve or Risky Adventure?" In *The Politics of Recall*, edited by Y. Welp and L. Whitehead, 9–27. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Whitehead, L. 2020. "On Reconciling Recall with Representation." In *The Politics of Recall*, edited by Y. Welp and L. Whitehead, 229–247. Elections: Springer.
- Witte, J. 2001. "Der kommunale „Recall“ in Deutschland – erste Anwendungserfahrungen." *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen* 32 (1): 57–71.
- Yeager, D. S., J. A. Krosnick, L. Chang, H. S. Javitz, M. S. Levendusky, A. Simpser, and R. Wang. 2011. "Comparing the Accuracy of RDD Telephone Surveys and Internet Surveys Conducted with Probability and Non-Probability Samples." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 75 (4): 709–747. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfr020>.

## Appendix

**Table A1.** Age distribution of the actual respondents compared to the original sample.

Age group	Original Sample	Respondents
18–24	10%	6%
25–34	19%	16%
35–49	26%	27%
50–64	24%	30%
At least 65	21%	20%
<i>N</i>	5,000	764

**Table A2.** Determinants of individuals' decision to participate in the first round of the 2023 mayoral election.

Recall (non-)vote (ref. against Feldmann)	
Neutral	–2.431*** (0.249)
For Feldmann	–1.362*** (0.351)
Mayoral election 2018 turnout 1st round (ref. yes)	
No	–0.901*** (0.226)
Don't remember	–1.237*** (0.331)
No partisan attachment	–0.297 (0.214)
Female	0.296 (0.204)
Education (ref. up to lower secondary qualification)	
Intermediate secondary qualification	0.339 (0.563)
At least upper secondary qualification	0.672 (0.546)
Subjective social status (ref. lower class/working class)	
Middle class	0.735* (0.304)
At least upper middle class	0.852* (0.335)
Constant	1.431* (0.589)
McFadden's Pseudo $R^2$	0.277
<i>N</i>	707

Binary logistic regression, dependent variable: 1: voted in the 1st round of the 2023 mayoral election, 0: did not vote in the 1st round of the 2023 mayoral election; standard errors in parentheses; <sup>+</sup>  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; weighted by the actual voter turnout for the recall election in Frankfurt 2022 and the age distribution in the original sample drawn by the city of Frankfurt.

**Table A3.** Determinants of individuals' satisfaction with democracy (only voters 2nd round mayoral election 2023).

Mayoral election 2018 turnout 1st round (ref. yes)	
No	-0.103 (0.087)
Don't remember	0.048 (0.133)
No partisan attachment	-0.156* (0.079)
Female	-0.005 (0.071)
Education (ref. up to lower secondary qualification)	
Intermediate secondary qualification	0.369 (0.267)
At least upper secondary qualification	0.301 (0.254)
Subjective social status (ref. lower class/working class)	
Middle class	0.601** (0.133)
At least upper middle class	0.930*** (0.144)
Recall (non-)vote (ref. against Feldmann)	
Neutral	-0.010 (0.149)
For Feldmann	0.474* (0.185)
2nd round mayoral election 2023: voted for Josef	0.372*** (0.096)
Neutral (ref. against Feldmann) * voted for Josef (ref. not voted for Josef)	-0.295 (0.180)
For Feldmann (ref. against Feldmann) * voted f. Josef (ref. not voted f. Josef)	-0.508* (0.223)
Constant	1.797*** (0.280)
$R^2$	0.170
$N$	562

Linear regression, dependent variable: 1: 'not at all satisfied', 2: 'not very satisfied', 3: 'fairly satisfied', 4: 'very satisfied'; standard errors in parentheses; +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ ; weighted by the actual voter turnout for the recall election in Frankfurt 2022 and the age distribution in the original sample drawn by the city of Frankfurt.