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Narratives of Backlash? Perceptions of Changing Status Hierarchies in Open- Ended Survey Responses

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Abstract

It is widely accepted in political science – and remarkably established in public discourse – that status anxieties fuel a far right backlash against progressive politics. This narrative suggests that right-wing conservatives perceive the status of women, racial, or sexual minorities as threatening. Using open-ended survey questions fielded in Germany, we show that women and minorities do figure in people’s perceptions of status hierarchies, but in very specific ways: First, overall, people still perceive status as largely socioeconomically determined. Second, sociocultural groups figure in perceptions of who is gaining/losing status, less so in perceptions of the top/bottom of society. Third, more than authoritarian voters, it is social progressives who perceive women and minorities as “winners”. While on race/ethnicity, we find evidence for a backlash, on gender and sexuality we find more evidence for a progressive momentum. This matters for progressive politics today and for how we empirically study status concerns.

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1 Introduction

The notion that the rise of the far right is rooted in concerns about status, especially among a white male working class, has become one of the most widely perceived and accepted in political science. There is good reason for this, considering a burgeoning literature building on a number of highly influential studies (Gidron and Hall 2017, 2020; Kurer 2020; Kurer and Van Staaldin 2022; Engler and Weisstanner 2021; Gest 2016; Mutz 2018; Hochschild 2016; Cramer 2016; Nachtwey 2016; Nolan and Weisstanner 2022; Burgoon et al. 2019). The narrative of a “backlash” against economic and social change was also taken up by the media and has entered public discourse with a remarkable reach and tenacity (spreading from a US and Trump-focused discourse to other countries). Perhaps no other political science theory has been as widely absorbed into public debates in recent years as that according to which conservative “old white men” are threatened by the improved social position of (educated) women, racial, ethnic, or sexual minorities¹.

In this paper, we use open-ended survey questions from an original, population-representative survey in Germany to study *to what extent, how, and among whom the status (gains) of women or minorities are actually perceived*. The pervasiveness of discussions about shifting hierarchies of gender, race, or sexual orientation suggests that such “sociocultural” factors have become prominent (if not predominant) in how people, and especially social conservatives, think about the social rank order. Certainly the typical New York Times reader (or her equivalent in other countries) could not be faulted for imagining this to be the case. However, we actually know little about which aspects of a backlash narrative are fully articulated in people’s minds, going beyond a diffuse sense of unease and threat triggered by social change.

We indeed expect the status of graduates, women, or minorities to figure in people’s

¹ For just a few examples from the US, the UK, or Germany see [NYT, April 2018](#), [NYT, December 2020](#), [die Zeit, May 2016](#), or [The Guardian, January 2017](#).

mental maps of society, but in much more specific and uneven ways than broad narratives of backlash might suggest. We formulate a theoretical framework for thinking about people’s status perceptions in a modern 21st century “knowledge society” (Iversen and Soskice 2019; Kitschelt and Rehm 2022; Hall 2021), along three dimensions: In addition to building on a literature that distinguishes “socioeconomic” and “sociocultural” group conflicts (Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2008; Hooghe and Marks 2018), we emphasize the importance of separately considering people’s perceptions of (static) established hierarchies versus (dynamic) ongoing social shifts (cf. Gest 2016; Gest et al. 2018), as well as variation in how homogeneously (or not) specific aspects of social hierarchies are perceived across subgroups.

Using quantitative text analyses of our open-ended survey responses (building on recent work e.g. by Rothschild et al. 2019 or Zollinger 2022), we first show that even in times of increased sociocultural polarization, social hierarchies are still perceived in largely socioeconomic terms. Second, sociocultural group dynamics (and especially relative status gains of women or minorities) are perceived primarily from a dynamic perspective, less so when people consider the current state of the social rank order. This suggests that the widely available survey item on subjective social status is highly unlikely to capture sociocultural group conflicts due to its static character. Third, changes in rankings by gender and sexuality are unevenly mentioned across subgroups: more so than social conservatives, it is social progressives to whom status gains among women or sexual minorities appear to be disproportionately salient. By contrast, open-ended responses suggest that shifts in the status of ethnic and racial minorities (“foreigners”, “immigrants”) are perceived to a similar extent by respondents with authoritarian and progressive attitudes, while varying response language clearly reflects the different light in which these subgroups evaluate these perceived developments.

In sum, on race and ethnicity, we find evidence of a fully-articulated backlash in how

people think about changing social hierarchies; however, on gender and sexuality, we find more specific evidence for a progressive momentum. On the one hand, this validates a productive research agenda focused on linking voters' status concerns to often socioculturally mobilized electoral conflicts: All the main groups that have been theorized as potentially threatening to right-wing, nativist voters figure in our respondents' descriptions of (changing) social hierarchies. On the other hand, our analyses place sweeping narratives of cultural backlash into perspective: the social position of women and minorities appears relatively more salient to social progressives; these groups do not figure particularly prominently in perceptions of (static) social hierarchies today; and – perhaps most importantly – status perceptions are still mainly about economic resources for most people. These results from the German case should travel to other advanced democracies, as Germany has by now experienced all the structural changes and electoral upheavals typical of advanced democracies.

While much of the attention in debates about a political “backlash” has been focused on those supposedly left behind by economic and social change, we see our findings as having important implications for what inclusive progressive politics might entail in the 21st century knowledge economy. Generally, we find very little evidence that people have been “distracted” from traditional economic inequalities, as is sometimes implied by accounts of cultural backlash (this is in line with qualitative work, e.g. Beck and Westheuser 2022). Even socially progressive voters to whom (ongoing) status gains of women or minorities appear disproportionately salient perceive social hierarchies predominantly in socioeconomic terms. In other words, those people who are most likely to care about advancing gender equality and minority rights are also sensitive to traditional economic inequalities (cf. Abou-Chadi and Hix 2021).

2 How “status” has helped (and hindered) our understanding of politics in advanced democracies

Interest in voters’ status perceptions has increased in part because of the difficulties of explaining emerging political divides purely on the basis of (narrow) material economic circumstances. Initially, this sparked debates about whether economic or cultural factors are primarily responsible for the rise of the far right in opposition to the new left (Manow 2018; Norris and Inglehart 2019). Status has gained prominence as a concept that fruitfully enables us to move beyond such a “horse race” perspective and acknowledge that economic and cultural shifts often interact (Gidron and Hall 2017; Mutz 2018; Engler and Weisstanner 2021; Bolet 2021).

The status concept has helped make the amalgamation of economic and cultural aspects of structural change explicit. Weber (1978[1922]) famously identified status as a distinctive feature of social stratification, related to but separate from class relations. Embodying broader cultural notions of who is accorded honor, recognition and respect in society, status (today as in the past) may be rooted in economic position, but also in a more diverse set of characteristics and resources (Gidron and Hall 2017; Oesch and Vigna 2022). Relatedly, renewed interest in voters’ perceptions of social hierarchies has gone hand in hand with a growing recognition that *relative* (as opposed to absolute) social positions matter for the political divides that are shaping 21st century politics (Kurer and Van Staalduin 2022; Kurer 2020; Engler and Weisstanner 2021; Rooduijn and Burgoon 2018; Nolan and Weisstanner 2022; Bolet 2022).

The primary approach in recent studies that focus on how status perceptions help advance our understanding of political transformations has been to link voters’ subjective social status to political outcomes. This work typically makes use of a survey item that asks respondents to place themselves in a social hierarchy, the “social ladder” question

(Gidron and Hall 2017; Kurer 2020; Engler and Weisstanner 2021). This research also tends to *infer* “cultural” resentment against improvements in the social position of graduates, women, and minorities from support for the far right among the lower-educated, older male workers.

Importantly, though, such self-placements on an abstract social ladder themselves provide no information about how people think about social hierarchies, let alone changes in the rankings of different groups. Beyond qualitative ethnographic work which documents a “cultural backlash” among certain groups disadvantaged by economic and social change (Hochschild 2016; Cramer 2016; Gest 2016, also see Damhuis 2020; Westheuser 2021), there is a surprising lack of evidence from representative surveys in recent work on the political consequences of status loss, anxiety, or threat on how voters think about (changes in) the broader social hierarchy.

Going beyond the focus on subjective social status in recent research, we ask survey respondents to describe various aspects of the social hierarchy as they perceive it, adding to a growing body of work that analyzes open-ended survey questions to study how people perceive society, social conflicts, or group identities (Rothschild et al. 2019; Zollinger 2022; Gidron, Sheffer, et al. 2022). This allows us to directly investigate some of the assumptions made in existing work on status shifts, particularly about authoritarians’ perceptions of how (highly-educated) women, racial, ethnic, or sexual minorities rank in the social order. In other words, our interest here is not in voters’ own sense of status, but in which aspects of a backlash narrative are fully articulated in people’s mental maps of a changing society.

3 Theorizing (changing) status perceptions in 21st century politics

Theoretically, there are good reasons to expect graduates, women, and minorities to figure in people's mental maps of society in much more limited and specific ways than the most sweeping accounts of a cultural backlash tend to suggest. To develop this point, we distinguish three dimensions of people's perceptions of the social order: 1) socioeconomic versus sociocultural group hierarchies (an analytical distinction based on two main dimensions of political conflict in advanced democracies), 2) static versus dynamically changing hierarchies, and 3) aspects of social hierarchies that are homogeneously perceived across society as opposed to heterogeneously across subgroups.

First, although a vast body of work has shown that more "sociocultural" group conflicts associated with a "second" dimension of political competition have become salient and politicized (especially by the far right and the new left, see Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2008; Hooghe and Marks 2018; Beramendi et al. 2015; Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Bornschieer, Colombo, et al. 2021), we can expect "socioeconomic" categories to still be highly if not primarily relevant for how people think about status today. The far-reaching shift from an industrial to a knowledge economy (Iversen and Soskice 2019; Hall 2021) has not challenged the fundamentally capitalist nature of our societies, in which economic resources represent a key source and indicator of social valuation (Weber 1978[1922]; Chan and Goldthorpe 2007; Savage et al. 2013; Westheuser 2021). Economic resources have been shown to provide a primary and widely accepted baseline for people's perception of a hierarchical social order (Harrits and Pedersen 2017). Broad references to the "rich and the poor" (based on income and wealth) or to "upper and lower" classes (based on economic resources and occupation) are likely to provide broad underpinnings for notions of the social hierarchy. If anything, rising inequality in previous decades and

especially the neoliberal turn of the 1980s and 1990s should have further entrenched economic resources and individuals' success on the market as markers of status (Hall and Lamont 2013).

To be clear, by analytically distinguishing “socioeconomic” and “sociocultural” groups, we do not mean to say that the social positions of women or minorities² are unrelated to socioeconomic inequalities. On the contrary, social change is tightly bound up with the shift towards a knowledge society, which has come with an expansion of education, a diversifying class structure, feminization of labor markets, and generally progressive value change (Iversen and Soskice 2019; Hall 2021; Garritzmann et al. 2021; Oesch 2008; Gingrich and Häusermann 2015)³. Instead, we base this distinction on the above-cited rich literature that identifies a (first) socioeconomic dimension of political conflict as well as a (second) more sociocultural one. Our point is that while the well-documented increase in the salience and politicization of the second dimension suggest that people are increasingly concerned with the social position of groups defined by gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality, the group distinctions traditionally associated with “first dimension” state-market conflicts (income, wealth, occupation) are still likely to dominate how people broadly think about status and status hierarchies. The same goes for education, which is increasingly associated with second dimension politics (Marks et al. 2022; Kitschelt and Rehm 2022; Abou-Chadi and Hix 2021), but which is also a long-established traditional source and embodiment of status (Bourdieu 1984). Although the relative political salience of traditional socioeconomic conflicts has declined, the underlying and deeply ingrained ways in which people think about social worth are unlikely to have changed.

Coming to our second point, we expect sociocultural groups to figure in people's

² These characteristics of course intersect in ways highly relevant to status.

³ In other words, we have no desire to revive the “economics versus culture” horse race alluded to in the previous section.

mental maps of society mainly from a dynamic perspective and much less so from a static one. By dynamic, we mean people’s perceptions of how social hierarchies are changing, with some groups gaining and others losing status over time. This point might seem trivial, given that accounts of status anxiety and cultural backlash often do imply shifts in social hierarchies, taking place roughly within the past 50 years. However, existing research is often not clear on this dynamic point. Notably, some studies (likely due to data limitations) make use of survey respondents’ self-placements in static social hierarchies (high, middle, low) while interpreting results based on theories about social change (most prominently, Gidron and Hall 2017; but see Gest et al. 2018 for a notable exception). Importantly, despite tremendous changes in the awareness and politicization of, as well as in the steepness of hierarchies of gender, race, or sexuality, these traditional rank orders have seldom been eliminated, let alone reversed. In other words, even if people perceived the social recognition accorded to, say, homosexuals compared to heterosexuals or women as compared to men to have evened out, we would not expect women or LGBTQ+ groups to anchor people’s perceptions of who is at the top of society.

Note that we do not expect socioeconomic groups to be irrelevant to perceptions of dynamically changing social hierarchies. Rather, we are saying that where women and minorities *do* figure prominently in people’s mental maps of society, it should be when people think about ongoing *changes* in who receives social recognition and respect (more so than when people think about current high versus low status). Although our focus here is on these socioculturally defined groups, it is in fact to be expected that socioeconomic factors like occupation also figure prominently in perceptions of dynamically changing social hierarchies: Pundits’ talk of liberal “educational elites” opposing a “left behind” working class or “squeezed” white middle class often capture images of relatively changing social positions. Empirically, it is well-established by now

that the far right tends to mobilize historically privileged, fairly well-off, well-protected groups (Kurer 2020; Mutz 2018; Jardina 2019; Bornschier and Kriesi 2013; Oesch and Rennwald 2018) while, conversely, the (new) left educated middle class includes groups who are precariously employed or hold underpaid jobs in the social, education, or health sectors (Gingrich and Häusermann 2015; Häusermann, Kurer, et al. 2015; Abou-Chadi and Hix 2021; Kitschelt and Rehm 2022). In other words, for certain socioeconomic groups too, absolute social rankings might be murky while perceived changes in social standing are salient and politicized.

Third, returning to our focus on sociocultural groups, we can come up with competing hypotheses about which subgroups are most likely to mention graduates, women, or minorities when thinking about social hierarchies. Accounts of perceived relative decline and backlash against progressive change that benefits women, racial, ethnic, or sexual minorities suggests that it is primarily authoritarian voters who are (resentfully) preoccupied with these groups' improving positions.⁴ Certainly that is a (sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit) assumption made in much of the recent work on how subjective social status relates to far right support (Gidron and Hall 2017; Kurer 2020; Engler and Weisstanner 2021; Nolan and Weisstanner 2022). This is also a pattern that could be expected based on ethnographic work that documents instances of authoritarian voters feeling “left behind” when comparing themselves to hitherto disadvantaged social groups (Hochschild 2016).

On the other hand, authoritarian individuals may not be particularly likely to actively perceive and acknowledge that women and minorities have gained status, either because these changes are not, in fact, as salient to them as a “backlash” narrative suggests, or because they negate these groups' upward trajectory – for political reasons and/or because of psychological and social motivations to maintain a positive sense of relative

⁴ By authoritarian, we mean the socially conservative, TAN pole of the GAL-TAN dimension.

status (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Shayo 2009; Lamont 2000). Instead, we could imagine that it is precisely the social progressives most concerned with and sensitive to gender equality and minority rights who might perceive these particular social trajectories. Exposure to accounts of “old white men” in left-liberal media outlets, to progressive political actors who challenge established hierarchies or embody social change (including movements like Black Lives Matter or MeToo), or to social environments where roles and norms have transformed makes this especially likely.

In sum, we expect the social position of (educated) women, ethnic, racial, or sexual minorities to figure in people’s mental maps of the social hierarchy in important but limited and specific ways: We expect them to still be secondary to economic-material resources in how people think about social hierarchies (even in an age of supposed “culture wars”); we expect them to feature specifically in how people think about dynamically changing social hierarchies rather than the (static) top/bottom of society; and we expect them to be unevenly perceived as gaining status across progressive versus authoritarian subgroups.

4 Research design

4.1 Data and case

To study (shifting) status perceptions we conducted an original online survey in Germany in 2022. Germany represents a fairly “average” case regarding both its economic and sociocultural development in recent years. Economic inequality has not increased to the same extent as in the Anglo-Saxon world, but distributive conflicts have featured in the political debates over the last decades not least due to a comparatively large and growing low-wage sector (Palier and Thelen 2010). Sociocultural political conflicts

have equally intensified. After the early emergence of the Green party in Germany, the breakthrough of the radical right party AfD came later than far right successes in some other Western European countries, but has significantly reshaped the political landscape in recent years (Kriesi et al. 2008; Oesch and Rennwald 2018; Kurer and Palier 2019). We would therefore argue that status perceptions in Germany should be comparable to those of other advanced democracies with similar structural and electoral changes.

A total of 3812 respondents took part in the survey and passed attention and speeding checks.⁵ Table A1 in the appendix presents the sample characteristics. The implemented quotas ensure that the sample reflects the population of Germany with regards to education, age, gender, and federate state.

4.2 Measures

Finding out which social groups are meaningful and accessible in individual’s minds when thinking broadly about societal hierarchies is not an easy task for quantitative, survey-based research. Closed-ended questions on where groups like women versus men or high-income versus low-income people stand in society would prime respondents to think about specific aspects of social stratification. In our unprompted framework based on open-ended survey questions, whether and how status groups are described can tell us about the social reality individuals have in mind when thinking about social hierarchies today and over time.

First, to elicit perceptions of *changing social hierarchies*, we asked respondents to describe people who have gained/lost recognition and respect compared to the past. We introduced these questions by stating that “The extent to which groups are recognized and respected in our society changes over time.” We also added information on respon-

⁵ More information on the attention check and survey overall can be found in [Appendix A](#).

dents' own perceived trajectory: "You yourself previously stated that the social position of people like yourself has rather [decreased/increased] over the past 30 years." Second, we asked respondents to describe people who are currently at the *top*, *in the middle*, and *at the bottom of society*, again encouraging them to name characteristics, lifestyles and opinions of the people they categorize into these three groups. We also presented respondents with their own previous self-placement on the (present) social ladder. The full question wording of all open-ended questions is included in Appendix A2.

We would like to elaborate on some of our specific decisions regarding question wording: We use the more colloquial terms "respect" and "recognition" rather than the more abstract term "status", since we expect it to resonate more with respondents. A concern here might be that "respect" and "recognition" per se trigger more sociocultural group connotations. However, in a pilot wave of the survey, we asked the static question eliciting people's descriptions of the top/bottom of society without reference to respect/recognition. Appendix A3 shows that, nevertheless, the most frequently mentioned terms across the two survey waves are strikingly consistent, which suggests that people's responses are not very sensitive to the specific question wording here.

Another concern might be that sociocultural categories do not have a "fair" chance against economic ones in a hierarchical setting focused on the "top" and "bottom" of society, given how social worth in our societies is typically monetized and made quantifiable. Besides the fact that this might be substantively true and hence exactly what we want to capture, we aimed to level the playing field by *first* asking about perceptions of dynamic shifts, which we expect to be most likely to bring sociocultural groups to mind (and by broadly asking for "characteristics, lifestyles, opinions"). Importantly, we think of "top" and "bottom" not only as inherent in the mental image of hierarchy, but these terms also figure in the wording of the widely used subjective social status item. Using these same terms allows us to cumulatively build on research using this item by

studying whether the assumptions it makes about cultural backlash are true.

To classify respondents by their sociocultural ideology, we take the mean support for three items covering typical second-dimension topics, namely immigration, EU integration, and gender equality (Häusermann and Kriesi 2015; Oesch and Rennwald 2018).⁶ We then split this index above the mean to form two groups of respondents with progressive versus authoritarian attitudes.

4.3 Text analysis of open questions

Answering open-ended questions about the status hierarchy is a demanding exercise. We therefore first describe how respondents reacted to our open-ended questions before describing our pre-processing and analysis strategy. On average, respondents wrote 10 (10) words when answering the question on who gained (lost) respect and recognition.⁷ The median answer time for questions on perceived status changes was slightly over a minute and a half. The questions about who is at the top, in the middle and at the bottom of society yielded on average 8 to 9 words for each category. Both the average amount of words written and the time spent answering all of the questions indicate that people are able and willing to answer open-ended survey questions related to social status. With roughly 3-4% of answers to either static or dynamic questions comprising less than three characters, this indicates that the large majority of our sample dealt with our questions and made substantial attempts at answering them.

We pre-processed the answers to each open-ended question using the `quanteda` R package (Benoit et al. 2018), removing answers with fewer than three characters (i.e.

⁶ These items read: “Overall, immigration is bad for German society.”; “European integration has gone too far.”; “The bottom line is that the family suffers when the wife works full time.”

⁷ For all open question, respondents were required to write at least one character to proceed in the questionnaire.

non-answers), punctuation, transforming everything to lower case, including frequent and meaningful collocations (combinations of two or three words), and removing stop words (such as “and” or “the”) (Appendix B includes details on preprocessing).

When analyzing our open-ended questions, we primarily opt for showing “raw” terms. The great strength of open-ended questions is that we find out about respondents’ mental images of social status hierarchies, based on their own words. Thus, we want to remain close to respondents’ descriptions of status groups. However, we introduce a higher level of abstraction by using a dictionary approach. The dictionary (see Appendix B3) is based on a conceptual distinction between socioeconomic vs. sociocultural aspects of status and group oppositions, in line with our theory. We further consider education as a separate category, since it is of central interest in an emerging knowledge society and widely recognized as linked to material economic outcomes as well as sociocultural attitudes. While we started with a list of theoretically defined terms for the dimensions, we then inductively added terms and adapted the dimensions by systematically reviewing frequently mentioned terms.

We opt for a parsimonious dictionary, meaning that we only categorize those terms that are clearly associated with a socioeconomic versus sociocultural dimension of political conflict in the academic literature and broader public debate. First, for the socioeconomic dimension, we include terms referring to occupations/the labor market and to money (encompassing wealth and poverty). Second, the sociocultural dimension includes terms related to gender, race/immigration, and sexuality. While the term “sociocultural” could of course include a range of other aspects, such as disability, age, or religion, we aim to test the salience of the cultural backlash narrative focusing on its most central categories and catchphrases. Appendix B3 and the presented results based on “raw” responses make our categorizations fully transparent.⁸

⁸ We focus on the socioeconomic, sociocultural and educational dimensions in our results, but [Table B14](#)

5 Results

5.1 Predominance of socioeconomic status perceptions

The upper panel of [Figure 1](#) shows the 20 terms occurring most frequently in responses about groups at the top of society, while the lower panel shows terms mentioned most frequently in descriptions of people at the bottom. Socioeconomic terms (black shading) clearly outweigh sociocultural and educational terms (light gray and dark gray shading) for perceptions of both the top and the bottom of society.⁹

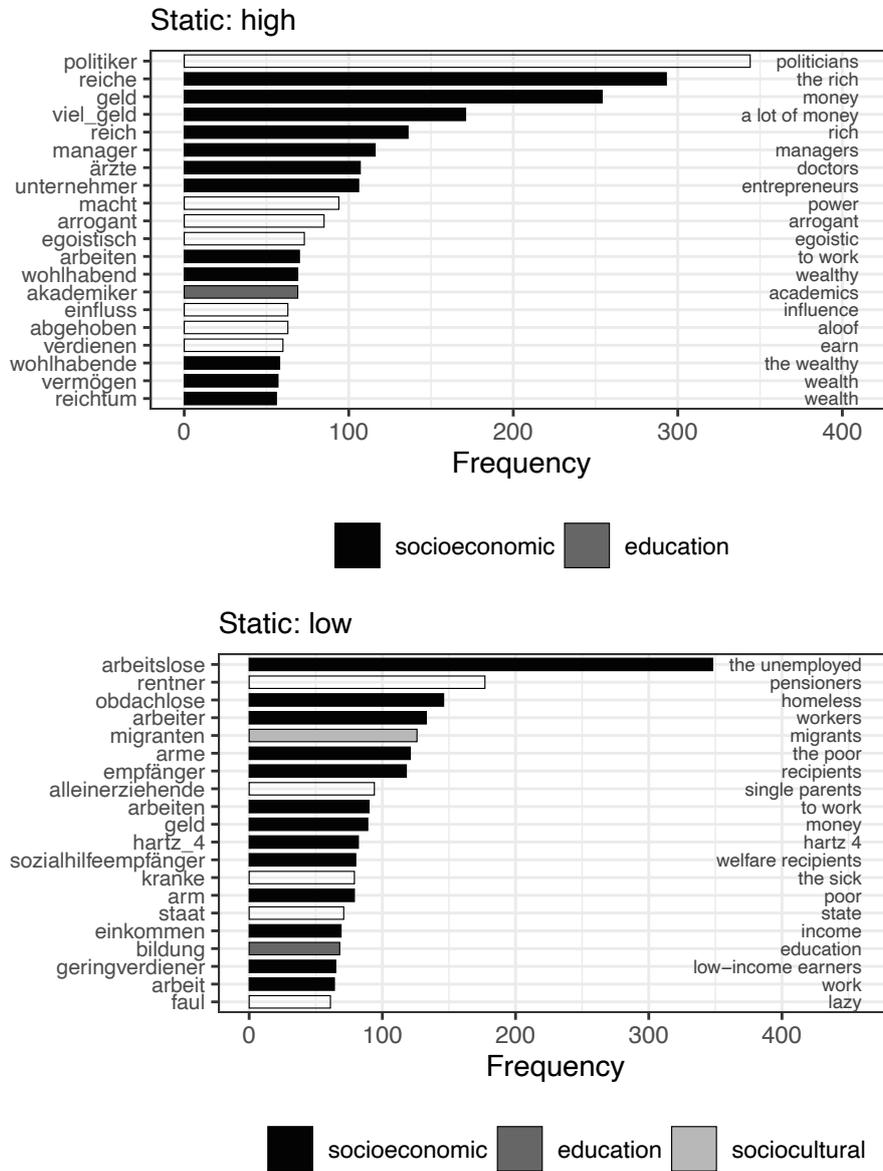
Groups positioned at the top of society are characterized as “the rich”, possessing “a lot of money” or working in elite occupations (“managers” or “doctors”). Another prominent topic relates to political power (“politicians”, “power”), which is neither clearly socioeconomic nor sociocultural in nature. No sociocultural terms appear among the most frequent terms describing the top of society, and “academics” feature as the only educationally defined group. Respondents’ sentiment towards the top of society is indicated by frequently appearing attributes such as “arrogant” or “selfish”. Such negative descriptions of the upper segments of society can be seen as demarcation against “amoral” economic and political elites (Lamont and Molnár 2002).

Socioeconomic terms also dominate perceptions those receiving little respect and recognition in society. Amongst a broader set of recurring terms, all referring to people who do not participate in the labor market and depend on social transfers, the “unemployed” are the most frequently mentioned group (bottom panel, [Figure 1](#)). References to poverty (“the poor”, “low-income earners”, “income”, “poor”, “money”, as well as “homeless”) appear in low status perceptions and mirror the “wealth” category

in the Appendix also shows results for further dimensions focusing on politics and attributes/personality traits.

⁹ Terms that we do not attribute clearly to one dimension are shown in white.

Figure 1: Static status groups - Top 20 absolute frequencies for top and bottom



The frequencies for medium groups are included in [Figure C1](#) in the appendix.

in descriptions of the top of society.

“Migrants”, are the only sociocultural group to appear within the most frequent terms used to describe the bottom of society. It appears among the top five ranks, which shows that people also acknowledge a more cultural type of disadvantage in the current social hierarchy. However, sociocultural groups are clearly less prevalent in people’s static perceptions of social status overall. In general, people make sense of the current status hierarchy in predominantly socioeconomic terms.

5.2 Relative importance of sociocultural status perceptions from a dynamic perspective

For *dynamic* status perceptions, we see that sociocultural groups are relatively more frequent (Figure 2) compared to static perceptions. However, this is only the case for descriptions of status *winners*. The most frequent term here, mentioned almost twice as often as the second most popular word, is “women”. Together with “homosexuals” and “migrants”, these are three important groups commonly associated with sociocultural group conflicts. “Academics” feature in descriptions of status winners, as they also did in perceptions of the top, now accompanied by further references to education (“graduates”, “education”). “Money” and “the rich” still appear frequently but are mentioned less often in comparison to static status terms.

While some professions (“doctors” or “craftsmen”) play a role in the description of those who are gaining respect, occupational groups (“craftsmen”, “police”, “teachers”, “civil servants”) are predominant terms for the description of status *losers*. However, with “migrants” and “men”, two important sociocultural groups also appear prominently here. The symmetry of men among the losing groups and women in descriptions of relative status winners indicates that changing gender relations are to some extent

Figure 2: Dynamic status groups - Top 20 absolute frequencies for winners and losers

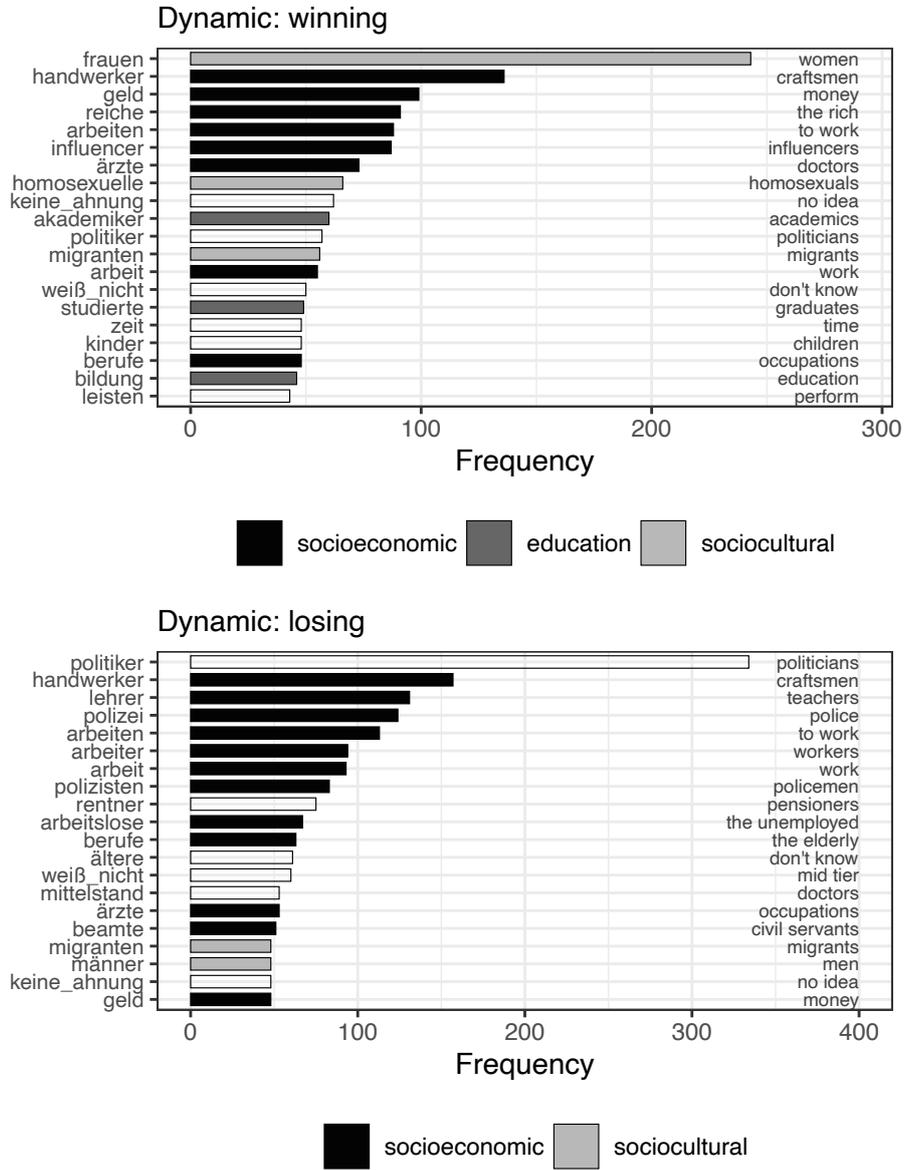


Table 1: Saliency of dictionary dimensions

Dimension	Question	N	%
Socioeconomic	static	5163	47.0
	dynamic	2793	38.0
Sociocultural	static	511	4.7
	dynamic	825	11.2
Education	static	916	8.3
	dynamic	629	8.6
Total	static	10987	100.0
	dynamic	7349	100.0

Note: The table displays the percentage of answers mentioning a dimension at least once. The dynamic category includes the two questions about winning and losing groups, the static category the three questions about upper, medium and low groups, which is why the Total N differs. More detailed results with the full dictionary (see Appendix B3) can be found in Table B14.

perceived as zero-sum. What we cannot infer, however, is whether respondents think men rightfully lose some of their status advantage. Interestingly, “craftsmen”, as well as “migrants” appear both when asking people about who *wins* and who *loses* status, indicating somewhat diverging perceptions for changes in occupational and racial hierarchies. In general, compared to the static question, “don’t know” answers were more frequent for descriptions of status winners and losers, which could indicate that thinking about status *changes* is more complicated than reporting the perceived status quo.

Our dictionary approach confirms that there is a clear difference between static and dynamic status perceptions regarding the saliency of socioeconomic and sociocultural references (see Table 1).¹⁰ The share of sociocultural groups mentioned in the dynamic questions (11%) is more than twice the static share (5%). Further, the table corroborates the predominance of socioeconomic categories (47% for static and 38% for dynamic status perceptions). Meanwhile, education-related terms feature similarly for both types of status perceptions (8-9%).

¹⁰Table B15 in the appendix breaks down these results by dictionary subdimensions.

5.3 Diverging perceptions of status shifts between progressives and authoritarians

To understand how status shifts matter for electoral conflicts in the 21st century, we contrast responses by individuals with progressive and authoritarian attitudes. We present keyness scores, which identify the most *characteristic* terms mentioned by these subgroups. The following two plots present the twenty terms mentioned with greatest relative frequency by progressive and authoritarian respondents respectively. Importantly, words mentioned with similar frequency by both groups will not appear in these plots, even if they are important in absolute terms.

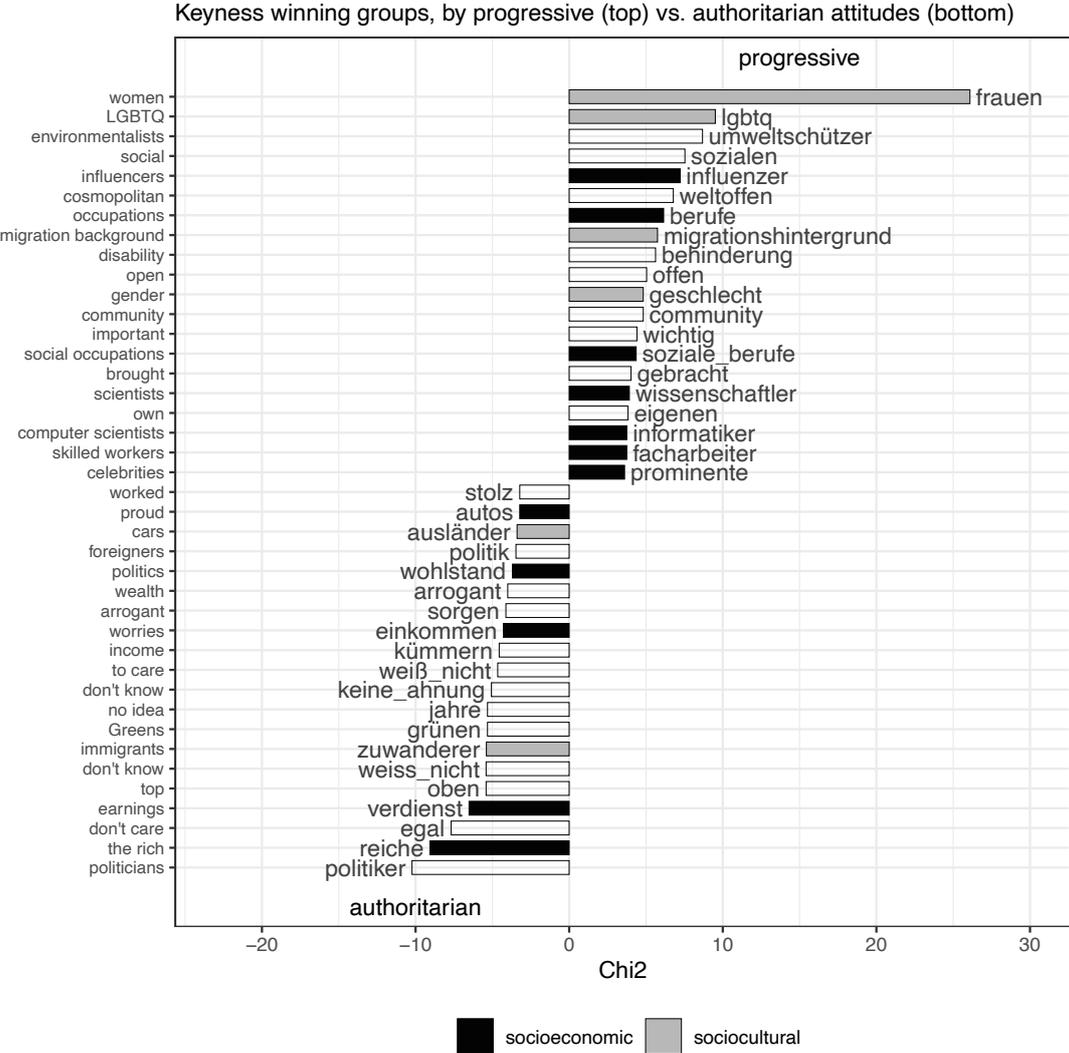
For perceptions of groups that are winning status, we find a notable divergence by attitudinal subgroups for the salience of sociocultural groups (Figure 3). Terms characteristically used by individuals with authoritarian attitudes are shown at the bottom, while words used by progressives are at the top. Rather than sociocultural groups (e.g. women or LGBTQ), terms like “politicians” and “the rich” are most distinctive for authoritarian descriptions of status winners. However, “immigrants” and “foreigners” also set authoritarians’ descriptions of status winners apart.

In contrast to authoritarians, progressives perceive status gains by “women” (gender), “LGBTQ” (sexuality) people, and those with a “migration background” (race) with greater relative frequency, touching on dimensions central to the backlash narrative. In other words, recognizing improvements in the social position of women and LGBTQ people distinguishes progressives’ responses from those of authoritarians.¹¹ Terms surrounding migration and race,¹² on the other hand, appear as distinctive for both groups,

¹¹This does not mean that authoritarians do not mention e.g. women as gaining status at all, but that progressives do so relatively more frequently.

¹²Since in the German context, race as a category is seldom explicitly politicized, in contrast to migration, we interpret mentions of migration background as coded references to race and ethnicity. This is borne out below, where subgroup analyses reveal a contrast to “German” natives.

Figure 3: Subgroup comparison of descriptions of groups perceived to be gaining status



suggesting that this is the more overtly contested dimensions of changing status hierarchies; this aspect features in the keyness statistics because both groups use different language to refer to immigrants (“migration background” among progressives versus “foreigners” or “immigrants” among authoritarians).

For perceptions of status loss, authoritarians most distinctively refer to “Germans” (Figure 4). The conjunction with “country”, “honest people” and “citizens” (unclassified but topically related to descriptions of the majority population) indicates that a sense of status decline for native (white) Germans is highly characteristic for authoritarians. It is important to note that mentioning a unified “German people” as a losing group carries particular weight given Germany’s Nazi past (Marcuse 2008). While such nationalist sentiments are culturally more frowned upon than in other countries, our open questions register an ongoing norm shift with regards to nationalist identities and narratives, underlining that people feel free to express their status concerns (despite potentially interfering social norms, see Miller-Idriss 2009). In combination with insights from the distinctively perceived status winners, status changes related to migration/race seem to be perceived as zero-sum by authoritarians, with “Germans” seen as losing at the expense of “immigrants”.

“Migration background” is the only explicitly sociocultural term that sets apart progressives’ description of social status losers. This mirrors authoritarian responses on this topic, albeit reflecting a very different sentiment. Further, whereas mentioning gender, sexuality and race is distinctive for progressives’ descriptions of status winners, mentioning the opposite sides of these sociocultural developments (men, heterosexuals, no migration background) as status losers does not distinguish progressive from authoritarian views.

Interestingly, education (“academics”, “schooling”) is only a distinctive category for progressives’ views of status losers. This might seem surprising given the importance

of education in knowledge economies. Looking at the context of these mentions reveals that progressives perceive a declining value of tertiary degrees in times of educational expansion. Additionally, they mention “schooling” in the context of groups with no or lower qualifications, thus perceiving downward shifts by people with low education over the past decades.

Finally, progressives mention some political outgroups as status losers (“nazis”, “conservative”, “COVID skeptics”), indicating that they perceive their own progressive values to be on the rise. Authoritarians seem to agree and mention “Greens” as status winners. Thus, politics and socially accepted norms and values seem to be uniformly perceived as changing in a more progressive direction.

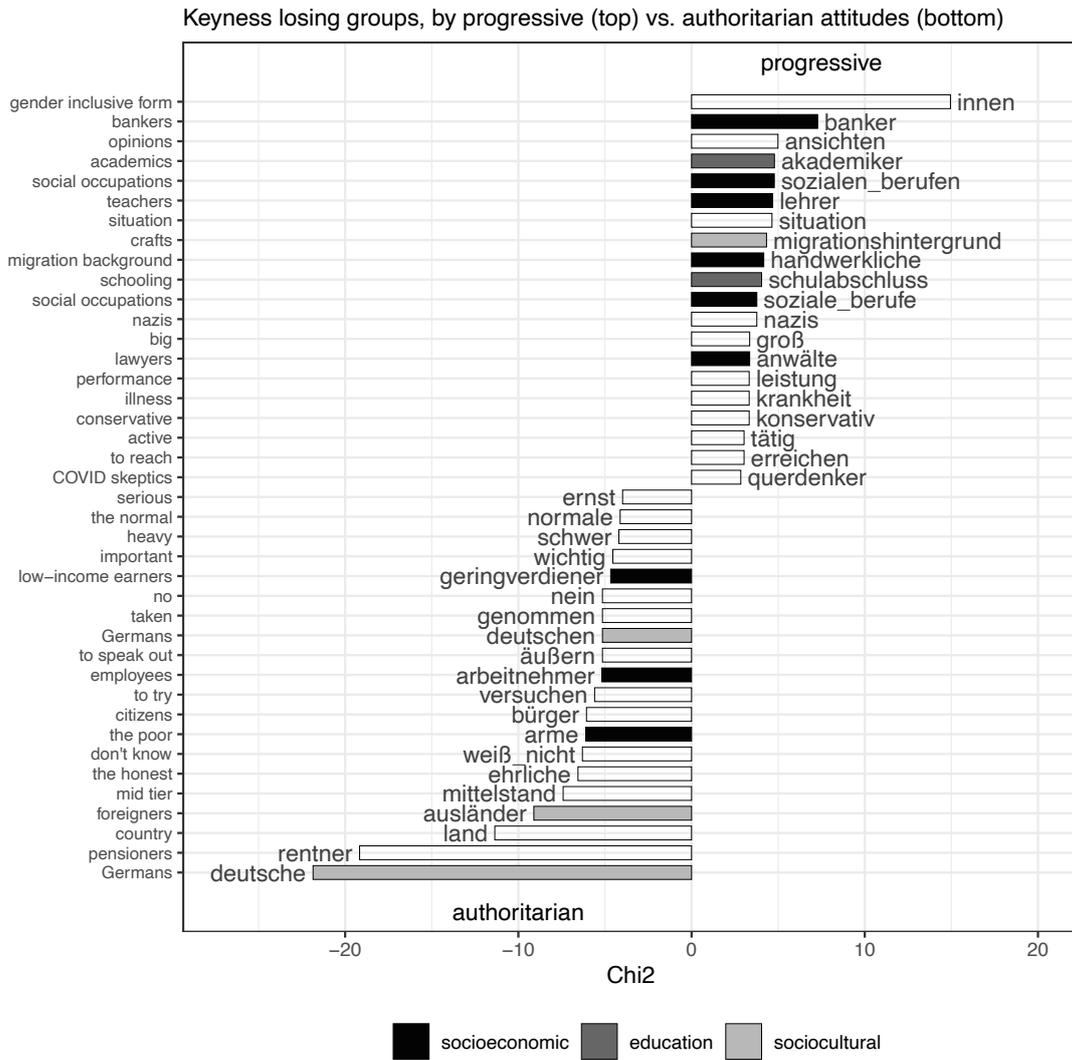
To sum up, we find important differences in perceptions of authoritarians and progressives regarding current status shifts. Progressives’ perceptions of *winner*s are largely sociocultural whereas authoritarians mention sociocultural terms characteristically when thinking about *loser*s of social status. In terms of the type of sociocultural conflicts, we find an emphasis on race/migration among authoritarians and broader associations to gender, sexuality, and race among progressive respondents.

6 Implications

What do we make of these results, both in terms of how we study perceptions of (changing) status hierarchies, as well as more broadly for political conflict in the 21st century knowledge society?

To start with, our findings have clear implications for the empirical study of status anxiety and a “cultural backlash“. Recent research on status anxiety, including highly influential studies, have worked with an item that asks people to place themselves on an social ladder representing their society today (Gidron and Hall 2017, 2020; Kurer 2020;

Figure 4: Subgroup comparison of descriptions of groups perceived to be losing status



Engler and Weisstanner 2021). Our analyses based on open-ended survey responses show this to be problematic, at least in terms of interpretations focused on resentment against sociocultural change. On the one hand, the answers to our open questions suggest that people largely have hierarchies of income, wealth, and generally economic resources in mind when they think about the top or bottom of society.¹³ On the other hand, this study demonstrates that a question about a static (current) social hierarchy is *especially* unlikely to tap into people’s perceptions of how socioculturally defined group positions are changing. For instance, women, while widely perceived as gaining status in our sample (as e.g. Gidron and Hall 2017 suggest), feature nowhere in the most frequent terms with which our respondents describe the top or bottom of society. An approach building on Gest et al. (2018) seems more promising, and complements qualitative work on perceptions of dynamic status shifts (Hochschild 2016; Damhuis 2019; Westheuser 2021). More generally, the picture emerging from our analyses highlights the need for carefully considering the trade-offs between capturing very specific group threats and priming people to think about status shifts that are perhaps not most salient to them in the bigger scheme of things.

Thinking about the real world implications of this study, we generally find very little evidence that people have been “distracted” from economic inequalities by “culture wars” (Frank 2004). Even progressive respondents, who are most likely to perceive and care about improvements in the social position of women and minorities, are overall likely to view social hierarchies primarily in socioeconomic terms. This also supports the notion that there is not necessarily a tension in advancing a political agenda that is socially progressive as well as redistributive (Abou-Chadi and Hix 2021), in contrast to how some mainstream left political actors seem to view and react to the rise of “identity politics” (Weeks and Allen 2022). While our results do not provide direct

¹³Remember that our open-ended questions were preceded by precisely such social ladder questions as used in the recent literature.

evidence of people’s normative judgments of various inequalities, they at least suggest that progressives are also sensitive to economic inequalities.

We find only limited evidence of people perceiving changes in socioculturally defined groups’ positions as clearly zero-sum: while women’s social position is widely perceived to be improving, it is not the case that as many people see men as declining, even when we contrast authoritarians and progressives (similarly for sexual orientation). The highly notable exception here is race and ethnicity, where authoritarians’ sense that “foreigners” are gaining status is mirrored by a perception that (native) “Germans” are losing status.

7 Conclusion

This paper provides new evidence on how individuals think about the social hierarchy. Open-ended questions asking respondents to describe people who are higher and lower in the social order and winning or losing status provide us with a sense of which groups are at the forefront of people’s mental maps of society.

At a very fundamental level, our results show that respondents are able to articulate a structuralist vision of society, naming specific social groups and not just individual attributes like merit or diligence. Social groups that have been of central interest in the scholarly literature figure prominently in voters perceptions. This is the case for women, ethnic, racial or sexual minorities – but these groups feature in people’s perceptions of the status hierarchy in very specific ways.

Our findings show, first, that socioeconomic reference groups remain central to people’s views of social hierarchies, even in a time when sociocultural group conflicts have become politically more salient. We attribute this to long-established economic standards for social valuation. Especially for perceptions of low/high positions in society,

socioeconomic categories are clearly dominant, including references to income, money, wealth versus poverty, as well as elite occupations versus unemployment.

Second, our results clearly show that we need to consider peoples' perceptions of dynamic changes to the social hierarchy separately: while socioeconomic categories are important here as well, this is where much-discussed sociocultural groups such as women, ethnic minorities, or LGBTQ+ groups come into play. According to our respondents' perceptions, social hierarchies related to gender, ethnicity, sexuality etc. have changed, but hardly reversed in absolute terms.

Third, subgroup analyses provide evidence that important aspects of social hierarchies are contested and not equally perceived across different segments of society. Notably, sociocultural groups, such as women and LGBTQ people, are distinctively mentioned as gaining status by progressive respondents, whereas authoritarians characteristically mention native Germans as status losers. Importantly, immigrants' status gains are clearly perceived in a very different light by progressives and authoritarians. Authoritarians' sense that immigrants win while natives lose is the only clear indication we find of changes in social hierarchies being perceived as zero-sum. In contrast, progressives do not view gains by people with migration background as happening at the cost of the majority white population. Generally, while we find evidence of a fully-articulated backlash on matters of race and ethnicity among authoritarians, our results on gender and sexuality are more in line with the idea of a progressive momentum.

Overall, this study validates a productive research agenda seeking to tie voters' status concerns to often socioculturally mobilized electoral conflicts – but it greatly refines the extent to which, where, and how sociocultural aspects of (changing) social hierarchies can be expected to be perceived by voters. We expect our results from Germany to be indicative of voter perceptions in other West European countries, since Germany has experienced all the major structural and economic changes (e.g. educational expansion,

the shift towards a knowledge-based economy, a rise in economic inequality) and waves of political mobilization (the early success of the Greens, the rise of a far right, mobilization around gay and women's rights etc.) that have recently affected and shaped the social fabric of advanced democracies.

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Online Appendix

Narratives of Backlash? Perceptions of Changing Status Hierarchies in Open-Ended Survey Responses

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A. Survey

We fielded our survey in two (non-panel) waves, with 1'941 respondents interviewed in January/February 2022 and another 1'871 in September 2022 (a slight change in wording between the two surveys is discussed in section [A2](#)).

The survey company Respondi recruited our respondents from their online access panel and reimbursed them based on the length of the survey. All respondents were informed about nature and goals of the study and only those providing voluntary and informed consent proceeded in the questionnaire. A pre-test (n of about 300, included in the total sample size) was conducted before the fielding of the survey and confirmed that respondents understood the open questions correctly. For the attention check, we instructed respondents to select a specific value on a seven-point-scale within a battery of items on political preferences (randomized order). Respondents who failed to select the correct value were screened out directly.

The survey started by asking about a first set of sociodemographics (including education and gender for population-representative quotas), followed by social identities, political attitudes, and subjective social status, after which we asked the open questions (see next section), vote choice and finally another set of sociodemographics (including occupation, income, and migration background).

A1. Sample characteristics

Table A1: Sample characteristics

		N	Percent
Gender	female	1934	50.73
	male	1869	49.03
	nonbinary	9	0.24
Education	low education	776	20.36
	medium education	2028	53.20
	high education	1008	26.44
Income	low income	1502	39.40
	medium income	1116	29.28
	high income	877	23.01
Age	18-39 years	1404	36.83
	40-59 years	1453	38.12
	above 60 years	894	23.45
Migration background	no	3264	85.62
	yes	543	14.24
Residence	countryside	888	23.29
	suburb/small city	1898	49.79
	big city	1022	26.81
Vote choice	right party	1323	34.71
	left party	1712	44.91
	other or none	337	20.38
	All	3812	100.00

Income: equivalized according to household size.

Migration background: respondent or at least one parent born abroad.

Residence: self-reported degree of urbanity/rurality.

Vote choice: party voted for in 2021 (or would have voted, if non-citizen)

left: SPD, Greens, LINKE; right: CDU/CSU, FDP, AfD

A2. Open question wording

This section lists the English translations of the original German language open questions.

1. Introduction page:

*Three open questions follow, where you can freely formulate your answers. It is particularly interesting for our research how you think about the social position of different groups in your **own words**. When we determine our own social position, as you did in the previous questions, we usually already have a picture of society in mind. That's what the next questions are about.*

2. Dynamic question:

How much groups are recognized and respected in our society may change over time. You yourself indicated in the previous questions that the social position of people like you has improved/not changed/worsened (depending on subjective social status answers) over the last 30 years.

***Now think about the people who have tended to gain recognition compared to the past.** How would you describe these people? What kind of characteristics, lifestyles, and opinions do these people have?*

***Now think about the people who tend to get less respect compared to before.** How would you describe these people? What kind of characteristics, lifestyles, and opinions do these people have? Just write down what comes to your mind, this is not about right or wrong. Please describe them in a few key words or short sentences.*

Groups winning recognition: _

Groups losing recognition: _

3. Static question:

Let's get back to our society today. Not all social groups receive the same amount of respect and recognition. You have placed yourself in more of a top/medium/bottom (depending on subjective social status answer) social position.

*How would you describe groups that are currently more on the **upper edge** of society, who receive a lot of recognition? How would you describe these people? What characteristics, lifestyles, and opinions do these people have? Please describe them in a few key words or short sentences.*

-

*And how would you describe groups that are in the **middle** of society and tend to get an average amount of respect?*

-

*And how about groups that tend to be at the **lower edge**, who tend to get little recognition?*

-

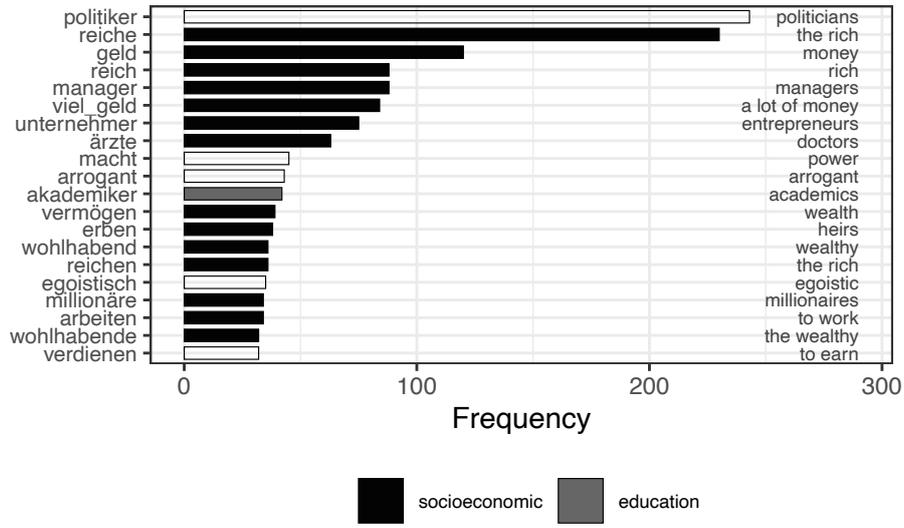
Note: This is the final question wording from our follow-up survey. In the first wave, for the static question, we asked for the top/middle/bottom positions without specifying the terms “recognition and respect”. In the second survey, we introduced these questions about high/low/middling status groups with “Now let’s come back to the present situation. Not all social groups equally receive social recognition and respect”. This addition in the follow-up survey allowed us to make sure that the mention of “recognition and respect” does not fundamentally change the responses that people give across our dynamic and static open-ended status questions. The results in Appendix [A3](#) indicate that the answers across these slightly different question wordings are extremely similar.

A3. Consistency between two surveys

Our first (N of 1’941) and second survey wave (N of 1’871) varied slightly in the question wording for the static open questions (see Appendix [A2](#)). The results in terms of salient status groups are very similar, as shown in the absolute frequency plots below. For each question, results are distinguished by survey wave. The consistency of results for the dynamic perceptions question are shown as a reference point.

Figure A1: High status groups - absolute frequencies

Wave 1 – Static: high



Wave 2 – Static: high

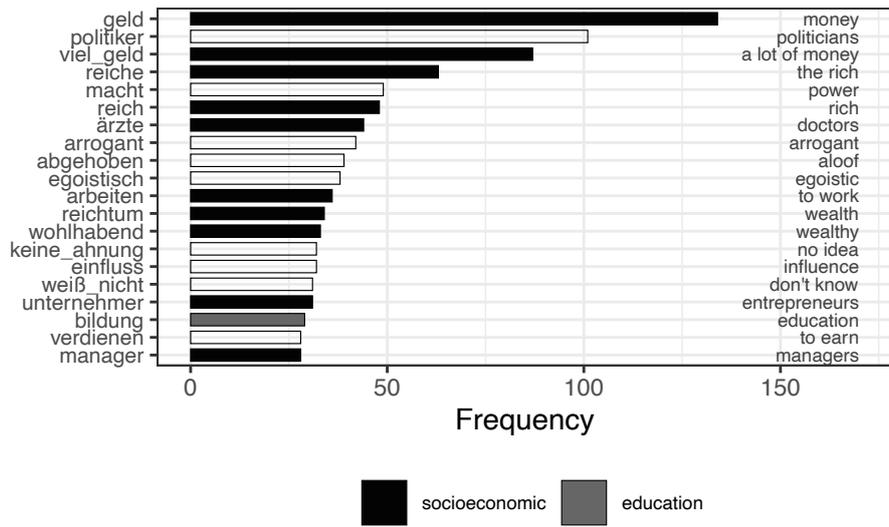
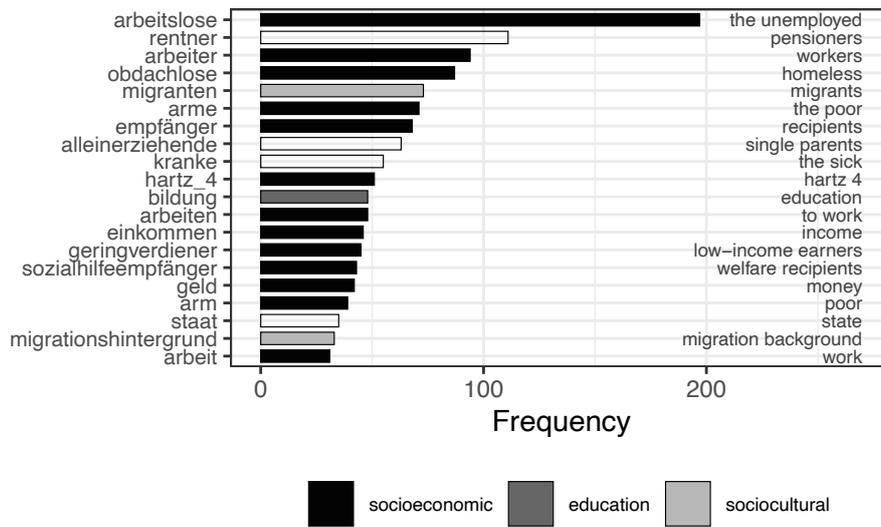


Figure A2: Low status groups - absolute frequencies

Wave 1 – Static: low



Wave 2 – Static: low

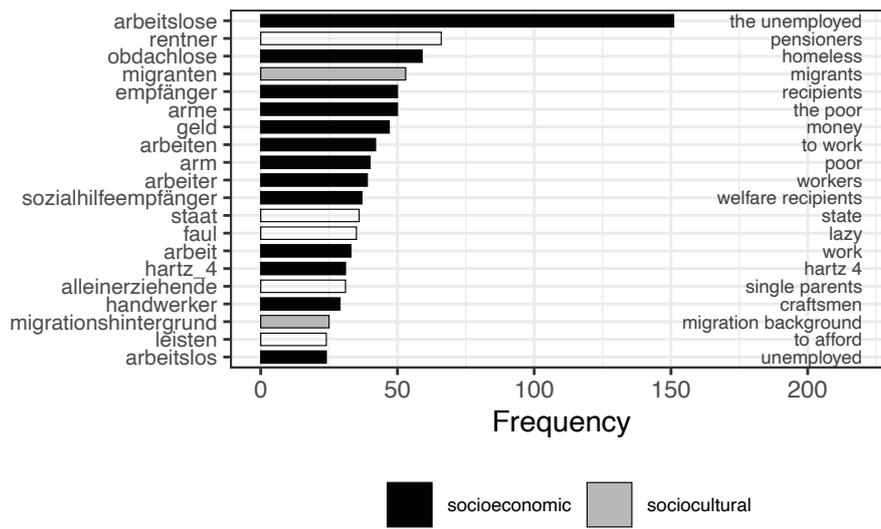


Figure A3: Winning status groups - absolute frequencies

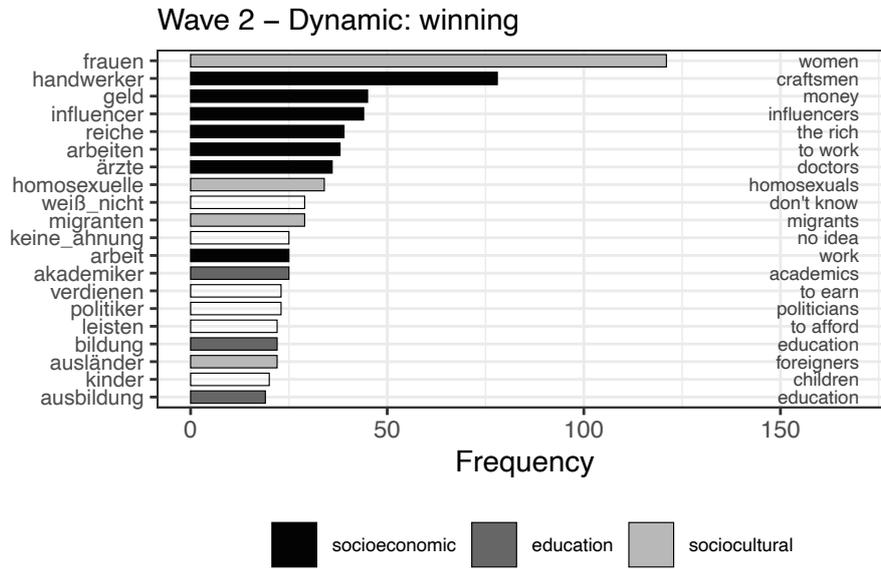
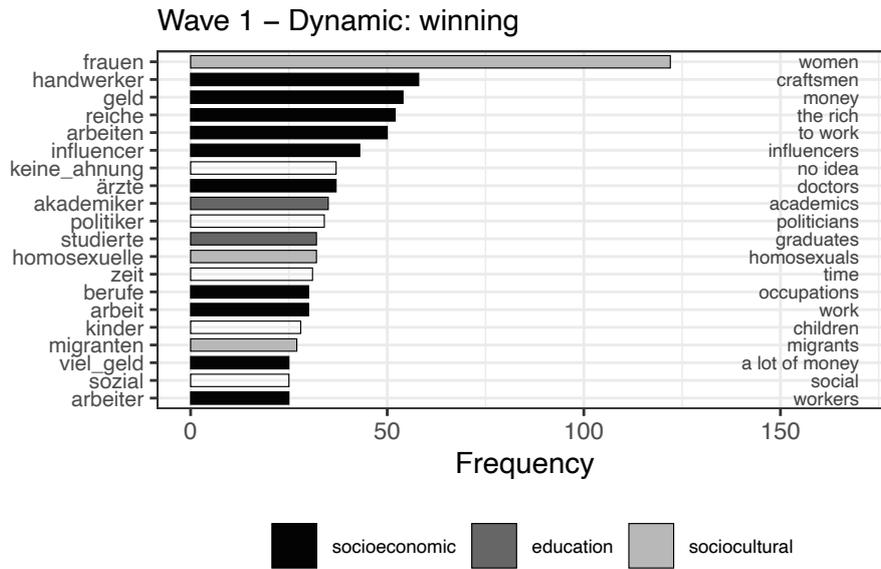
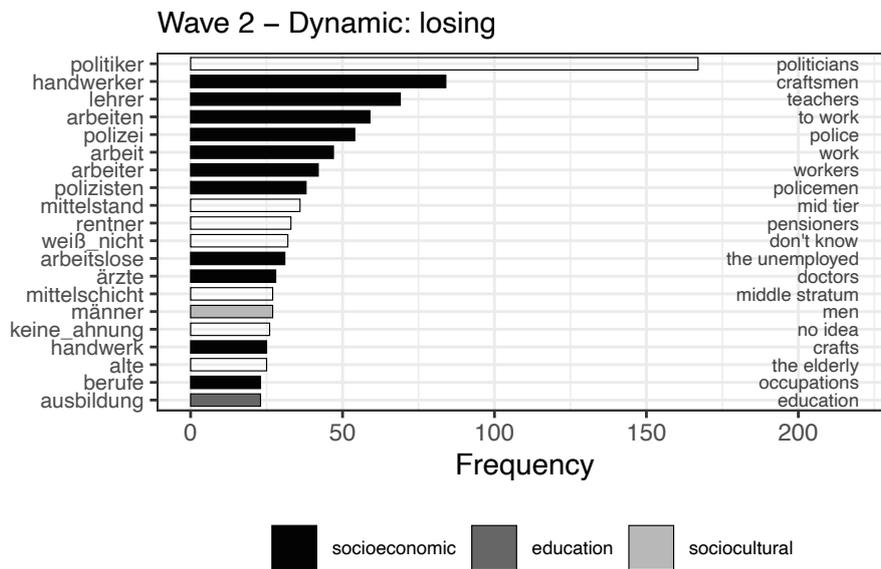
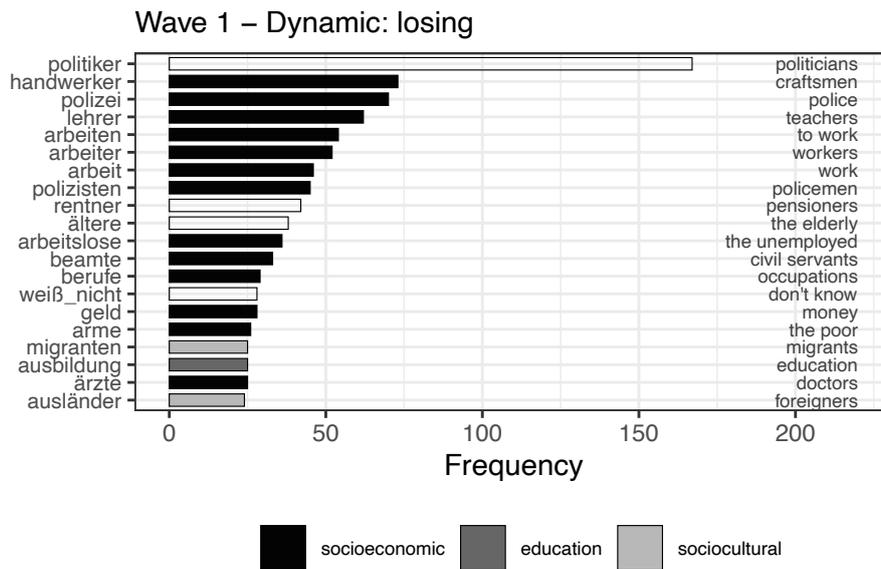


Figure A4: Losing status groups - absolute frequencies



B. Text analysis of open questions

Our pre-processing of the text data included the following steps: First, we removed six respondents who answered the open questions in English language. Per question, we then removed answers with fewer than three characters to exclude non-answers. Second, we removed punctuation and symbols and transformed all tokens to lower case. Third, we analyzed each question separately for frequent collocations (combinations of 2 or 3 words) and included meaningful collocations as compounded tokens. For example, “social occupation” was included as a compound. Last, we removed stopwords and other terms that carry little content, especially words appearing in the question wordings themselves, such as “recognition”, “people”, “today” (see [Table B1](#) for deleted and [Appendix B2](#) for compounded terms). Some terms only appear in the static question wording (surveyed after the dynamic ones). Thus, we exclude these terms only for the answers to the static questions (see [Table B2](#)).

B1. Processing: Deleted terms

Table B1: Terms deleted in pre-processing of the entire text corpus

30	gewinnen	lebensweisen	u.ä
ahnung	gewonnen	legen	u.u
allgemein	geworden	leute	überhaupt
anerkannt	gibt	mal	verbessert
anerkennung	gilt	man	verfügen
befinden	große	manchmal	verlieren
beispielsweise	großer	mehr	verliert
bekommen	großen	meinung	verloren
bereiche	gruppe	meinungen	viel
besser	gruppen	meist	vielen
bzw	gut	menschen	weiß
dabei	gute	mich	weiss
dafür	gutes	müssen	wenig
darunter	habe	niemals	weniger
davon	halten	obwohl	will
denen	heute	oftmals	wohl
denke	heutigen	personen	wollen
denken	heutzutage	position	wurde
desto	hohe	positionen	wurden
doch	hohen	respekt	z.b
d.h	hoher	respektiert	zb
eher	höher	schon	z_b
eigentlich	ihre	sehe	
eigenschaften	ihrem	sehen	
eindeutig	ihren	sei	
einmal	ihrer	sicherlich	
erfahren	ja	siehe_oben	
erhalten	je	sowie	
etc	jedoch	stark	
evtl	jemand	stehen	
finde	jahre	steht	
früher	jahren	stellen	
frage	jahrzehnte	teil	
ganzen	jetzt	teils	
gar	kommen	teilweise	
geht	kommt	tendenziell	
gerade	können	unserer	
gesellschaft	lassen	usw	
gestellt	laufen	u	
	leben	und_co	

Table B2: Additional terms deleted in pre-processing for the static questions

rand	oben	oberen
mitte	mittlere	unteren

B2. Compound Terms

Table B3: Compounds Winning

viel geld
sozial* berufe
sozial* medien
social media*
soziale* bereiche*
soziale* netzwerke*
soziale* herkunft
gut* *bildung
besser* bildung
gute* einkommen
gute* hause
weiß nicht
weiß ich nicht
weiß es nicht
kein* ahnung
kann ich nicht sagen
nicht die geringste ahnung
kene ahnung
weis* nicht
fällt dazu nichts
fällt mir
fällt nicht*
fällt nix
keine angabe
keine angaben
z b
u u
u ä

Table B4: Compounds Losing

einfache* arbeiter
einfache* leute
wenig geld
soziale* berufe*
sozial schwache*
hart arbeitende*
har*z 4
hartz iv
handwerklich* berufe*
normale* arbeiter
viel geld
nicht viel geld
mal so viel geld
oben herab
öffentliche* dienst
weiß nicht
kein* ahnung
kann ich nicht sagen
nicht die geringste ahnung
kene ahnung
weis* nicht
fällt dazu nichts
fällt mir
fällt nicht*
fällt nix
siehe oben
keine angabe
keine angaben
z b
u u
u ä

Table B5: Compounds High

viel geld
mehr geld
sich * leisten
hohe* einkommen
reich geboren
keine sorgen
gut* einkommen
was besseres
gut* *bildung
finanziell *gesichert
finanziell unabhängig
über leichen
vitamin b
höhere* dienst*
öffentliche* dienst
eigene* vorteil
auf kosten
weiß nicht
kein* ahnung
kann ich nicht sagen
nicht die geringste ahnung
kene ahnung
weis* nicht
fällt dazu nichts
fällt mir
fällt nicht*
fällt nix
keine angabe
keine angaben
z b
u u
u ä

Table B6: Compounds Medium

wie ich
gut* *bildung
leisten können
nach oben
gerade so
mittler* einkommen
gut* einkommen
runden kommen
sozial engagiert
hart arbeitend*
genug geld
mit dem strom
eigene meinung
9 to 5
klein unternehmer
öffentliche* dienst
mittlerer dienst
höhere* dienst
weiß nicht
kein* ahnung
kann ich nicht sagen
nicht die geringste ahnung
kene ahnung
weis* nicht
fällt dazu nichts
fällt mir
fällt nicht*
fällt nix
keine angabe
keine angaben
z b
u u
u ä

Table B7: Compounds Low

I	II
wenig geld	keine *bildung
einfache* arbeiter	mangelnde bildung
wenig geld	geringe* bildung
soziale* berufe	nicht arbeiten
sozial schwache*	in den mund
weiße männer	auf der straße
hart arbeitende*	ohne ausbildung
ältere* menschen	nicht arbeiten
har*z 4	keine arbeit
hartz iv	ohne arbeit
handwerklich* berufe	auf kosten
viel geld	weiß nicht
nicht viel geld	kein* ahnung
mal so viel geld	kann ich nicht sagen
ohne ausbildung	nicht die geringste ahnung
gering* einkommen	kene ahnung
keine arbeit	weis* nicht
runden kommen	fällt dazu nichts
nicht bereit	fällt mir
alg i	fällt nicht*
alg ii	fällt nix
arbeitslosengeld ii	keine angabe
arbeitslosengeld i und ii	keine angaben
gering verdiener	z b
viele kinder	u u
schlechte bildung	u ä
schlecht bezahlt*	

B3. Dictionary analysis

We classify the terms in our corpus into 6 different dimension for the dictionary analysis: socioeconomic terms, sociocultural terms, terms related to education, politics, attribute words or don't know terms. The following tables show these six dimensions and the corresponding terms.

When categorizing terms that do not obviously fall into one dimension, we checked the context of mentions of the term to help inform our decision. For example, we categorize “social media” and “internet” as socioeconomic, because it was overwhelmingly used to describe occupations like influencers or IT specialists. Where no such context was obvious, we did not categorize the term.

Table B8: Socioeconomic Terms

occupation	occupation (I)	occupation (II)	wealth	wealth (I)
ärzte	krankenschwestern	erwerbstätige	reiche	sozialschmarotzer
manager	erzieher	arbeitsmarkt	reich	geringem_einkommen
unternehmer	altenpfleger	berufstätige	reichen	geringes_einkommen
wissenschaftler	sozialen_bereich	berufstätigen	viel_geld	amt
banker	pflegeberufe	personal	wohlhabende	schlecht_bezahlte
bänker	pflegeberufen	beschäftigte	reichtum	prekäre
banken	gesundheitswesen	beschäftigten	wohlhabend	existenzminimum
geschäftsführer	rettungsdienst	mitarbeiter	millionäre	einkommen
selbstständige	mediziner	steuerzahler	erben	lohn
selbstständig	sozialarbeiter	9_to_5	geerbt	gehalt
chefs	sanitäter	gearbeitet	vermögen	geld
vorstände	handwerker	angestellt	vermögend	besitz
wirtschaftsbosse	handwerk	wirtschaft	luxus	besitzen
juristen	handwerksberufe	arbeitslose	hohes_einkommen	finanziell
anwälte	handwerkliche	arbeitslos	wohlstand	finanziellen
firmen	handwerkliche_berufe	arbeitslosigkeit	unternehmen	finanzielles
steuerberater	handwerklichen_berufen	nicht_arbeiten	superreiche	steuern
management	arbeiter	keine_arbeit	superreichen	eigentum
geschäftsleute	landwirte	ohne_arbeit	autos	verdiener
firmenchefs	facharbeiter	alg_i	großverdiener	urlaub
geschäftsmänner	meister	alg_ii	gutverdienende	reisen
professoren	bäcker	arbeitslosengeld_ii	gutes_einkommen	haus
lobbyisten	it	arbeitslosengeld	bonzen	knete
polizei	digital	rente	obere_zehntausend	auto
polizisten	internet	influencer	oberen_zehntausend	verdienende
feuerwehr	informatiker	influenzer	vielverdiener	miete
polizeibeamte	technik	sozialen_medien	finanziell_gesichert	bezahlt
soldaten	verkäufer	soziale_medien	finanziell_abgesichert	bezahlen
beamte	einzelhandel	social_media	finanziell_unabhängig	verdienst
lehrer	niedriglohnsektor	sportler	obdachlose	wirtschaftlich
öffentlichen_dienst	dienstleister	profisportler	arme	lebensunterhalt
öffentlicher_dienst	reinigungskräfte	fußballer	geringverdiener	
höheren_dienst	angestellte	fussballer	gering_verdiener	
höherer_dienst	arbeitende	profifußballer	arm	
mittlerer_dienst	arbeit	profi_sportler	armut	
mittleren_dienst	beruf	profi_fußballer	ärmer	
dienst	berufe	profi_fussballer	wenig_geld	
soziale_berufe	berufen	formel_1	empfänger	
sozialen_berufen	berufliche	promis	hartz_4	
pfleger	job	prominente	hartz4	
pflegerinnen	jobs	stars	hartz_iv	
pflegepersonal	arbeitnehmer	berühmte	harz_4	
pflegende	arbeiten	sänger	harz_iv	
pflegekräfte	normale_arbeiter		sozial_schwache	
pflege	normalen_arbeiter		sozialhilfeempfänger	
medizinisches	fachkräfte		sozialleistungen	
medizinischen	hart_arbeitende		sparen	
krankenhäusern	hart_arbeitend		runden_kommen	
krankenhäuser	klein_unternehmer		in_den_mund	
krankenschwester	kleinunternehmer		schmarotzer	

Table B9: Sociocultural Terms

gender	sexuality	race	marginalized
frauen	homosexuelle	migranten	minderheiten
männer	lgbtq	migrationshintergrund	randgruppen
geschlecht	schwule	ausländer	rand
frau	lesben	zuwanderer	
mann	queere	flüchtlinge	
feministen	heterosexuelle	kanacken	
feministinnen		einwanderer	
mütter		integration	
weisse_männer		geflüchtete	
weiße_männer		deutsche	
		deutschen	
		weiße	
		deutschland	
		volk	
		einheimische	
		herkunft	
		integrieren	

Table B10: Education Terms

low	high	generic
bildungsfern	gebildete	bildung
ungelernt	gebildet	ausbildung
ungelernte	studiert	weiterbilden
ungebildet	studierte	lernen
ungebildete	studierten	bildungsgrad
schlechte_bildung	akademiker	schulbildung
keine_bildung	guter_ausbildung	bildungsniveau
mangelnde_bildung	gute_ausbildung	ausbildungsberufe
geringe_bildung	gute_bildung	ausgebildete
ohne_ausbildung	studieren	bildungsstand
	bessere bildung	qualifikation
	besserer_bildung	bildungschancen
	studenten	bildungsabschluss
	abitur	schulabschluss
	studierende	
	bildungsbürgertum	
	studium	

Table B11: Attributes

personality	personality (I)	attributes
arrogant	sorgen	leisten
arroganz	klein	leistungen
arrogante	kleine	verdienen
egoistisch	sozial	verdient
egoisten	soziale	versuchen
schlecht	offen	nach_oben
schlechte	weltoffen	kämpfen
schlechter	zielstrebig	mut
abgehoben	fleißig	erreichen
überheblich	fleißige	mühe
egozentrisch	zufrieden	erfolg
oberflächlich	bodenständig	erfolgreich
skrupellos	engagiert	erledigen
faul	engagement	leistungsträger
faule	engagieren	bemühen
lügner	ehrgeizig	mehrwert
schwache	glücklich	glück
über_leichen	hilfsbereit	vorteil
korrupt	interessiert	chancen
gier	unabhängig	chance
betrüger	aktiv	teilen
auf_kosten	arbeitssam	kümmern
nicht_bereit	wichtig	dienen
abhängig	wichtigen	sozialen
angeber	wichtige	für_andere
normale	gemeinwohl	einsetzen
normal	systemrelevant	pech
einfach	systemrelevante	geraten
einfache	freundlich	wissen
einfachen	lieb	mittelschicht
normalen	ehrlich	mittelstand
wie_ich		mitte
neues		mittleren
neue		mittelständler
neu		mittelklasse
alleine		
unauffällig		
durchschnitt		
durchschnittlichem		
durchschnittliches		

Table B12: Political Terms

power	groups	environment
politik	querdenker	umwelt
macht	konservativ	umweltaktivisten
politiker	konservative	umweltschützer
parteien	rechtsradikale	veganer
regierung	nazis	klimaaktivisten
politisch	schwurbler	
politische	grüne	
politischen	grünen	
lobbyisten	aktivisten	
lobby	rechte	
	weltverbesserer	
	linke	

Table B13: No Content Terms

weiß_nicht
weis_nicht
weiss_nicht
weiss_ich_nicht
weiß_ich_nicht
weis_ich_nicht
weiß_es_nicht
keine_ahnung
keine_richtige_ahnung
nicht_die_geringste_ahnung
kene_ahnung
kann_ich_nicht_sagen
fällt_dazu_nichts
fällt_mir
fällt_nicht
fallt_nichts
fällt_nix
keine_angabe
keine_angaben
ka
k.a

Table B14: Saliency of all dictionary dimensions

Dimension	Question	N	%
Socioeconomic	static	5163	47.0
	dynamic	2793	38.0
Sociocultural	static	511	4.7
	dynamic	825	11.2
Education	static	916	8.3
	dynamic	629	8.6
Politics	static	781	7.1
	dynamic	743	10.1
Attributes	static	2887	26.3
	dynamic	1376	18.7
Don't know	static	385	3.5
	dynamic	342	4.7
Total	static	10987	93.4
	dynamic	7349	86.6

Note: Table displays the percentage of answers mentioning the dimension. The dynamic category includes the two questions about winning and losing groups, the static category the three questions about upper, medium and low groups. The 'Total' rows show the number of answers per answer category and the percentage of answers that contain any of the five listed dictionary terms. Thus, 93% of the answers to the static questions contain any of the five listed dictionary dimensions, while 87% of the dynamic questions do (excluding the 'don't know' dimension).

Table B15: Salience of dictionary subdimensions by question type

Question	Dimension	Subdimension	N	%	
Static	Socioeconomic	Occupation	2970	27.0	
		Wealth	2997	27.3	
	Sociocultural	Gender	72	0.7	
		Sexuality	10	0.1	
		Race	416	3.8	
	Education	-	916	8.3	
	Total	-	10987	100.0	
	Dynamic	Socioeconomic	Occupation	2192	29.8
			Wealth	868	11.8
		Sociocultural	Gender	389	5.3
Sexuality			149	2.0	
Race			396	5.4	
Education		-	629	8.6	
Total		-	7349	100.0	

Note: Table displays the percentage of answers mentioning the dimension. The dynamic category includes the two questions about winning and losing groups, the static category the three questions about upper, medium and low groups. The 'Total' rows show the number of answers per question type.

C. Results for medium status group (static)

Figure C1: Mid status groups - absolute frequencies, pooled sample

