Pre-Analysis Plan

Beyond Residency: Variations in Local Ties and Electoral Preferences in Mayoral Elections

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Date: July 2026

1 Overview

This pre-analysis plan outlines the data collection and empirical strategy for a research project on local ties and the electoral success of mayoral candidates in local elections. We employ a conjoint survey experiment on electoral candidate preferences among voting-age residents (18-75 years) in Germany. Fielded by a German survey institute, the survey aims to quantify voters' relative preferences for mayoral candidate attributes, with a particular focus on locality markers in local elections. We conceptualize local identity as a multidimensional construct encompassing ascribed (birthplace), achieved (length of residence), and performative (local civic engagement) dimensions, which are experimentally varied in the conjoint design. The study examines how these dimensions shape perceptions of candidates as members of the local in-group and, more broadly, how local identity structures group boundaries in electoral choice.

2 Conceptual framework

It is a long-standing hypothesis that in electoral contexts, candidates with a local affiliation benefit from making their local ties visible. In the Economics literature, these local ties are often conceptualized as a place-based identity.

Building on Akerlof and Kranton (2000), we conceptualize voting decisions as driven not only by instrumental payoffs (e.g., policy performance, administrative competence, and the capacity to deliver resources for the municipality), but also by identity payoffs: individuals derive utility from actions and outcomes that are consistent with salient social categories (i.e., locality categories like birthplace or local engagement) and their associated prescriptions (the person should know local culture / the person should be locally embedded).

In this framework, identity affects choices because category membership and norm compliance generate (or reduce) utility, and because identity-relevant cues shape beliefs about whether a given option "fits" the in-group and will act in norm-consistent ways.
Applied to local elections, we treat "localness" cues as signals that affect (i) symbolic fit ("one of us") / ascribed locality, (ii) beliefs about competence and local knowledge (a low-information heuristic) / achieved locality, and (iii) beliefs about norm adherence and prosocial commitment (trustworthiness, representational reliability) / performative locality, from the perspective of respondents, which in turn shape vote choice and candidate evaluations.

Municipal elections and mayoral elections specifically provide a particularly relevant setting for studying locality cues for several reasons. First, municipal policy is inherently

place-based and unique to the local level in the issues addressed. Therefore, it requires especially granular knowledge of local conditions, making local knowledge yet more valuable than at higher levels of government (Besley and Coate, 2003; Burnett and Kogan, 2017). Second, local elections are characterized by thinner information environments and weaker partisan cues, which increases the relative diagnostic value of candidate-level information cues such as localness (Oliver and Ha, 2007; Kirkland and Coppock, 2018). Third, mayors interact directly and repeatedly with voters, so social embeddedness functions as a credible commitment device. Locally rooted candidates face stronger reputational damage when not representing the interests of their electorate, making localness a rational signal of accountability (Fischel, 2001; Colombo and Tojerow, 2020).

Our locality category on "place of birth" locates candidates in a local in-group category that represents symbolic proximity or affective similarity. This is the closest to what is commonly understood as place-based identity and is enhanced in combination with the information on whether someone "grew up and lives" in that municipality.
Beyond this cue of a "local native", our attribute on "years living in the municipality" primarily functions as a cue for local knowledge and local embeddedness. This category can therefore be seen as an information and local competence heuristic: long residence implies familiarity with local problems and institutions.

The third locality category is civic engagement, which serves as the behavioral cue in our setting. That conveys enacted commitment to the local community and adherence to a prescription of a "good local citizen," i.e., norm compliance. A high level of civic engagement implies the accumulation of social capital, in addition to the pure informational local embeddedness that the duration of residence in the municipality provides.

Moreover, this performative behavioral cue also relates to the logic of "identity as an asset" by Bénabou and Tirole (2011): when people care about who they are and infer values and type from past choices, observable actions become a form of identity capital that is built and protected over time, making them especially credible signals of underlying commitment. In our setting, local civic engagement, particularly a board position, can therefore be interpreted as a history of costly, publicly legible community-oriented behavior, which raises the perceived stakes of acting consistently with a "committed local" identity and thus increases perceived reliability and trustworthiness.

We acknowledge that locality cues need not uniformly benefit candidates. Voters may value outsider status as a signal of new or different perspectives, of independence from long-standing local networks, or professional expertise acquired elsewhere. At the same time, strong local embeddedness could also signal being closed off or isolated, or captured by established interests. Our design does not assume a uniformly positive effect

of localness; rather, the conjoint experiment allows us to estimate the net direction and magnitude of each locality dimension, including the possibility of null or negative effects for specific attribute levels or respondent subgroups.

3 Research questions and hypotheses

3.1 Research questions

We derive the following research questions from the conceptual framework:

1. Which locality channel (ascribed, achieved, and performative) is most relevant for respondents' electoral preferences at the local level? (H1–H3)
2. Do voters' own local attachments moderate the impact of different types of local-identity cues on their electoral preferences? (H4)

3.2 Hypotheses

These research questions motivate the following four hypotheses. Three of them correspond to the conjoint attributes of ascribed, achieved, and performative local identity. We do not formulate explicit hypotheses on the remaining conjoint attributes, such as gender or age, as their main purpose is to increase the realism of the profiles. The fourth hypothesis corresponds to a crucial heterogeneity analysis that relates respondents' own local identity to candidates' local identity attributes.

We test hypotheses H1–H3 by examining the direction, magnitude, and statistical significance of coefficients associated with the three dimensions of local identity. H3a concerns the ordering of the two engagement AMCEs rather than their difference from baseline. We test H3a as a linear contrast between the two engagement coefficients, $\beta_{\text{board}} - \beta_{\text{member}}$ (both relative to the baseline "not a member"), using a Wald test. A positive, statistically significant contrast supports H3a, i.e. that the performative effect increases in engagement intensity. This contrast is estimated within the main AMCE specification 3 and requires no additional model. We test hypothesis H4 using interaction terms between respondents' local attachment and candidate locality attributes. We test hypothesis H4a by comparing the size of this moderation across locality dimensions, that is, whether the moderation by local attachment is stronger for performative locality cues than for ascribed or achieved locality cues.

H1. Ascribed local identity: Ceteris paribus, candidates with stronger ascribed locality markers (born in the municipality and/or grew up there) receive greater electoral

support.

H2. Achieved local identity: Ceteris paribus, candidates who have lived in the municipality longer receive greater electoral support.

H3. Performative local identity: Ceteris paribus, candidates with stronger local civic engagement receive greater electoral support.

H3a. This effect increases in engagement intensity.

H4. Identity investment: Ceteris paribus, respondents with stronger local attachment place greater weight on candidates' local identity cues than respondents with weaker local attachment.

H4a. Ceteris paribus, this moderation is stronger for performative local identity than for ascribed or achieved local identity.

3.3 Internal Interaction Effects

We distinguish two classes of attribute interactions: substitution among the three locality dimensions (confirmatory), and interactions between locality cues and non-locality attributes (exploratory). For the confirmatory substitution tests, the full-factorial Average Marginal Interaction Effect (Egami and Imai, 2019) on all cells is underpowered at our planned sample size, particularly for interactions with the residence attribute. We therefore follow an estimation strategy in which the headline substitution test for each pair uses a theoretically motivated binary contrast, while the full-level AMIE and a regularized estimator are reported alongside as descriptive and robustness checks, respectively.

Substitution among locality dimensions

The three locality attributes may act as partial substitutes when they signal overlapping latent qualities. We test three two-way interactions, each added individually to the main AMCE specification:

- **Ascribed local identity vs. achieved local identity (belonging substitutes)** We expect being locally born/raised and long local residence to be substitutes as belonging cues: either can signal that the candidate is firmly part of the in-group. The interaction between local birthplace/raised and long local residence is negative. However, we expect substitution to be incomplete: a residual "native premium" may remain even with long local residence. We expect the marginal return to long local residence to be smaller when the candidate is already born and raised in the municipality, and vice versa: either cue can establish in-group membership, reducing the incremental value of the other. Note that for local-born candidates the residence cue is displayed as a return move ("moved back X years ago," Section 5.2.1), so the ascribed × achieved interaction is estimated partly through this joint native-but-returned wording rather than on two perceptually independent cues; this preserves plausibility and identification but means the contrast tests substitution between the

cues *as jointly presented*, not as orthogonal signals.

- **Achieved local identity vs. performative local identity (embeddedness substitutes)** We expect years in the municipality and civic engagement to be proxies for local embeddedness and social ties. Both signal that the candidate actively integrates into the in-group. The interaction between long residence and engagement is negative. Again, we expect substitution to be incomplete: even with long local residence, there might remain an "investment premium" when engaging locally.
- **Ascribed local identity & performative local identity (compensation effect)** We expect candidates who lack ascribed locality (not born locally) to benefit disproportionately from high civic engagement, which compensates by signaling earned local integration. The marginal return to engagement is therefore larger for non-native candidates.

For each of the three substitution hypotheses, we estimate the interaction with an approach of three layers.

Headline estimation (*confirmatory*): The hypothesis is tested on a pre-specified 2 $\times$ 2 contrast, with cut points fixed in advance based on theoretical considerations.
Birthplace is collapsed to local-born (municipality X) versus non-local (other same-state municipality and other-state municipality combined), since the theoretical claim concerns mainly in-group versus out-group rather than gradual differentiations of non-locality. Residence is collapsed to long-rooted (raised and residing, or moved 17 years ago) versus shorter tenure (12, 7, or 2 years ago), since the substitution claim concerns whether long embeddedness has accumulated, not so much within-shorter-tenure distinctions. Civic engagement is collapsed to any engagement (member or board) versus none, since the substitution claim concerns particularly the presence of a behavioral integration signal. The test specification is a Wald test on the single interaction coefficient from this 2$\times$2 specification. This test provides information on whether the confirmatory substitution hypotheses hold.

Regularized estimation (*robustness*): For robustness, we report a fusion-penalized AMIE estimator as proposed by Egami and Imai (2019). The fusion penalty regularizes differences between adjacent coefficients for ordered attributes (residence, engagement) and pairwise differences for unordered attributes (birthplace), collapsing levels whose effects the data cannot clearly distinguish. The estimator therefore collapses levels endogenously and serves as a check that the headline results are not driven by an arbitrary cut point.

Exploratory interactions between locality and non-locality attributes

We also examine whether the weight of locality cues varies with the informational context defined by other profile attributes. These interactions are exploratory and are estimated individually.

- **Locality cues & party cues (informational substitutes)** We expect the informational value of locality signals to depend on the strength of party cues. When candidates carry a strong party label (affiliation with an established nationwide party), the label itself reduces uncertainty about candidate quality and crowds out the need for locality cues. When party cues are weak (independents, local lists), locality cues become particularly informative as an alternative basis for inference. The interaction between party cue strength and locality is negative: equivalently, the marginal effect of locality cues is larger under weak party cues than under strong party cues.

4 Heterogeneity analysis and subgroup effects

4.1 Core heterogeneity

To examine H4, we interact candidate locality attributes with respondent local attachment. The primary specification uses the relative local attachment measure as a continuous moderator, defined as the difference between municipality-level attachment and the mean of state- and country-level attachment:

We use the relative measure as our primary specification because it isolates the distinctive salience of local identity relative to a respondent's general territorial attachment.
Confirmatory inference on H4 and H4a is therefore conducted on this specification. We interact relative attachment with each of the three candidate locality dimensions (ascribed, achieved, performative) separately.

To test H4a, we first conduct a joint Wald test of equality of the three moderation coefficients (ascribed, achieved, performative). This omnibus test establishes whether the moderation differs across locality dimensions. Because rejection of equality does not by itself establish that performative locality carries the largest moderation, we additionally report the two directional contrasts of interest — performative versus ascribed and performative versus achieved — and treat H4a as supported only if the performative moderation is significantly larger than both. Since these two contrasts are pre-specified and evaluated only conditional on the omnibus test, and H4a is a single directional hypothesis, no further multiplicity adjustment is applied.

We additionally report two robustness specifications in the appendix to assess whether

the H4 result is sensitive to the operationalization of attachment. First, we utilize the continuous 7-point municipality-attachment item directly. When in concordance with the primary specification, this indicates that the moderation is driven by local attachment rather than by an artifact of the relative-difference measure.

Secondly, as an attitudinal measure and behavioral robustness check, we utilize the continuous variable of the respondents' years lived in the municipality. When supporting the primary specification, this points to alignment with local identity processes. Because years of residence is mechanically correlated with respondent age, this specification controls for respondent age and its interaction with candidate locality.

4.2 Subgroup effects (pre-treatment)

We estimate two classes of pre-treatment interaction. The first comprises moderation of candidate locality effects by respondent characteristics: for each moderator, we interact candidate locality attributes with the respondent characteristic, using the full sample, with split-sample AMCE plots reported for visualization.
The second comprises affinity interactions, in which a respondent characteristic is interacted with the corresponding candidate attribute (respondent gender $\times$ candidate gender; respondent age $\times$ candidate age). Because all moderators are measured pre-treatment, subgroup identification is valid under the conjoint randomization.
We classify all analyses in this subsection as pre-registered exploratory rather than confirmatory because, unlike H1–H4, they are motivated by plausible but non-directional expectations rather than formally derived hypotheses. We report Benjamini–Hochberg FDR-adjusted p-values at $q = 0.05$ alongside unadjusted values. We define two FDR families. Firstly, all subgroup $\times$ locality interaction tests and secondly, the affinity interaction tests.

- Municipality size class & candidate locality: In smaller municipalities, thinner information environments and denser social networks may amplify the weight of locality cues, as voters have fewer alternative signals on which to evaluate candidates. Conversely, in very small communities, voters may rely on direct personal knowledge of candidates rather than on profile-based heuristics. This may potentially attenuate conjoint-based locality effects. Since the sample is quota-matched by municipality size class, we utilize this variation to examine this moderator.
- Respondent local-native status (born in current municipality) & candidate ascribed local identity: Respondents who are themselves local natives may place greater weight on candidates' ascribed locality, as shared native status activates stronger in-group identification.
- Respondent gender & candidate gender (gender affinity): Beyond the weight respondents place on candidate gender on average, we examine whether candidate gender effects depend on respondent gender. A substantial literature on gender affinity

finds that voters tend to favor same-gender candidates, with the effect typically more consistent among women than men and often conditional on the strength and salience of respondents' gender identity (Schwarz and Coppock, 2022; Tirado Castro and Banducci, 2026).

- Respondent age & candidate age (age affinity): Analogously, we examine whether the effect of candidate age varies with respondent age. Evidence on age-based affinity suggests that voters lean toward candidates closer to their own age, such that younger respondents are relatively more supportive of younger candidates (Sevi, 2021). Because candidate age in our design also proxies experience and institutional knowledge, we interpret any age-affinity pattern as descriptive.

4.3 Exploratory descriptives (post-treatment)

We examine additional heterogeneity using respondent characteristics measured in the post-treatment module. Because these variables are collected after the conjoint experiment, they may in principle be influenced by the preceding experiment, and we therefore interpret these analyses as descriptive associations rather than causal moderation effects. An exception is respondent local-native status (born in current municipality), which is immutable to the conjoint treatment and is included here only because its measurement is placed post-treatment to avoid priming.

These analyses serve a diagnostic rather than confirmatory function: by examining whether locality effects concentrate among respondents whose own characteristics align with particular channels, they provide indirect, suggestive evidence on the mechanisms underlying the locality preferences identified in our main analysis.
We organize the exploratory heterogeneity analyses into two thematic groups.

Political engagement and behavior:

- Respondent civic engagement & candidate performative local identity
- Respondent contact with mayor/council/administration & candidate locality

Attitudes and information environment:

- Respondent political interest & candidate locality
- Respondent institutional trust / social trust & candidate locality
- Respondent local newspaper consumption & candidate locality
- Respondent citizenship-criteria attitudes & ascribed vs. achieved locality

5 Survey and empirical design

5.1 Survey specifications and data

Data for this study will be collected through a representative online survey administered by a professional German survey institute. The survey institute is responsible for sample recruitment and fieldwork only; the design and implementation of the questionnaire, including the conjoint experiment, are conducted by the authors. The planned survey duration is approximately 10 minutes.

The target population consists of German citizens and EU citizens residing in Germany who are above 18 years and are therefore eligible to vote in local elections. For fieldwork, the realized sample is restricted to respondents aged 18 to 75, in line with the panel provider's quota frame. To ensure broad representativeness across relevant sociodemographic and contextual dimensions, the sample is quota-matched by gender, age group (four categories), educational attainment (three categories), region (East vs. West Germany), and municipality size class (four categories). These quotas are intended to capture meaningful variation in local contexts while maintaining comparability across respondents.

Screening and exclusion criteria. Respondents are screened at the start of the survey and excluded if they (i) are younger than 18 years or older than 75 years, (ii) hold neither German nor another EU member-state citizenship, or (iii) reside in one of the three city-states (Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen), whose municipal institutions and the role of the mayor differ substantially from regular municipalities.

A further set of exclusions follows from the quota design rather than from substantive eligibility: because the realized sample is quota-matched by gender and educational attainment, respondents who cannot be assigned to a quota cell on these dimensions are screened out. This concerns respondents who report their gender as "diverse" or decline to state it, and respondents who decline to state their highest educational attainment. We flag that this excludes non-binary respondents by construction, so our estimates do not speak to this group.

A further quality-based exclusion concerns the conjoint attention check (Section 5.3). Respondents who complete the survey but answer fewer than two of the three attention-check items correctly are classified as a quality failure and excluded from the realized analysis sample. This screen removes respondents whose responses to the recall items indicate insufficient engagement with the conjoint task.

The planned sample size is approximately 2,500 respondents. Prior to the main fieldwork, a pre-test will be conducted with around 400 respondents to assess survey length, comprehensibility, and the functioning of the conjoint module. Fieldwork is expected to be completed within a two-week period in July 2026. Upon completion, the survey institute will provide pseudonymized data to the research team; all analyses will be conducted exclusively by the participating researchers.

The questionnaire contains three components. First, a pre-treatment module collects core socio-demographic information as well as information on local attachment. This includes respondents' age, gender, current municipality of residence, duration of residence, education, and self-reported attachment to their municipality/city, their state, and their country. We use information on respondents' current municipality of residence to personalize locality-related attributes in the conjoint experiment (e.g., defining the reference municipality for candidate birthplace and residence), thereby ensuring contextual relevance and comparability across respondents.

Attachment to the municipality is measured on a 7-point scale, as are attachment to the respondent's state and to Germany. We derive two operationalizations of local attachment that we utilize in the subsequent heterogeneity analyses for H4. The *absolute* measure is the municipality-level item on which respondents answer how attached they feel to their municipality. The *relative* measure is defined as the difference between municipality-level attachment and the mean of state- and country-level attachment:

$$\text{LocalAttachment}_i^{\text{rel}} = A7_i^{\text{municipality}} - \frac{1}{2}\left(A7_i^{\text{state}} + A7_i^{\text{Germany}}\right) \tag{1}$$

This difference score captures the degree to which local identity is salient relative to higher-level territorial identities, which corresponds to the relative category salience that generates the identity utility in the framework by Akerlof and Kranton (2000).

Second, the survey includes a forced-choice paired-profile conjoint experiment on hypothetical mayoral candidates. This is the main experimental component of the survey. Details on the conjoint experiment are presented in Section 5.2.

Third, a post-treatment module collects information on attitudinal questions, especially respondents' civic engagement, respondents' contact with mayor/council/administration, self-reported political interest and political leaning, trust in institutions and social trust, consumption of local and national newspapers, assessment of citizenship criteria, and a question on vote choice in the most recent local-level election. Additionally, we collect respondents' municipality of birth in the post-treatment module. This item is placed after the conjoint experiment to avoid priming local-origin salience prior to the experimental tasks. Combined with information on respondents' current municipality of residence

(collected pre-treatment), this allows us to construct a binary indicator for whether a respondent was born in their current municipality of residence.

The study follows standard ethical and data-protection requirements for online survey research. Participation is voluntary and based on informed consent, and respondents may discontinue the survey at any time without penalty. Sensitive information, including political preferences and municipality of residence, is collected only with explicit consent and is minimized and coarsened where possible to reduce re-identification risk. Respondents can skip sensitive questions. The survey institute pseudonymizes all technical identifiers before data delivery, and results are reported only in aggregate form. IRB approval was obtained from the Economics Ethics Committee of the LMU Munich (IRB-Nr. 2026-08).

5.2 Attributes and levels

In the conjoint experiment, we include attributes that are (i) most relevant to vote choice among personal characteristics, (ii) are observable for voters in a mayoral election and are likely to be disclosed by candidates, and (iii) have been suggested to be relevant in the literature. Levels reflect a range of characteristics for every attribute that is realistic and reflects existing variation within that attribute. Levels were prioritized that seemed realistic for a mayoral candidate and might reveal mechanisms important to the respondents, e.g., when choosing professions of candidates, some involve more interpersonal contact and imply higher potential social competence than others. An overview of all attributes and levels is provided in Table 1.[1]

5.2.1 Local identity

Birthplace: As we elicit respondents' current municipality prior to the conjoint experiment, we display the level customized to their municipality. A candidate born in the respondents' municipality signals the highest local attachment within that attribute. Beyond this, we employ two more levels on birthplace, which are a different municipality of the same municipality size class within the same state, and a municipality of the same municipality size class in another state. The two other levels are populated with comparison municipalities matched to the respondent's own municipality on size, so that municipality size does not confound the locality contrast.[2]

[1]The exact German wording is presented in Table 3. We request participants to complete the survey in German.

[2]Municipalities are classified into seven population-based size bins. The comparison municipality is drawn from the bin of the respondent's municipality; if there is no suitable municipality in that bin, we draw from the next-smaller bin, until a match is found. The same-state level draws from the respondent's own federal state, and the other-state level from a (randomly drawn) different federal state. We match

Table 1: Conjoint experiment (English wording)

Attribute	Levels
Gender	**male**, female
Age	**27**, 36, 45, 54, 63
Occupation	**Office clerk**, Teacher, Optician, Metalworker, Lawyer
Political experience	**No local political experience**, Local councilor, Experience as mayor
List	**Independent candidate**, Joint candidate of SPD and Greens, Joint candidate of CDU and FDP, Candidate of a local list
Civic engagement	**Not a member of any club**, Member of the local sports club, Board member of the local sports club
Place of birth	[**Municipality**], [other municipality of the same municipality size class in the same federal state], [other municipality of the same municipality size class in a different federal state]
Place of residence	**Grew up and lives in [Municipality]**, Moved to [Municipality] 2 years ago, Moved to [Municipality] 7 years ago, Moved to [Municipality] 12 years ago, Moved to [Municipality] 17 years ago

Notes: Variable parts of the levels in square brackets. Baseline levels are depicted in bold. Note that when implementing, we adjust the wording when the gender is female. CSU is shown for respondents in Bavaria instead of CDU. We show the state in brackets behind the variable levels of "Geburtstort" (e.g., "Hallerndorf (Bayern)"). When Place of birth is [Municipality] but Place of residence is not "Grew up and lives in [Municipality]," the residence wording is shown as a return move (e.g., "Moved back to [Municipality] 7 years ago").

Place of residence: Our reference category "raised and residing in municipality X" is again the level representing the highest local attachment, while further levels are designed to signal different intensities of local embeddedness as defined by duration of residence in the municipality ranging from "moved to municipality 2 years ago", to "moved to municipality 7 years ago", to "moved to municipality 12 years ago", to "moved to municipality 17 years ago". Both place of birth and place of current residence are the main variables for defining local identity and local ties in existing studies (Schulte-Cloos and Bauer, 2023; Jankowski, 2016; Velimsky *et al.*, 2024). When a candidate's place of birth is the respondent's own municipality, but the place of residence is not "grew up and lives in municipality X," the residence level is displayed as a return move — i.e., "moved back to municipality X 2/7/12/17 years ago". This preserves the logical coherence of the profile, since a candidate born in municipality X who now resides there after an interval away must have returned. The displayed wording is a deterministic function of the realized (birthplace, residence) combination; it relabels rather than constrains the assignment, so it does not affect the randomization or the non-parametric identification of the AMCEs and only ensures profile plausibility.

on the seven-bin size classification, which is more refined than the four-category municipality-size classes used for the sample quotas. Because municipalities are denser in the smaller bins, a same-bin match is almost always available; where it is not, the step-down rule means the comparison municipality is equal in size or marginally smaller.

Engagement: Civic engagement and moreover, behavioral cues congruent with in-group norms have been shown to increase approval among in-group members. We formalize three levels with varying intensity, namely "not a member of any club", "member of the local sports club", "member of the board of the local sports club". We use sports club because these clubs are very common in Germany and sport-related activities do not give implicit signals on an ideological scale.

5.2.2 Political "valence", competence, and governing capacity

Age: Age is often correlated with experience (e.g., "life experience") in the context of elections. In combination with other attributes, it is also a proxy for institutional knowledge. However, old age might also convey a lack of energy or a more conservative ideology. We include five levels of age in 9-year intervals between 27 and 63. We chose 27 as the lowest level as it allows for previous political experience and candidates have chosen their occupation. We chose 63 as the highest level because some states have age limits for mayors (typically 65 or 67 at election).

Occupation: Occupations can be a signal of a candidate's competencies, which might impact the evaluation of their fit for the position of a mayor. We chose a range of occupations for the attribute level that reflect, on the one hand, a high topical fit in terms of knowledge about processes and institutions (office clerk, lawyer) as well as blue-collar occupations (optician, metalworker), and jobs with a high level of social interactions (teacher).

Political experience: Previous political experience is the most direct measure of competence in local politics. A previous political position indicates that a candidate has successfully shown their capability to fellow citizens and has gained experience in the political process. We use "no previous political experience" as the reference level. Further, we include "experience as a local councilor" and "experience as mayor" as levels that signal previous political experience with increasing intensity.

5.2.3 Brand and representation cues

Gender: A large body of literature documents that gender can play a decisive role in voters' decision-making, while the direction of the effect is often ambiguous (Eyméoud and Vertier, 2023; Baltrunaite *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, it is a salient feature of candidate campaigns and posters. The reference category is "male".

Party: Also at the local level, candidates are often affiliated or endorsed by a party. However, compared to higher-level offices, this is only the case for a significantly smaller share of the candidates. This distinctive feature of local elections is reflected in the levels

of the party attribute. Some candidates run independently. These are the reference category "independent candidate". Since local-level topics can be very specific, often local lists are created for specific issues and nominate a candidate ("candidate from a local list"). Further levels are "joint candidate endorsed by SPD/ Greens (Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen)", and "joint candidate endorsed by CDU/FDP".[3] Joint lists of large parties with similar ideological positions are common in German local elections. We do not include far-left and far-right parties. First, they compete in relatively few local elections. Second, pooling large parties and excluding extreme parties reduces the risk of party affiliation dominating voters' choices.

5.3 Empirical design

The study employs a forced-choice paired-profile conjoint experiment embedded in a representative online survey, as described in Section 5.1. Respondents repeatedly choose between two hypothetical mayoral candidates. In addition to the forced-choice decision in each conjoint task, respondents provide a rating-based evaluation on a 7-point scale indicating how likely they would vote for the respective candidate profile as mayor. This rating-based outcome is collected after each task for each candidate profile and serves as a secondary outcome that complements the binary choice measure. This paired-profile design closely mirrors real-world local elections, in which—despite the formal presence of multiple candidates—electoral competition often concentrates on two viable contenders, particularly in runoff settings. Conjoint experiments are a well-established method for studying electoral preferences (e.g., Franchino and Zucchini, 2015; Kal Munis, 2021; Nyholt, 2024). The seminal contribution by Hainmueller *et al.* (2014) introduced candidate-choice conjoint designs, and subsequent validation studies demonstrate that conjoint-based stated preferences align closely with real-world electoral behavior (Hainmueller *et al.*, 2015).

Immediately before the randomized main conjoint tasks, respondents complete a conjoint attention check. Following recent methodological recommendations (Kane and Costa, 2024), this attention check takes the same form as the subsequent tasks: respondents view a pair of candidate profiles and answer the same outcome questions used throughout the conjoint, i.e., which candidate they would choose, and a rating of each candidate on a 7-point Likert scale. As in the later tasks, one profile references the respondent's current municipality of residence, so the pair is constructed in the same respondent-specific way as the real conjoint rather than being fully generic. Because the personalized profile references the respondent's own municipality, the comparison profile is assigned a birthplace in an excluded city-state (Hamburg). As no respondent resides there, the two profiles can never display the same municipality, preserving identical correct answers across all

[3] CSU will be displayed for respondents in Bavaria. The CDU does not exist there.

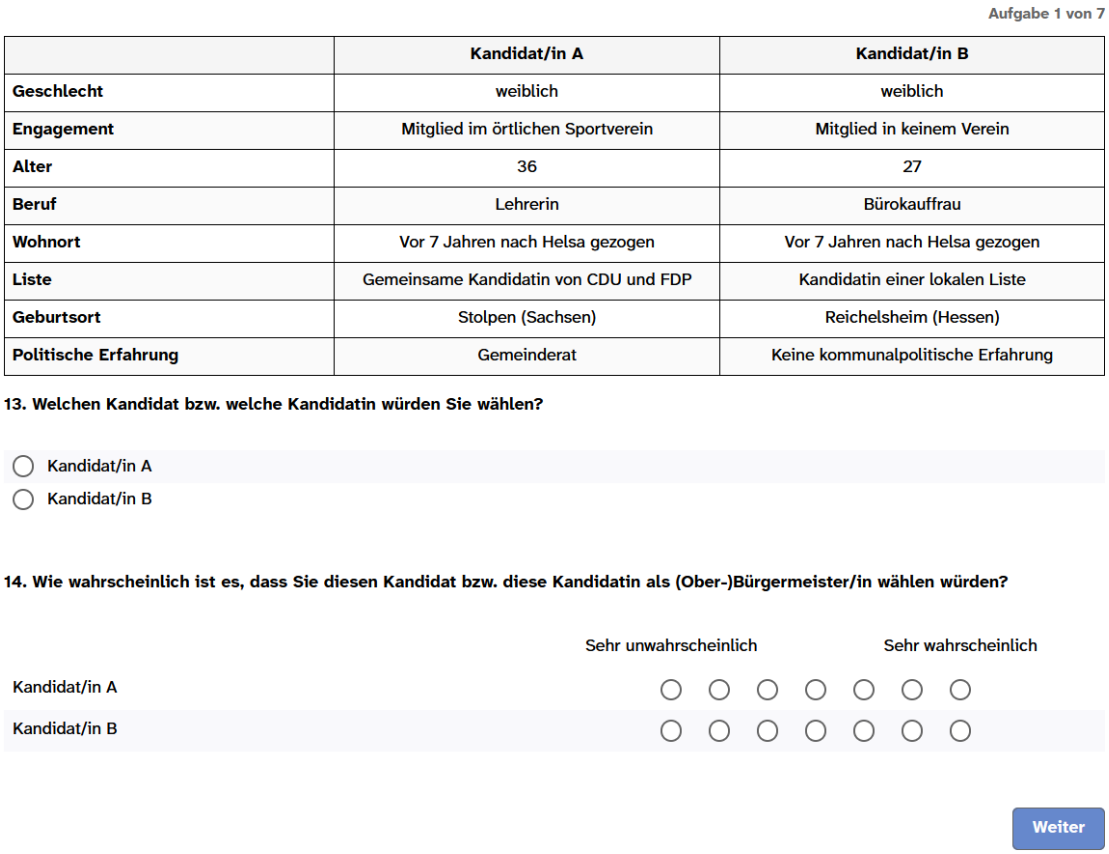
respondents. The other attribute levels queried by the attention check are held constant across all respondents, so the correct answers to these items are identical for everyone. On the following page, respondents answer three factual questions about attributes shown in the profiles. Each question offers the same four response options: "Candidate A," "Candidate B," "Both equal," and "Attribute was not shown." The three correct answers are distributed across these options.

Because the questions appear on a separate screen and the profiles are no longer visible, correct answers require recall of the displayed information rather than re-reading. To limit the risk that the conjoint attention check primes attention to particular attributes in later tasks (Kane and Costa, 2024), the items ask about attributes that are not central to our hypotheses. One item asks about candidates' marital status, an attribute not included in the profiles. Here the correct response is "Attribute was not shown.", so an affirmative choice indicates guessing rather than recall and provides a more demanding test of attentiveness than recall-based items alone. Responses are combined into an additive attentiveness scale ranging from zero to three. Respondents scoring below two on this scale, i.e., answering fewer than two of the three items correctly, are treated as a quality failure and removed from the analysis sample.

Attribute levels are drawn with equal probability, subject to one plausibility constraint designed to exclude logically inconsistent combinations: The two profiles within a choice task cannot display the same list affiliation. This constraint preserves realism while maintaining sufficient variation for causal identification. Profile position (left/right) and attribute order are randomized across respondents, while the latter are held constant within respondents to reduce cognitive burden and avoid confusion. Each respondent completes seven conjoint choice tasks, a number well within fatigue thresholds established in the literature (Bansak *et al.*, 2018). An example task is presented in Figure 1.

After the final choice task, respondents are asked three follow-up questions referring to the last pair of profiles: (i) which candidate they perceive as better acquainted with the local problems of their municipality, (ii) which candidate they see as more representative of the municipality's residents, and (iii) which candidate they consider best able to bring together different local groups and actors to develop joint solutions. For each question, respondents may select profile A, profile B, both equally, or 'don't know. These items provide additional descriptive information on respondents' perceived decision channels and complement the choice-based outcome measures.

After the conjoint experiment, respondents are asked attitudinal questions, especially respondents' civic engagement, respondents' contact with mayor/council/administration, self-reported political interest and political leaning, trust in institutions and social trust,



Aufgabe 1 von 7

	Kandidat/in A	Kandidat/in B
Geschlecht	weiblich	weiblich
Engagement	Mitglied im örtlichen Sportverein	Mitglied in keinem Verein
Alter	36	27
Beruf	Lehrerin	Bürokauffrau
Wohnort	Vor 7 Jahren nach Helsa gezogen	Vor 7 Jahren nach Helsa gezogen
Liste	Gemeinsame Kandidatin von CDU und FDP	Kandidatin einer lokalen Liste
Geburtsort	Stolpen (Sachsen)	Reichelsheim (Hessen)
Politische Erfahrung	Gemeinderat	Keine kommunalpolitische Erfahrung

13. Welchen Kandidat bzw. welche Kandidatin würden Sie wählen?

- ◯ Kandidat/in A
- ◯ Kandidat/in B

14. Wie wahrscheinlich ist es, dass Sie diesen Kandidat bzw. diese Kandidatin als (Ober-)Bürgermeister/in wählen würden?

	Sehr unwahrscheinlich						Sehr wahrscheinlich
Kandidat/in A	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Kandidat/in B	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Weiter

Figure 1: Example of conjoint task realization.

consumption of local and national newspapers, assessment of citizenship criteria, and which party (if any) they voted for in the most recent local election. Eliciting this information post-treatment avoids priming partisan considerations prior to the experimental tasks while allowing for more fine-grained characterization of respondents' attitudes and political orientations in subsequent heterogeneity analyses.

6 Analysis

This section outlines the empirical analyses for estimating the causal effects of candidate attributes on electoral preferences and testing the hypotheses presented in Section 3.

6.1 Outcome variable and unit of analysis

The primary outcome variable is a binary indicator equal to one if a candidate profile is chosen in a given conjoint task and zero otherwise. The unit of observation is the candidate profile within a choice task. Each respondent contributes multiple observations corresponding to the profiles evaluated across the conjoint tasks.

As a secondary outcome, we additionally analyze a rating-based measure collected after each conjoint task. Respondents indicate on a 7-point scale how likely they would be to vote for the respective candidate profile as mayor. Collecting separate ratings for both profiles yields a profile-level outcome that parallels the unit of analysis of the binary choice measure.

We analyze the individual profile ratings using regressions analogous to the main AMCE specification, with the rating as the dependent variable and standard errors clustered at the respondent level (Equation 4. This design additionally allows us to compute the within-task rating difference as an exploratory outcome capturing preference intensity: a respondent who rates candidates 7 versus 1 expresses stronger conviction than one who rates them 4 versus 3, even though both generate the same forced-choice outcome.

We operationalize this intensity outcome at the task level. For each conjoint task j evaluated by respondent i, we define the within-task rating gap as $\Delta R_{ij} = R_{ij1} - R_{ij2}$, where profiles are indexed so that $k = 1$ denotes the profile shown on the left (A) and $k = 2$ the profile shown on the right (B), so that $\Delta R_{ij} \in \{-6, \ldots, 6\}$ and positive values indicate a stronger rating for profile A. We regress this gap on the within-task differences in attribute-level indicators between the two profiles:

$$\Delta R_{ij} \;=\; \delta \,\mathrm{Pos}_{ij} \;+\; \sum_{a=1}^{8} \sum_{\ell=2}^{L_a} \beta_{a\ell} \left(D_{ij1}^{a\ell} - D_{ij2}^{a\ell} \right) \;+\; \varepsilon_{ij}, \tag{2}$$

with standard errors clustered at the respondent level i. Each $\beta_{a\ell}$ measures the effect on the rating gap of assigning profile A rather than profile B to level ℓ of attribute a, expressed in rating points and interpretable on the same footing as the choice-based AMCEs. The differencing removes the profile-level intercept, and the position term Pos_{ij} absorbs any systematic left–right rating bias. This task-level analysis provides supplementary evidence on whether locality cues not only shift vote choice but also the strength of candidate preferences. We treat it as an exploratory intensity outcome that complements the forced-choice AMCEs rather than as a confirmatory test, and therefore apply no multiplicity adjustment to it.

In addition to the primary forced-choice outcome and the rating-based evaluation, we analyze comparative perception items asked after the final conjoint task only: which candidate is perceived as better acquainted with local problems, which candidate is seen as more representative of the municipality's residents, and which candidate is considered best able to bring together different local groups and actors to develop joint solutions. These items are treated as supplementary descriptive outcomes that provide evidence on whether candidate locality cues are associated with distinct perceived channels, especially local knowledge, symbolic/descriptive representational fit, and integrative capacity.

6.2 Primary estimands: Average Marginal Component Effects

The primary estimands of interest are *Average Marginal Component Effects* (AMCEs) for each attribute level. AMCEs capture the causal effect of changing one attribute level relative to a baseline on the probability that a candidate profile is chosen, averaging over the randomized distribution of all remaining attributes. This estimand is well-suited to multidimensional treatment designs such as conjoint experiments and directly corresponds to hypotheses H1–H3.

AMCEs are estimated using linear probability models in which the binary choice outcome is regressed on a full set of attribute-level indicators. This is specified as follows:

$$Y_{ijk} = \alpha + \sum_{a=1}^{8} \sum_{\ell=2}^{L_a} \beta_{a\ell}\, D_{ijk}^{a\ell} + \gamma\, \text{Pos}_{ijk} + \varepsilon_{ijk}, \tag{3}$$

where $Y_{ijk} \in \{0, 1\}$ indicates whether profile $k \in \{1, 2\}$ in task $j \in \{1, \ldots, 7\}$ evaluated by respondent i is chosen. The index a runs over the eight conjoint attributes and ℓ over the levels of attribute a, with L_a the number of levels of attribute a. $D_{ijk}^{a\ell}$ is an indicator equal to one if attribute a of profile (i, j, k) takes level ℓ, with $\ell = 1$ denoting the omitted baseline level (so $\beta_{a\ell}$ is the AMCE of level ℓ relative to the baseline of attribute a). Pos_{ijk} is a profile-position fixed effect (left/right) and γ its coefficient. The intercept is denoted

by α and the error term by ε_{ijk}. Standard errors are clustered at the respondent level i to account for the repeated choices each respondent contributes across the seven tasks. Under full randomization of attribute levels, each $\beta_{a\ell}$ identifies the AMCE of level ℓ of attribute a non-parametrically (Hainmueller *et al.*, 2014).

Attribute effects on the 7-point scale measure are estimated using regressions analogous to the main AMCE specification, with the rating outcome as the dependent variable and standard errors clustered at the respondent level.

$$R_{ijk} = \alpha + \sum_{a=1}^{8} \sum_{\ell=2}^{L_a} \beta_{a\ell} \, D_{ijk}^{a\ell} + \gamma \, \mathrm{Pos}_{ijk} + \varepsilon_{ijk}, \tag{4}$$

where $R_{ijk} \in \{1, ..., 7\}$ is the rating of profile (i, j, k) and the specification is otherwise identical to Equation 3.
These analyses are intended to assess whether the same attribute effects observed in the binary choice outcome also appear in respondents' more fine-grained rating-based evaluations of candidates.

Following recent methodological guidance on the interpretation of conjoint estimands (Abramson *et al.*, 2022; De la Cuesta *et al.*, 2022), we report marginal means alongside AMCEs. AMCEs remain our primary estimand for testing H1–H3, as these hypotheses are formulated in terms of baseline-relative comparisons.

However, AMCEs are not well-suited for comparing the relative importance of different attributes, since such comparisons depend on the choice of reference categories and the number of levels per attribute. We therefore report marginal means, i.e. the average choice probability for each attribute level, averaged over the distribution of all remaining attributes, as a baseline-invariant complement. Marginal means are estimated as the level-wise mean choice probability with standard errors clustered at the respondent level, consistent with the AMCE specification. We summarize each attribute's importance as the spread of its marginal means across levels, operationalized as the range (the difference between the largest and smallest marginal mean). We treat marginal means as descriptive additional evidence that complements the AMCE-based tests of H1–H3 rather than as a basis for confirmatory inference, and therefore apply no multiplicity adjustment to them.

6.3 Statistical power

We assess statistical power using two-sided tests with $\alpha = 0.05$ and the conventional 80% power target. With $R = 2{,}500$ respondents, $J = 7$ tasks, and $K = 2$ profiles, the raw number of profile evaluations is $n_{\text{raw}} = R \cdot J \cdot K = 35{,}000$. To account for within-

respondent clustering we apply a design-effect correction (Schuessler and Freitag, 2020) with cluster size $m = J \cdot K = 14$ and an intra-cluster correlation of $\rho = 0.05$, giving $\text{DE} = 1 + (m-1)\rho = 1.65$ and an effective sample size of $n_{\text{eff}} = n_{\text{raw}}/\text{DE} \approx 21{,}212$. The minimum detectable effect at 80% power is $\text{MDE} = (z_{1-\alpha/2} + z_{1-\beta})\,\text{SE}$.

Main effects (AMCEs) For the eight conjoint attributes, the minimum detectable AMCE ranges from approximately 1.9 percentage points (two-level attributes) to 3.0 percentage points (five-level attributes such as residence). These MDEs lie below the 3–8 pp AMCEs typically reported in the candidate-locality literature, so the main-effect tests (H1–H3) are well powered.

Interaction tests (confirmatory) Each substitution hypothesis is tested on a pre-specified 2×2 contrast (Section 3.3). The interaction coefficient is a difference-in-differences across four cells whose sizes are unequal, because the collapsed levels carry unequal mass: the smallest cell (e.g., local-born $\times$ long-rooted, $\approx$ 2,800 effective observations) dominates the variance. The resulting minimum detectable interaction is approximately 4.2 percentage points across the three contrasts, corresponding to power of roughly 50% at a true 3 pp interaction, 75% at 4 pp, and 90% at 5 pp. The plausibility constraint (birthplace fixed to X when residence is "raised and residing") further thins the local-born $\times$ long-rooted cell, so these figures are mildly optimistic for the birthplace $\times$ residence contrast.

6.4 Design validity and diagnostic checks

We conduct the following diagnostic checks to assess the validity of the conjoint design and the identification assumptions underlying the AMCE estimation:

- We examine randomization balance across attribute levels and respondent characteristics.
- We test for profile-order effects by comparing choice probabilities across left and right profile positions.
- We test for interactions between profile position and task order, to diagnose whether position effects vary systematically over the course of the experiment. If position effects vary with task order, which could suggest fatigue-driven satisficing, we report estimates restricted to earlier tasks as a sensitivity check.
- We assess task stability and potential carryover effects by interacting key attribute effects with task order to detect systematic learning or fatigue across tasks.
- We examine attribute-order primacy to ensure that the fixed within-respondent attribute order does not systematically bias responses.

Respondents who answer fewer than two of the three attention-check items correctly are excluded from the analysis sample as a quality failure, as described in Section 5.1; this exclusion is applied to the main sample rather than only as a sensitivity check. Among the retained respondents, who answered at least two items correctly, we additionally report sensitivity estimates that further exclude those who failed the fabrication item (the marital-status item, for which the correct response is "not shown"), since failing this item may reflect active confabulation rather than passive carelessness and thus a qualitatively different form of inattention.

As a further data-quality screen, we exclude speeders, i.e., respondents who complete the questionnaire implausibly fast, which indicates insufficient engagement with the tasks. In contrast to the attention-check criterion above, the speeder exclusion is applied to the main analysis sample rather than only as a sensitivity check, since implausibly fast completion is a direct behavioral indicator of non-engagement with the full survey. Respondents whose total completion time falls below approximately one third of the median completion time are removed from the analysis sample. As a sensitivity check, we re-estimate the primary AMCEs on the full sample without the speeder exclusion to confirm that the results are not driven by this screen.

Because the forced-choice and the rating-based evaluation are collected as distinct outcomes, the two can, in principle, diverge within a task. A respondent may select one profile while assigning a strictly higher rating to the other. We deliberately do not constrain responses to be consistent, since the forced-choice is a comparative judgment, whereas the rating is an absolute, profile-level evaluation, and their divergence – if aligning with the forced-choice outcome – is informative about preference intensity. We report the prevalence of cases in which the profile that is chosen receives a strictly lower rating than the other profile. We define such a strict reversal at the task level as a completed task in which the chosen profile is rated strictly below the unchosen one, with equal ratings not counting as reversals. As a robustness check, we re-estimate the primary AMCEs in two specifications: one that excludes all tasks flagged as strict reversals, and one that excludes respondents who exhibit a strict reversal in at least four of their seven completed tasks. These are robustness re-estimations of the primary estimand rather than additional hypothesis tests, so no multiplicity adjustment applies.

6.5 Interpretation and scope

All results are interpreted as average causal effects of candidate attributes on stated vote choice in a hypothetical local-election context. This interpretation has several limitations. First, the conjoint design identifies the relative weight respondents place on observable candidate characteristics, but is not designed to directly disentangle the underlying mechanisms, that is, whether locality cues operate through identity congruence, competence

inferences, or trustworthiness perceptions. The comparative perception items collected after the final task provide suggestive descriptive evidence on these channels but do not allow for causal mediation claims.

Second, stated preferences in a hypothetical conjoint setting may overstate the role of personal candidate characteristics relative to real elections, where partisan cues are more deeply encoded, campaign dynamics shape salience, and incumbency advantages constrain the choice set. The conjoint environment strips away these contextual factors by design, which strengthens internal validity but limits direct generalization to actual electoral outcomes.

Third, our sample comprises voting-eligible residents across German municipalities of varying size. While quota-matching ensures broad demographic coverage, the results reflect stated preferences in an online survey context and may not extend to settings with substantially different local political institutions, electoral rules, or associational cultures outside Germany.

Fourth, the analysis identifies which locality cues shape preferences but does not speak to the welfare implications of locality-based voting. Whether voters' preference for local candidates reflects efficient information processing or in-group bias with allocative costs is beyond the scope of this study.

7 Deliverables

We will write a peer-reviewed journal article including the analyses as outlined in this pre-analysis plan. In addition, results will be communicated via non-peer-reviewed policy publications.

8 Calendar

Table 2: Timeline for implementation and analysis

Time	**Work package**
June 2026	Questionnaire and experiment implementation, pre-test
July 2026	Fieldwork survey
July/August 2026	Data cleaning, data analysis
September/October 2026	Paper draft, submission to conferences
From January 2027	Conferences/workshops/submission

9 Funding

Funding for the data collection and the survey software license is from two sources. First, we acknowledge funding from the *DGOF – Deutsche Gesellschaft für Online-Forschung* (German Society for Online Research). Second, we acknowledge funding from the Chair of Economics, esp Public Economics at the Dresden University of Technology.

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Additional material

Table 3: Conjoint experiment (exact German wording)

Attribute	Levels
Geschlecht	**männlich**, weiblich
Alter	**27**, 36, 45, 54, 63
Beruf	**Bürokaufmann**, Lehrer, Augenoptiker, Metallbauer, Anwalt
Politische Erfahrung	**Keine kommunalpolitische Erfahrung**, Gemeinderat, Erfahrung als Bürgermeister
Liste	**Parteiloser Kandidat**, Gemeinsamer Kandidat von SPD und Grüne, Gemeinsamer Kandidat von CDU und FDP, Kandidat einer lokalen Liste
Engagement	**Mitglied in keinem Verein**, Mitglied im örtlichen Sportverein, Teil des Vorstands im örtlichen Sportverein
Geburtsort	**[Gemeinde]**, [andere Gemeinde derselben Gemeindegrößeklasse im gleichen Bundesland], [andere Gemeinde derselben Gemeindegrößeklasse in einem anderen Bundesland]
Wohnort	**Aufgewachsen und wohnhaft in [*Gemeinde*]**, Vor 2 Jahren nach [*Gemeinde*] gezogen, Vor 7 Jahren nach [*Gemeinde*] gezogen, Vor 12 Jahren nach [*Gemeinde*] gezogen, Vor 17 Jahren nach [*Gemeinde*] gezogen

Notes: Variable parts of the levels in square brackets. Baseline levels are depicted in bold. Note that when implementing, we adjust the wording when the gender is female. CSU is shown for respondents in Bavaria instead of CDU. We show the state in brackets behind the variable levels of "Geburtsort" (e.g., "Hallerndorf (Bayern)"). When place of birth is [Gemeinde] but place of residence is not Aufgewachsen und wohnhaft in [Gemeinde]", the residence wording is shown as a return move (e.g., Vor 7 Jahren zurück nach [Gemeinde] gezogen").