

# Rewarding Conservative Politicians? Evidence from Voting on Same-Sex Marriage

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## Rewarding Conservative Politicians? Evidence from Voting on Same-Sex Marriage\*

### Abstract

We examine whether voters rewarded conservative politicians who were voting in favor of same-sex marriage. Data is based on a roll-call vote in the German national parliament (Bundestag) in June 2017. This roll-call vote drastically influenced the public discourse about the social political platform of the conservative party. National elections took place in September 2017. The results show that the vote share of conservative politicians who voted in favor of same-sex marriage was around 1.29 percentage points (around 0.33 standard deviations of the change in the first vote share) higher than the vote share of conservative politicians who did not vote in favor of same-sex marriage. Voters were seeking for outcomes other than economic outcomes to evaluate politicians' performance in office.

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# 1 Introduction

Voters reward and punish politicians. They observe, for example, macroeconomic outcomes such as economic growth, unemployment and inflation and hold politicians responsible: when the economy is doing well (high economic growth, low unemployment and inflation), voters tend to reward politicians and confirm incumbents in office (economic voting; on theories and empirical evidence on economic voting see, e.g., [Nannestad and Paldam, 1994](#); [Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2013](#)).<sup>1</sup> Clearly, politicians often make attempts to influence macroeconomic outcomes by, for example, implementing fiscal policies to gratify the needs of their constituencies (partisan politics; e.g., [Schmidt, 1996](#); [Potrafke, 2017, 2018](#)). Politicians cannot, however, fully influence macroeconomic outcomes. Voters understand that macroeconomic outcomes are also predisposed by external circumstances and therefore like to evaluate politicians' performance based on measures which politicians directly influence. It is conceivable that voters desire competent, honest and exemplary politicians and punish politicians that have been involved in scandals. The empirical evidence on how voters respond to politicians who were corrupt, favored relatives or abused tax payers' money is quite mixed, however (e.g., [Hirano and Snyder, 2012](#); [Vivyan et al., 2012](#); [Rudolph and Däubler, 2016](#); [Kauder and Potrafke, 2015](#); [Larcinese and Sircar, 2017](#); [Potrafke and Rösel, 2019](#)).

Roll-call voting of members of parliament (MPs) is likely to be a prominent measure based on which voters reward and punish politicians (retrospectively).<sup>2</sup> Roll-call votes portray voting behavior of individual politicians in parliament. Roll-call votes often take place when politicians need to handle controversial issues. Examples include Brexit and same-sex marriage (e.g., [Aidt et al., 2021](#); [Kauder and Potrafke, 2019](#)). Political parties have views on the issues. Conservative parties are, for example, less likely to advocate same-sex marriage than liberal parties. Individual MPs may however disagree with their parties' view on the issue and consider voting against the party line. On the one hand, voters may punish individual MPs who vote against the party line when they believe that MPs should be loyal to their party. On the other hand, voters may well appreciate voting against the party line when they themselves disagree with the party line or wish to reward rebellion.

Empirical evidence on how MPs' roll-call voting influences citizens' voting behavior is mixed. In the United States, voters hardly paid attention to Members of Congress' roll-call votes ([Ansolabehere and Jones, 2010](#)). Voters punished politicians for being

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<sup>1</sup>Voting decisions are multidimensional. On strategic voting with multiple policy dimensions see, for example, [Hughes \(2020\)](#).

<sup>2</sup>Voting may also be prospective: voters also base their vote decision on promises for the future, or on expectations, rather than on what has been done before. On prospective voting see, for example, [Elinder et al. \(2015\)](#).

too partisan, but not for being ideologically too extreme (Canes-Wrone et al., 2002; Carson et al., 2010). In the United Kingdom, policy accountability of MPs is relatively weak and general rather than issue-specific (Vivyan et al., 2012). Voters are likely to reward and punish MPs for roll-call voting when the electoral system allows individual punishing, the vote received attention in the media, and voters had a chance to learn about the roll-call vote and views of individual MPs (e.g., Stiers, 2021). First, the German electoral system is well suited to examine how voters punish and reward individual MPs because of the first and second vote in national elections.<sup>3</sup> Second, MPs’ individual voting behavior on same-sex marriage was public and some MPs were quite active in advertising their voting behavior (e.g., Tauber, 2017).

We examine an intriguing roll-call vote on same-sex marriage which occurred in June 2017 in the German national parliament (Bundestag).<sup>4</sup> It was the only roll-call vote that took place on this day. This roll-call vote drastically influenced the public debate about the social political platform of the conservative parties in Germany, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its Bavarian sister party Christian Social Union (CSU), see Wenzelburger and Fehrenz (2018).<sup>5</sup> Same-sex couples already had the opportunity to enter into legally recognized civil unions.<sup>6</sup> 393 members of parliament (MPs) voted in favor and 226 MPs voted against same-sex marriage (four abstained and seven did not attend). The MPs of the social-democratic SPD, the Greens, and the left-wing party DIE LINKE voted near-completely in favor of same-sex marriage. 225 of the CDU/CSU MPs voted against and 75 in favor of same-sex marriage (four abstained and five did not attend).<sup>7</sup> The voting behavior of the conservative CDU/CSU MPs was remarkable because MPs usually voted in party blocs in roll-call votes that dealt with morality policy issues such as abortion and stem-cell research. Christian democratic MPs were more likely to vote for restrictive policy regulation than members of other

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<sup>3</sup>Voters punish political parties and not individual politicians when there is no personal vote. See, for example, Avdeenko (2018).

<sup>4</sup>On roll-call voting in the German national parliament see, for example, Kauder et al. (2017); Frank and Stadelmann (2020); Mai (2020); Sieberer and Ohmura (2020).

<sup>5</sup>There were 214 roll-call votes during the legislative period. In the CDU/CSU faction, 61 of the 214 roll-call votes were wedge votes. Only in seven of the 214 roll-call votes, however, more than 10 % of the MPs deviated from the faction’s majority. The roll-call vote on same-sex marriage gave rise to the largest deviation within the CDU/CSU faction during the legislative period.

<sup>6</sup>To be sure, the same-sex marriage changed only a small number of legal issues such as extended rights to adopt children. Its main purpose was symbolic by using the term “marriage”.

<sup>7</sup>German citizens were advocating same-sex marriage. Representative survey data that were collected over the period 2 May 2017 to 29 June 2017 show that 62 % of the respondents were in favor of same-sex marriage (among them 45 % strongly support same-sex marriage and 17 % rather support it). Among supporters of the CDU/CSU, 34 % strongly support, 21 % rather support same-sex marriage, 16 % strongly deny it, 17 % rather deny it. Young and female citizens were more supportive than old and male citizens. For more details see Der Tagesspiegel (2017).

political parties over the period 1992-2015 (Engler and Dümig, 2017).<sup>8</sup>

Conservative MPs were concerned about re-election chances when voting on same-sex marriage: the margin of the majority for the incumbent in the previous election was a strong predictor for supporting same-sex marriage (Kauder and Potrafke, 2019). When the majority increased by one percentage point, the likelihood of voting in favor of same-sex marriage decreased by around 1.32 percentage points. Against the background of the re-election concerns of the conservative MPs in June 2017, we investigate how voting on same-sex marriage influenced vote shares in the national election in September 2017. The results of the econometric model show that the vote share of conservative politicians who voted in favor of same-sex marriage was around 1.29 percentage points (around 0.33 standard deviations of the change in the first vote share) higher than the vote share of conservative politicians who voted against same-sex marriage.

## 2 Empirical strategy

### 2.1 Institutional background and data

The German party system changed quite a bit since the 1990s. The platforms of the established political parties CDU/CSU and SPD (Social Democratic Party) converged. The then SPD-chancellor Gerhard Schröder had moved the SPD towards the middle of the political spectrum in the early 2000s. Consequently, new political parties entered the political arena. In 2007, the leftist party DIE LINKE was established. DIE LINKE is competing against the SPD to attract left-wing voters. The vote share of the SPD decreased in national and state elections. Angela Merkel, CDU-chancellor and CDU-chairman, moved the CDU towards the middle of the political spectrum. In 2013, the populist right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD) was founded. The vote share of the CDU/CSU decreased in national and state elections.

In national elections, voters cast two votes in a personalized proportional representation system. The second vote determines how many seats the individual parties receive in parliament. Each party that received at least 5 % of the second votes obtains a number of the 598 seats in the parliament that corresponds to the party's second vote share. The first vote determines which candidate is to obtain the direct mandate in one of the 299 electoral districts with a simple majority. Candidates elected to the parliament with the first vote (direct mandate) obtain their seats first. Candidates from state-specific party lists obtain the remaining seats. When the number of direct

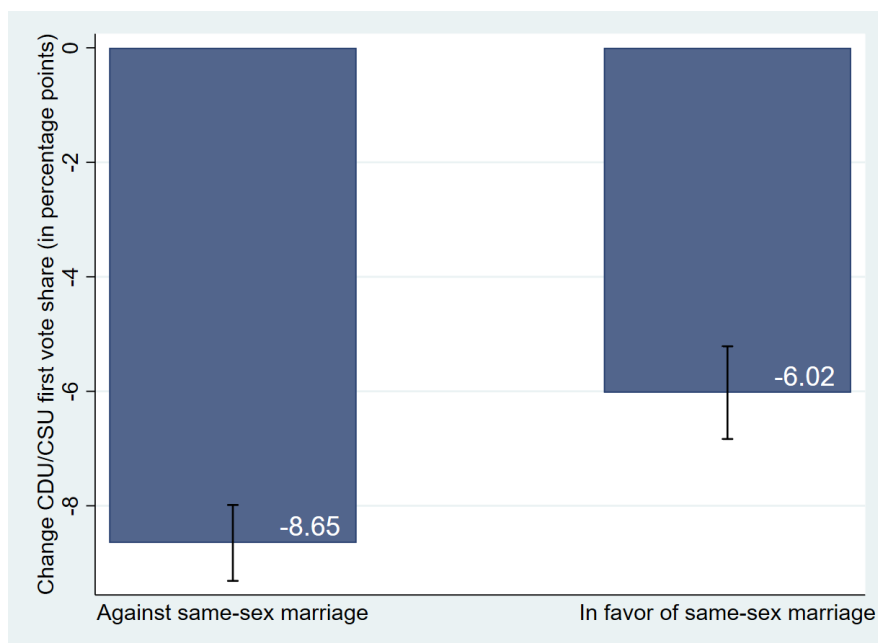
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<sup>8</sup>On what predicts attitudes towards homosexuals see, for example, Jäckle and Wenzelburger (2015); Berggren and Nilsson (2016); Berggren et al. (2017).

mandates exceeds the party's vote share, the party obtains excess mandates, and the other parties obtain equalizing mandates to maintain the power relations.

The second vote share of the CDU/CSU decreased from 41.54 % in the 2013 national election to 32.93 % in the 2017 national election. The first vote share of the CDU/CSU decreased from 45.34 % to 37.26 %. We only include those districts in which the candidate from 2013 was still running for office in 2017; we exclude districts where boundaries have changed. In the resulting sample of 198 CDU/CSU MPs, the first vote share decreased from 45.96 % to 38.03 %. Figure 1 shows that conservative MPs voting in favor of same-sex marriage lost 2.63 percentage points less than MPs voting against same-sex marriage.

Figure 1: CONSERVATIVE MPS VOTING IN FAVOR OF SAME-SEX MARRIAGE LOST 2.63 PERCENTAGE POINTS LESS THAN CONSERVATIVE MPS VOTING AGAINST SAME-SEX MARRIAGE



*Notes:* The figure shows the difference in CDU/CSU MPs vote shares between the 2017 and the 2013 national election. The decline of the first vote shares of conservative MPs voting in favor of same-sex marriage (6.02 percentage points) was 2.63 percentage points smaller than the decline of the first vote shares of conservative MPs voting against same-sex marriage (8.65 percentage points). This difference is statistically significant at the 1 % level. Vertical lines show the 95 % confidence interval.

## 2.2 Econometric model

The model has the following form:

$$\begin{aligned} & \text{Change CDU/CSU first vote share}_i \\ &= \alpha + \beta \text{ Supporting same-sex marriage}_i + \sum_j \epsilon_j X_{ij} + u_i, \end{aligned}$$

with  $i=1, \dots, 198$ ;  $j=1, \dots, 10$ .

The dependent variable *Change CDU/CSU first vote share* describes the change in the vote share of a CDU/CSU candidate from the 2013 to the 2017 election. Our explanatory variable of interest *Supporting same-sex marriage* takes on the value one when a candidate voted in favor of same-sex marriage and zero when a candidate voted against same-sex marriage or abstained.

To deal with potential omitted variable bias we include many explanatory variables (described by the vector X) that are likely to be correlated with the change in the vote share between 2013 and 2017 and voting behavior on same-sex marriage. To control for economic voting, we include *Change in unemployment rate*, measuring the difference between the 2017 and the 2013 unemployment rate. We conjecture the CDU/CSU to lose votes when the unemployment rate increased. It is conceivable that the new populist right-wing party AfD influenced the vote share of CDU/CSU candidates: in districts with many AfD supporters it is likely to observe fewer votes for the CDU/CSU candidate. We thus include the variable *Change AfD second vote share*, measuring the change in the AfD vote share from 2013 to 2017. Clearly, the role of the AfD in the German party system is complex. MPs and party members of the CDU/CSU have held different views about how the CDU/CSU should handle the AfD. For example, some believe that the CDU/CSU should strongly denigrate the AfD. Others believe that the CDU/CSU should dispute with the AfD on political arguments. It is conceivable that voting on same-sex marriage and the CDU/CSU first vote share is related to the views of the individual CDU/CSU candidate and the views of the AfD direct candidate in the electoral district (if there was one).<sup>9</sup> We would like to measure the complex interactions between the CDU/CSU, the AfD and their candidates in more detail. There is no suitable data available to do so. We acknowledge that using the AfD second vote share only proxies the role of the AfD.

We further include many variables that describe the characteristics of the election district. East Germany has been shown to be still different from West Germany (see, for example, [Bauernschuster et al., 2012](#); [Potrafke, 2013](#)). The dummy variable *East*

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<sup>9</sup>The CDU/CSU MPs in our sample faced competition of 109 AfD direct candidates in the 2013 election and 187 AfD direct candidates in the 2017 election.



*Germany* assumes the value one if the electoral district is in East Germany, and zero if the district is in West Germany. The variable *Change in population density* describes whether the change in a candidate’s vote share differs between districts that have become more urban or more rural between 2013 and 2017. We expect a CDU/CSU candidates’ vote share to increase when a district has become more rural. The CDU/CSU candidates may have gained or lost votes when the share of young or old inhabitants has changed. The variables *Change in share age below 18* and *Change in share age above 60* measure how the shares of inhabitants aged below 18 and aged above 60 have changed between 2013 and 2017. We expect that CDU/CSU candidates gained votes when the share of the young has decreased and when the share of the elderly has increased. *Change in share school low* and *Change in share school high* describe how the shares of students that finished school in the last year without graduation or with higher education entrance qualification have changed from 2013 to 2017. German students have been shown to be more in favor of social-democratic and green than of christian-conservative policy positions (see Fischer et al., 2017). We thus expect CDU/CSU candidates to lose votes when the share of skilled graduates increase.

We finally include two variables describing personal characteristics of the candidate: The *Candidate age* in 2017 and a dummy variable *Candidate female* that assumes the value one for female candidates. Survey data show, for example, that young and female citizens were more likely to support same-sex marriage than old and male citizens (Der Tagesspiegel, 2017). Clearly, considering the ten control variables in the econometric model does not solve the issue of potential OVB. There may still be unobserved confounders that are correlated with voting on same-sex marriage and the change in the first vote shares. We estimate an OLS model with standard errors robust to heteroskedasticity (Huber/White/sandwich standard errors – see Huber, 1967; White, 1980). Table 1 shows descriptive statistics.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Baseline

Table 2 shows our baseline regression results. In discussing the results, we focus on our preferred specification in column (4). The estimate indicates that voting in favor of same-sex marriage gave rise to a lower decrease of the CDU/CSU first vote share (the vote share of all 198 MPs in our sample decreased). The coefficient estimate is statistically significant at the 5 % level. The numerical meaning of the effect is that candidates that voted in favor of same-sex marriage were better off by about 1.29 percentage points (around 0.33 standard deviations of the change in the first vote share).

Table 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Change CDU/CSU first vote share	198	-0.079	0.039	-0.214	-0.007
Supporting same-sex marriage	198	0.273	0.446	0.000	1.000
Change in unemployment rate	198	-0.006	0.008	-0.037	0.008
Change AfD second vote share	198	0.078	0.047	0.018	0.276
East Germany	198	0.162	0.369	0.000	1.000
Change in population density	198	0.009	0.055	-0.227	0.476
Change in share age below 18	198	-0.001	0.008	-0.012	0.020
Change in share age above 60	198	0.008	0.009	-0.017	0.035
Change in share school low	198	-0.003	0.013	-0.068	0.025
Change in share school high	198	-0.020	0.058	-0.153	0.132
Candidate age	198	52.253	9.159	30.000	76.000
Candidate female	198	0.247	0.433	0.000	1.000
GDP per capita	198	34.725	12.133	19.304	92.367
Share of migrants	198	0.191	0.084	0.025	0.442

*Notes:* Variables describing a change measure the difference between 2017 and 2013. Candidate age, GDP per capita, and Share of migrants measured in 2017. Population density measured in 1000 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. GDP per capita measured in 1000 euros.

The change in the unemployment rate does not turn out to be statistically significant and does thus not support the theory of economic voting. The coefficient of the change in the AfD vote share indicates that a one percentage point increase in the AfD vote share gave rise to a 0.68 percentage point decrease of the CDU/CSU candidate's vote share (statistically significant at the 1 % level). An increase in the share of population aged above 60 by one percentage point gave rise to a 1.30 percentage point increase of the CDU/CSU vote share, corroborating that the conservative CDU/CSU is popular among the elderly (statistically significant at the 1 % level). An increase in the share of students that finished school with the highest possible graduation reduced the vote share of the CDU/CSU candidate (statistically significant at the 5 % level). The numerical meaning of the effect is that an increase in the share of the skilled graduates by one percentage point decreased the vote share of the CDU/CSU candidate by about 0.07 percentage points. This effect indicates that German students prefer other parties than the CDU/CSU. The effect is however numerically small. The other variables describing the electoral district do not turn out to be statistically significant: whether the district is in East Germany and its changes in population density, in the share of the population aged below 18 and in the share of students leaving school without graduation do not seem to matter.

From the two variables describing the candidates' characteristics, only the age is statistically significant (at the 5 % level), indicating that older candidates lost more votes than younger candidates. The numerical meaning of the effect is however small

Table 2: REGRESSION RESULTS

	Change CDU/CSU first vote share			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Supporting same-sex marriage	0.0262*** (0.00524)	0.0164*** (0.00498)	0.0232*** (0.00534)	0.0129** (0.00530)
Change in unemployment rate		0.126 (0.590)		0.103 (0.582)
Change AfD second vote share		-0.668*** (0.0723)		-0.676*** (0.0749)
East Germany		0.00937 (0.0166)		0.00557 (0.0166)
Change in population density		0.0589 (0.0610)		0.0579 (0.0607)
Change in share age below 18		0.800 (0.577)		0.950 (0.601)
Change in share age above 60		1.259*** (0.394)		1.300*** (0.405)
Change in share school low		0.179 (0.179)		0.129 (0.175)
Change in share school high		-0.0828** (0.0347)		-0.0734** (0.0342)
Candidate age			-0.000565* (0.000287)	-0.000597** (0.000241)
Candidate female			0.00679 (0.00624)	0.00793 (0.00527)
Constant	-0.0865*** (0.00336)	-0.0443*** (0.00490)	-0.0578*** (0.0155)	-0.0132 (0.0140)
Observations	198	198	198	198
$R^2$	0.0886	0.443	0.109	0.466

Standard errors in parentheses; \*  $p < 0.10$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

Notes: Variables describing a change measure the difference between 2017 and 2013. Candidate age measured in 2017. Population density measured in 1000 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>.

and indicates that being one year older reduced the candidate's vote share by about 0.06 percentage points. The gender of the candidate, by contrast, lacks statistical significance at conventional levels.

## 3.2 Robustness and heterogeneity tests

### 3.2.1 Additional control variables

GDP per capita in the electoral districts is only available for the year 2017. We wish to consider the change in economic performance from 2013 to 2017. That is why we used the change in unemployment and not GDP per capita in our model. Also the share of

migrants in the population is only available for the year 2017. When we include GDP per capita and the share of migrants as measured in the year 2017, inferences regarding the nexus between voting on same-sex marriage and changes in the CDU/CSU first vote shares do not change.

### 3.2.2 Jackknife tests

Jackknife tests do not suggest that inferences change when an individual MP is included/excluded. When excluding individual MPs, one at a time, the coefficient of same-sex marriage ranges between 0.0106 and 0.0146 and is statistically significant at the 5 % or 1 % level.

### 3.2.3 East and West Germany

We examine whether the effect of voting on same-sex marriage differs in East and West Germany. In East Germany, the decline of the first vote shares of conservative MPs voting in favor of same-sex marriage (7.33 percentage points) was 5.46 percentage points smaller than the decline of the first vote shares of conservative MPs voting against same-sex marriage (12.79 percentage points). In West Germany, by contrast, the decline of the first vote shares of conservative MPs voting in favor of same-sex marriage (5.69 percentage points) was 2.25 percentage points smaller than the decline of the first vote shares of conservative MPs voting against same-sex marriage (7.94 percentage points). When we include an interaction term between voting on same-sex marriage and running in East Germany and include the controls of our baseline model, the marginal effect of voting on same-sex marriage does not differ statistically between East and West Germany.

## 4 Conclusion

Voters have often retrospectively rewarded incumbent politicians when the economy was booming (economic voting). Rewarding politicians for economic performance is difficult, however, because politicians do not directly influence economic outcomes such as economic growth and employment.

Roll-call votes in parliament are a suitable measure for evaluating politicians' performance. We have examined a controversial roll-call vote in the German Bundestag: voting on same-sex marriage. Same-sex marriage was approved by the German Bundestag on 30 June 2017. This roll-call vote received quite some attention. Around 75 % of the conservative MPs were opposing same-sex marriage, 25 % of the conservative MPs were in favor of same-sex marriage. Support was pronounced in contested elec-

toral districts; conservative MPs running in contested electoral districts were likely to attract left-wing voters by advocating same-sex marriage (Kauder and Potrafke, 2019).

An interesting question is whether voters rewarded conservative MPs for voting in favor of same-sex marriage in the national election on 24 September 2017. They did. We have investigated how voting on same-sex marriage influenced the difference in vote shares between the 2013 and 2017 national election. The (unconditional) difference in vote shares of MPs who voted in favor of same-sex marriage was 2.63 percentage points larger than the difference in vote shares of MPs who voted against same-sex marriage. This difference renders to be 1.29 percentage points once we control for many potential confounders such as the vote share of the populist right-wing party Afd, the unemployment rate and the age of the individual MP. The change in the unemployment rate did not predict conservative MPs' vote shares; a result indicating that same-sex marriage was triggering voters to a larger extent than economic issues. In many industrialized countries, economic performance has been good since the financial crisis 2008-2010. Voters were seeking for outcomes other than economic outcomes to evaluate politicians' performance in office.

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