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A swing vote from the ethnic backstage:
The role of German American isolationist tradition for Trump's 2016 victory

Abstract: We question the growing consensus in the literature that European Americans behave as a homogenous pan-ethnic coalition of voters. Seemingly below the radar of scholarship on voting groups in American politics, we identify a group of white voters that behaves differently from others: German Americans, the largest ethnic group, regionally concentrated in the 'Swinging Midwest'. Using county level voting returns, ancestry group information from the American Community Survey (ACS), current survey data and historical census data going back as early as 1910, we provide evidence for a partisan and a non-partisan pathway that motivated German Americans to vote for Trump in 2016: a historically grown association with the Republican Party and an acquired taste for isolationist attitudes that mobilizes non-partisan German Americans to support isolationist candidates. Our findings indicate that European American experiences of migration and integration still echo into the po-litical arena of today.

Keywords: *ancestry, presidential election, Trump, American politics, isolationism, assimilation*

1. Introduction

'Will German Americans make Trump President?' During the run-up to the U.S. presidential election of 2016, several German news outlets shifted their attention to a large group of voters rarely recognized in the political behavior literature. Under the headline above, the newspaper *Die Welt* painted a scenario in which voters with German ancestry in several Midwestern states could be turning the tide in favor of the Republican candidate (Gersemann 2016). Focus Online (2016), a prominent German online news resource posted a video explaining why German Americans living along the 'German Belt' between Pennsylvania and Oregon might be deciding the 2016 general election.[1] Both analyses referenced an opinion poll by Morning Consult with more than 5000 Americans who had specified their ancestral affiliations. The poll showed that Americans of different European ancestries supported Trump to different degrees. German Americans favored him by a margin of 18% over Clinton, others also went against Clinton but lagged substantially behind in their support for Trump (Aldhous and Singer-Vine 2016). To date, there has only been a snap-shot inquiry into the phenomenon (Urlaub and Huenlich 2016). At the same time, Trump's victory continues to raise the question whether "whites across the country developed a pan-ethnic racial identity" (Arbour 2018: 34) – especially in light of the pronounced racism exhibited by part of his constituency. In contrast to previous research, we provide evidence that leads us to question the existence of such a homogenous voter coalition. Our post-election analysis of the role an estimated 46 million self-identified German Americans played for Donald Trump's victory in 2016 points to a link between the candidate and the history of isolationism in German American communities. Two distinct pathways, a partisan and a non-partisan pathway, appear to have driven German Americans towards Trump: a historically grown association with the Republican Party on the one hand and an acquired taste for isolationist attitudes that can be activated by respective candidates' campaign agendas on the other. We argue that in addition to Republican partisanship, Trump's isolationist political agenda mobilized non-partisans among the German American community to vote for Trump in 2016. Because German

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[1] https://www.focus.de/politik/videos/wahlen-in-den-usa-warum-die-deutsch-amerikaner-die-us-praesidentenwahl-entscheiden-koennten_id_6177921.html.

Americans make up the largest self-identified ancestry group in the U.S. and are regionally concentrated in the 'Swinging Midwest', they played a decisive role in the 2016 election. Thus, the rallying cry "America First'' was a cornerstone of Trump's campaign which mobilized these communities' isolationist preferences beyond partisanship.

We embed our study in the context of research on the remaining influence of white ethnicity in American politics (Sonnenshein and Valentino 2000; Gimpel and Cho 2004; Arbour and Teigen 2011; Arbour 2018). Using aggregated characteristics of the American Community Survey (ACS) together with official voting returns at the county level, we first provide evidence that supporting Trump in the voting booth can be attributed to the specific candidate. It is not simply a result of 'working class status' as defined by education and socioeconomic status and cannot be attributed solely to the traditional affiliation of many German Americans with the Republican Party. As we will show, the swing from Obama (2012) to Donald Trump in 2016 took place in many counties of the Midwest that are predominantly of German ancestry. Using survey data from 2016 we also provide evidence at the microlevel that the two pathways seem to exist even today: a partisan as well as a non-partisan pathway fueled by Trump's isolationist agenda. At the same time this also corroborates our evidence based on ecological correlations. Finally, we use election data from before and after World War I to show how isolationism in German American communities opened the partisan and the non-partisan pathway and how the early isolationist swing vote still affects US politics today.

2. German ethnicity in U.S. politics

Defining experiences in the life of American communities can have effects on politics that last for extended periods of time. For instance, Acharya et al. (2016) describe a causal relationship of over 150 years between chattel slavery in the 19th century and recent political attitudes in American counties of the South. By comparison, the War-time experiences of German Americans that led to isolationist preferences lie in recent history and go back between 70 to slightly over 100 years. At the outset of the 20thcentury, German Americans made up the largest group of European immigrants to the United States. 5 million had arrived in the U. S. from various German-speaking regions (Office of Immigration Statistics 2009: 6). The reach of the German language indicates the degree of influence: By 1890, German was a well-established language of education and media. Twenty-five states from the East Coast to the Midwest had bilingual programs or German instruction (Buenger and Kamphoefner 2019; Toth 1990). 796 of the 1170 foreign language newspapers in the United States in 1894 were in German (Park 1922: 310, Arndt and Olson 1976). By 1910, there were close to 9 million speakers of German, nearly 10% of the population registered by the census (Kloss 1966).

Because of their size and heterogeneous ideological make-up, German immigrants were the linchpin in a power struggle between Republicans and Democrats at the end of the 19th century – especially in the Midwest (Kleppner 1970; Jensen 1971). Following the Civil War, Germans favored the Republican Party. But Democrats effectively reshaped their image to appeal to German Catholics and Lutherans who feared for drinking habits and mother tongue schooling (Salmons 2017; Jensen 1971). In the South, German Texans abandoned formerly held positions of racial equality to become part of the Democratic establishment (Buenger and Kamphoefner 2019). At the outset of the 20th century, the ties to the Republicans were loosening and a political realignment was conceivable.

However, World War I changed the game. German Americans of various strands openly campaigned against American participation in the war. Substantial anti-German hysteria followed the American entry into the War in 1917 (Luebke 1974). The federal government and the States censored German publishing and rolled back German-English bilingual education. German American reactions to this wave of hostility were localized and diverse. In states with more reported incidents of anti-German violence, German Americans increased petitions for naturalization and adopted English names for their children and themselves (Fouka 2019). Where legislation outlawed the German language in schools, German Americans sent their children to German-speaking Sunday schools and increasingly married within their ethnic group (Fouka 2016). Overall it seems that while making concessions, they mostly stuck to their ways behind the closed doors of their ethnic societies (Kamphoefner 2015: 49f). Deliberate assimilation and ethnic introversion were strategies that complemented each other and allowed German Americans to navigate the period after World War I and beyond (Wilkerson & Salmons 2008, 2012).

We argue in this paper that the isolationist tradition in German American communities begins immediately after WWI.[2] The United States entered the War in spite of President Woodrow Wilson's campaign that centered around American neutrality. This marked a break between German Americans and Democrats. When Republican candidate Warren Harding called for a "return to normalcy" in 1920, and promised a withdrawal from international affairs, German Americans swung back to the Republicans. The swing reinvigorated the identification of a majority of German Americans with the Republican Party and lies at the root of the German American identification with the Republican Party. As German Americans submerged their ethnic identity, the historic reasons for this relationship were obscured. Eventually, a residual identification with the Republican party remained. We can only speculate about the specific mechanisms of transmission across generations. It is established in the literature that there is a – albeit far from perfect – correlation between parent and child partisan behavior (e.g Niemi and Jennings 1991). The interpretation whether this intergenerational transmission of party identification stems from political socialization in a social-psychological tradition (Campbell et al., 1980), or whether offsprings employ their parents' party identifications simply as 'priors' in a Bayesian learning process (Achen 2002) remains unsettled. We do not take sides in this discussion but merely point out that the intergenerational transmission of party identification exists and, thus, that German Americans' historical proximity to the Republican party might show its imprints even today without remembering how it originated. However, the partisan pathway is only part of the story.

The second and decidedly non-partisan pathway to explain the contemporary support of Trump by German Americans also opened up in the 1920s. In the close-knit local social ecologies of German American communities, anti-interventionism became a more general attitude. Political outsiders benefitted from this non-partisan sentiment. For instance, in 1924 the former Republican La Follette ran on a progressive third-party platform throughout the U.S. He won Minnesota and came in second in many Midwestern states. Brøndal (2011) suggests that La Follette's vigorous opposition to the American entry into WWI secured him German American support. In other words, the experience of World War I not only strengthened the affiliation of German Americans with the Republican Party, it also mobilized German Americans beyond the Republican Party to vote for candidates who run on isolationist agendas, regardless of Party affiliation. In the mid-1950s, upon a visit to a number of counties in the Midwest with decades of isolationist voting patterns, Samual Lubell highlighted this link to German American heritage (Lubell 1956: 137ff). One of the places he visited was Stearns County in

[2] A swing pattern was, in fact, reproduced during World War II, when American military involvement was imminent in 1940. Counties with strong German American heritage across America defected from Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal coalition and favored Wendell Willkie who bridged the separation between isolationists and interventionists in the Republican Party (Lubell 1956: 137ff; Rippley 1976: 210f; Dunn 2013). The Democratic vote share dropped by 35% in many counties historically settled by German Americans, swinging several states into the Republican fold. The swing is better documented than the earlier swing in WWI. In this paper, we focus on the earliest cause for the German American isolationist trend and show its lasting effect.

Minnesota – according to Conzen (1991), a prime example of how German immigrants created local social ecologies that shaped "non--group as well as group life at the local level" and reproduced this culture in every institution of the broad local community. Stearns county still is rural and overwhelmingly German Catholic. At the time of Lubell's visit, children still acquired German as their first language and learned English later in school. The county showed the expected German American voting patterns: the Republican vote share increased from 54% in 1916 to 86% in 1920, the county then voted for the progressive candidate La Follette in 1924, and it also swung away from the Democratic Party in 1940 before the U.S. entry into WWII. Lubell's interviews in the 1950s document a distinct opposition to the Korean War. The ideological elements of isolationism remained with German American voters in Stearns County for decades. A check into more recent voting data confirms a local isolationist trend: In 1992, presidential candidate Ross Perot with his vocal opposition to the Gulf War and protectionist agenda on trade received 25% of the county vote – 6% above his national vote share average. Donald Trump left the Republican Party in 1999 to launch an unsuccessful presidential campaign in Perot's Reform Party primaries (CNN 1999) As the Republican nominee of 2016, Trump swept Stearns County with a near 60%. What the campaigns of Perot and Trump shared was an opposition to American military involvement abroad and a proclivity for isolationist positions on trade, migration, and multilateralism. Places like Stearns County could be examples of an ethno-political link – a palpable pulse of isolationism in German American counties across America. The link between German American communities and isolationism, dropped off the radar of research due to the deliberate submergence and assimilation of the group (cf. Glazer and Moynihan 1966: 312).

While voting patterns of other European American groups were obvious even as late as in the 1960s (Dahl 1963; Wolfinger 1965; Miller 1971), German Americans never resurfaced as a perceivable voter group.

So how can German Americans be identified today and throughout history? Early elections in the 20th century can be linked to the settlements of the first migrant generation. Census data provides birth places for the year 1910 preceding WWI, for instance, and there still was a sizable German-born population in the U. S. at the time. More recently, the introduction of the ancestry question in the census of 1980 revolutionized the possibilities for the study of white ethnicity in the U.S. The open-ended question allows respondents to specify a maximum of two ancestries and was repeated decennially until the year 2000. After that it was replicated in the American Community Survey (ACS). The resulting data can be compared based on first, second and single ancestry indications.[3]

Farley (1991: 426) observed a high fluctuation of self-reported ancestry indications among European Americans and concluded that "ancestry has become an optional component of one's self--identification" confirming a suggestion by Gans (1979) that expressions of European ancestry were merely "symbolic" without reflecting a deeper social reality. Based on a study of ethnicity in Albany, New York, Alba (1990) confirmed that the role of European ethnicity in the U.S. was fading as indicated by intermarriage (four in five marriages) and lack of residential segregation. For several reasons we are confident, however, about a link between ancestry indications among German Americans today and the historic areas of settlement. First, while it is true that there was strong fluctuation in ancestry indications, the case of German Americans shows how external factors can influence ethnic self-identification. In 1980, 49 Million Americans claimed German heritage, which amounted to 21,5% of the population, closely following the 21,9% indications of English ancestry. Ten years later, the number jumped to 58 Million Americans indicating German ancestry - nearly a fourth of the population. The years 1989/90 also mark a period in which Germany made positive headlines with the Fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification. It appears likely that these momentous events had a strong influence on ethnic self-perception. The fact that German Americans remained the largest ancestry group in the U.S. in every census since 1990, speaks to a reemerging and remaining ancestral awareness.

Second, although the total number of German ancestry indications declined to 42 Million in 2000 and 2010, the geographic concentration of German Americans and other ancestry groups is not shifting. As we show, ancestry indications can still be meaningfully linked to statistics of early migration. The United States Map Gallery which illustrates ethnic concentrations across America (Kilpinen 2014) shows that German ancestry is highest in the Midwest. The American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year-estimates between 2011 and 2015, the German ancestry share was highest in 1170 of 3111 counties nationwide.[4] In 950 counties, people who indicated 'German' as their first, second or single ancestry made up a quarter of the population. In 281 counties, one fifth of the population indicated single German ancestry. Such high rates of endogamy do not appear improbable, because of the rural concentration of German Americans in many states.

Ancestral self-identification should also not be dismissed as a relevant variable for ethnic political behavior because of the more recent evidence to the contrary. Geographic concentrations of white ethnic groups persist in New England and were related to voting behavior in the presidential elections of 1992, 1996 and 2000 (Gimpel and Cho 2004). As in other areas of the country, German Americans were found to be "distinctly non-urban" (ibid: 996) and not unlike other places and times, the group swung back and forth from Democrat to Republican between 1992 and 1996 (ibid: 1001). Gimpel and Cho (2004) matched election data with ethnic data at the township level. They rightfully point out the importance of aggregated data, because

Ethnic influence may diffuse. Voters may socialize neighbors and their offspring to express and sustain political views that might otherwise be washed away by other forces. A brand of politics emerging from distant ethnic roots can influence offspring and nearby others who are completely uninformed about ethnicity. (ibid: 988).

We share the view that local social ecologies (township or county) have a unique story to tell about the influence of ethnic voting patterns. Tight-knit local communities deserve the same attention as individual level data and larger geographic concentrations of white ancestry groups.

This point became particularly clear for one of the fastest growing self-identified groups in recent years: So-called 'Unhyphenated Americans' no longer indicate any specific European ancestry in surveys and instead simply specify their ancestry as 'American.' This group has high concentrations in the Appalachian region (Perez and Hirschman 2009). Unhyphenated voters played a key role during the Republican primaries leading to Trump's candidacy in 2016 (Irwin and Katz 2016; Arbour and Teigen 2016). Support for Trump was also confirmed at the microlevel for this group in the Morning Consult poll where Unhyphenated Americans closely followed German Americans. However, rejection of the Democratic Party among this group was already apparent during the Obama years (Arbour and Teigen 2011). Unhyphenated American communities at the county level followed a trajectory of increasing their support for the modern Republican Party in the 2016 election, and Arbour (2018) concludes that Trump was very likely not the cause of their support for the Republican ticket. To get a first impression of the differences between German American and Unhyphenated American communities, Fig. 1 compares their voting behavior for all presidential elections since 1984 in counties with 20% or more "Unhyphenated

[3] In the 2020 census the questions on ancestry and race were combined for the first time, raising some questions about the comparability to previous formats. These issues are not relevant for this paper.

[4] Due to a mismatch of voting precincts and census districts Alaska is excluded from the analysis in this paper.

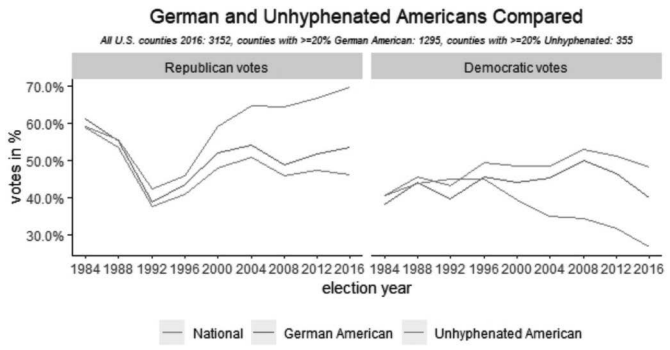

Fig. 1. Comparison of general election results in German American and Unhyphenated American Counties from 1984 (Reagan) to 2016 (Trump).

Americans" (N = 355) with counties of 20% or more inhabitants of "German" ancestry (N = 1295). As a reference, we also include the nationwide average vote share for Republicans and Democrats.[5] The patterns in Fig. 1 confirm Arbour's (2018) observation that Unhyphenated American counties (in blue) have been leaving the Democratic fold and increasing their support for the modern Republicans in a continuous process since in the mid-nineties.

By contrast, the voting record of German American counties (in green) is more closely aligned with the national vote share while having clear conservative leanings. One notable exception is the year 2016: The 2016 election also marks the first time that the nationwide average for the Republican Party is decreasing while the average of the Republican vote in German American counties is strongly increasing. At the same time, vote share average of the Democratic Party decreased nearly twice as much in German American counties than nationwide. We argue that as an isolationist Republican, Donald Trump was able to mobilize compounded support in German American communities by a Republican partisan pathway and by way of the lingering isolationist attitudes among German Americans without a Republican party identification.

3. German American support for trump: evidence and explanations

3.1. 'Trump effect' and swing vote

Analysts initially saw the white working class as the driving force behind Trump's success (cf. Tankersley 2016) - a presupposition that was later challenged (e.g. Carnes and Lupu 2019). Our first set of hypotheses examines whether the share of German ancestry is associated with an increase of Republican vote share and a decrease of the vote shares of the Democrats in 2016 when controlling for levels of education and median household income.

H1a. The higher a county's share of German ancestry the higher the vote share for the Republican Presidential Candidate in 2016, independent of the level of education or income.

H1b. The higher a county's share of German ancestry the lower the vote share for the Democratic Presidential Candidate in 2016, independent of the level of education or income.

Our second set of hypotheses examines whether the developments in Fig. 1 indeed reflect a 'Trump Effect' on American voters with German ancestry or whether they are mere effects of the traditional Republican Party affiliation. If there is a 'Trump Effect' we should find evidence for two observable implications. First, there should be a stronger effect of German ancestry in 2016 than in 2012 in favor of the Republican candidate. The share of German ancestry should systematically increase the relative difference between the 2016 and 2012 Republican vote share at the county level.

H2a. The higher a county's share of German ancestry the higher the gain in Republican vote share in 2016 relative to 2012.

Second, the share of German ancestry should increase the relative difference between the 2016 and 2012 Republican vote share more than at the previous pair of elections between 2012 and 2008.

H2b. The higher a county's share of German ancestry the higher the difference between the Republican tickets of 2012 and 2016 as opposed to the Republican tickets of 2008 and 2012.

While a confirmation of these hypotheses would provide evidence for a special link between Trump and German Americans, the relevance of this link for Trump's victory does not immediately follow from these hypotheses. We need to understand whether counties of German American character indeed played a distinct role in 2016 and voted systematically different from other white groups in recent elections. We therefore also include the county share of the largest European ancestry groups, namely German, Unhyphenated American, English, Irish, and Italian in our models. If German American counties are not a mere reflection of a greater 'white vote', where would they differ from the other groups? Fig. 1 shows that the withdrawal from the Democratic Party increased in 2016 and appears steeper than for Unhyphenated American counties. Perhaps the role of German Americans was indeed more decisive in the outcome of the 2016 election than the role of other groups. If German Americans swung in favor of Trump, we would expect a close relationship between the swing and German American counties:

H3a. The higher the share of German ancestry the more likely the county is located in a swing state that flipped from blue in 2012 to red in 2016.

Fig. 1 which was calculated using total ancestry indications illustrates an important problem: even if the influence of an ancestry group on a county likely correlates with its size, we can assume a stronger influence where the specific ancestry is leading. For instance, if German Americans make up 30% in a county and lead with a clear distance of 15% to the next group, we assume that German ancestry influences the county's political behavior more than the second group. Based on this distinction we expect the following:

H3b. The more dominant the share of German ancestry is at the county level within the swing states, the more likely we are dealing with a county that flipped from blue in 2012 to red in 2016.

We will test the two 'swing hypotheses' using the 2012 election results as a reference point. Between the 2012 and 2016 election, six states supported Obama in 2012 as well as Donald Trump in 2016. Five of these states lie along traditional areas of German settlement. The counties in these states that voted both for Obama in 2012 and for Trump in 2016 form clusters in some regions (Uhrmacher et al., 2016). If we can produce evidence of a relationship between swing states, swinging counties within these states and the German ancestry of these regions, it would be a confirmation of a long tradition of ambiguous German voting behavior. Not all counties along the so-called "German belt" are clearly dominated by German heritage. Unhyphenated Americans also play a role with reference to their dispersion and will be included as a contrast group in our analysis.

[5] The vote shares only build on the two main parties: The Republican Party and the Democratic Party. In most elections between 1984 and 2016 the Republican and Democratic vote share reached more than 98% together. We see a small deviation of 95% in 2000 and 94% in 2016, a larger deviation of 90% in 1996 and the largest in the 1992 election where the two largest parties only gained together 80% of the vote share due to the Reform Party candidacy of Ross Perot.

3.2. The causal pathways of isolationism

This brings us to the explanation of why German Americans voted for Trump in the first place. Trump is German American, but it would be simplistic to reduce the connection to the candidate's ethnic roots. We believe his agenda effectively addressed the sentiment of German Americans. In an early analysis of German American voting behavior, Urlaub and Huenlich (2016) suggest that economic issues stood at the forefront of the connection with Donald Trump and made German Americans susceptible to xenophobic messaging. Oberhauser et al. (2019) have claimed that people who voted for Trump in 2016 were motivated by their white social identity and nativism. For instance, in the Iowa-swing, being white significantly correlated with Trump support. Using measures of racism denial, Reny et al. (forthcoming) also connect the Trump Swing to conservative attitudes on race among working class white voters. In another study racism denial accounted for part of Donald Trump's support among white voters, while negative stereotypes of African and Hispanic Americans were not predictive (Schaffner et al., 2018: 33). Hooghe and Dassonneville (2018) likewise confirm the role of racism in the Trump vote. While racial anxiety and xenophobia apparently have mobilized Trump voters, generally speaking, it is not immediately plausible to us, however, that these factors were the driving force behind swing voters who also supported Barack Obama in 2008 or 2012. Instead, we argue that Donald Trump in fact had certain political commonalities with Barack Obama that are rarely acknowledged. Both were opposed to the U.S. foreign policy of the Bush administration, for instance, and promised a decrease in foreign military entanglements. Using individual-level data we examine evidence below the county-level that is consistent with our theory, namely that two pathways lead German Americans to support candidates such as Trump, that run on a isolationist agenda.

H4. At the individual level a vote for Donald Trump is linked not only to Republican party affiliation but to isolationist attitudes and particularly so for non-partisans. This also holds for respondents in counties that are German dominant.

Our theory states that German Americans supported Trump in 2016 as Republicans and as non-partisan isolationists. The two pathways originated after World War I. Elections during and after World War I provide the earliest evidence. Democratic President Woodrow Wilson entered the War in 1917 in spite of his 1916 campaign promises. This experience swung German Americans firmly back into the Republican fold in 1920. We can illustrate the early Republican realignment of German Americans by testing the following hypothesis.

H5a. The higher the share of German immigration in a county the more likely the county moved from the Democratic to the Republican Party between 1916 and 1920.

If there is a connection between this early isolationist swing and today's Republican Party affiliation of German Americans we should see a link between the election results of Harding in 1920 and Trump in 2016:

H5b. The election results of 1920 for Harding predict the election outcome for Trump in 2016.

Throughout the 20th century, isolationist positions were mainly held by the Republican Party (cf. Dunn 2013). Over time, the German American proclivity for isolationist attitudes turned into a strong affiliation with the Republicans. However, this is not the full story. The second, non-partisan pathway isolationism took in German American communities is not Republican. Hence, political outsiders with an isolationist record were also able to gain traction in German American settlements in the 1920s and still do so today. In 1924, Robert La Follette relied heavily on the German American vote (Brøndal 2011). If our theory, especially about the non-partisan pathway, is true then we should see that German Americans should have voted for La Follette in 1924. In the next hypothesis, we test this expectation.

H5c. The higher the share of German immigrants in a county the more likely the county supported Robert La Follette in 1924.

To sum up, we argue that below the radar of public opinion analysts there is an interesting group of voters, German Americans, who supported Donald Trump in large numbers at the 2016 election. We show that, while traditionally conservative, German Americans were particularly attracted to Trump as a presidential candidate due to his isolationist agenda. Using aggregate county-level data and individual microdata, our analysis proceeds in four steps: First, we show that in 2016 there is a systematic support pattern in German American counties for Trump when compared with previous presidential elections, independent of the level of education or income. Second, we show that the consistent support pattern is particularly relevant for the voting returns in swing states that supported Obama in 2012 but Trump in 2016. Third, we provide evidence of a link between isolationist attitudes such as opposing free trade and international American military involvement and support for Trump in German dominant counties. This link operates in addition to party affiliation. Finally, using historical election data we show how German Americans supported presidential candidates with an isolationist agenda in the 1920s. These support patterns are predictive of the election outcome in German dominant counties in 2016 - namely, support for Donald Trump. Throughout the analysis we also show that these characteristics are far less attractive for voters of other European ancestry groups. Our research shows that the decision of voters to self-report their German ancestry is related to different voting patterns than the other comparable ancestry groups. An individual's decision to self-classify as German American rather than Unhyphenated American has strong political connotations at the aggregated county level.

4. Data and methods

Throughout this paper we use aggregated data for 3114 counties from various sources. Counties of the State of Alaska had to be excluded because of repeated redistricting since 1984 and the resulting difficulties to map election data onto the available ancestry data. We rely on country level voting returns to which we merge self-reported first and second ethnic ancestry information as shares of county inhabitants using the newest available data *before* the respective election. Data for the Republican and Democratic vote shares at the county level between 1984 and 2016 were extracted from the Congressional Quarterly (Congressional Quarterly Voting and Elections Collection 2019) and were cross-checked with data from the Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections (Leip 2019a). Matching ancestry data for the largest white ancestry groups in previous years was extracted from the National Historical Geographic Information System (NHGIS) data base for the census years of 1980, 1990 and 2000 as well as from the 5-year estimates of the American Community Survey (ACS) in 2009, 2011 and 2015 (Manson et al., 2019). The ACS ancestry question is open-ended and allows respondents to report up to two ancestries. This entails that anybody indicating more than one ancestry is counted in several ancestry groups, and the total of ancestry indications always exceeds the county population. At the same time, it is possible for respondents to only indicate a single ancestry. The totals of each ancestry are then a combination of multiple and single indications of any given ancestry. If ancestry indications are connected to identity, however, it seems that single ancestry indications should be the hallmark of defining the influence of German identity on a county. We therefore use single ancestry as the basis of our regression analyses throughout this paper.[6]

As mentioned above, we also need to guard against the ecological

[6] In the appendix (Tables A1 and A2), we present all analyses with total ancestry data to demonstrate that our results also hold for total ancestry shares with one exception.

fallacy of interpreting simple shares of the county population as signs of 'German dominance'. Our analysis of voting behavior at the local level within the swing states proceeds with help of a dominance measure of German ancestry. Our dominance measure builds on the work of Davide Vampa (2020: 92) who develops a new measure of party dominance:

$$\text{Dominance(d)} = \text{Absolute}^{*}\text{Relative} = s^{*}(s/c)$$

Vampa's (2020) intention is to develop a clearly conceptualized and operationalized measure of party dominance. His study defines dominance as a combination of absolute and relative dominance. For party dominance, absolute dominance means to include the percentage of parliamentary seats won by the largest party and relative dominance to include the largest party's main competitor's percentage of seats as well. We apply and adjust this measure for ancestry dominance as our reasoning is very similar to Vampa's concept of party dominance. For ancestry dominance, *s* is the share of the highest ancestry in the respective county and *c* is the share of the second highest ancestry. We use the formula above to calculate dominance measures for German, Unhyphenated, English, Irish and Italian ancestry. Where an ancestry that is not the highest in a county is coded as 0. For instance, in a county with the highest ancestry of 40% German and the second highest ancestry of 25% Unhyphenated, *Unhyphenated dominance* is coded as 0. Whereas *German dominance* (d) would be 0.64 (= 0.4 * (0.4/0.25)).

The dependent variable used in Tables 1 and 2 (models 1 to 5) consists of the Democratic and Republican county *vote share* between the elections 2008 to 2016. It is a continuous measure and calculated as percentages of the county vote. The Republican vote share of the 2016 election is used in model 1, whilst the Democratic one is used in model 2. The dependent variable of model 3 is based on the percent difference between the Republican and the Democratic vote share of 2016. In model 4, we use the Republican Party's percent vote share difference of the 2016 and the 2012 election. The dependent variable of model 5 is calculated as the difference between the Republican and Democratic vote shares in 2016 (as used in model 3) minus the difference between the Republican and Democratic vote shares in 2012. The dependent variable *swing state* that is used in model 6 is a binary variable. A county is coded as 1, if the county lies within a state that swung from a Democratic vote share majority in 2012 to a Republican vote share majority in 2016, and it is coded as 0 otherwise. *Swing county* is a second binary variable that is used in model 7. A county is coded as 1, if the county swung from a Democratic vote share majority in 2012 to a Republican vote share majority in 2016, and it is coded as 0 otherwise. In this model, we only look at swing-state counties. Our sample is therefore reduced to 476 counties. The dependent variable of model 10 is a dummy coded as 1 if the vote share majority in a county changed between the Democrats in 1916 and the Republicans in 1920 and coded as 0 if not. For models 11 and 12, we use again the Republican county *vote share* of the presidential election 2016 as done in model 1. The dependent variable of model 13 consists of the 1924 vote share of Robert La Follette from the Progressive Party.

Models 1 to 6 build on the same set of independent variables. The ancestry variables are *German*, *Unhyphenated*, *English*, *Irish*, and *Italian ancestry*. They are continuously measured and calculated as the share of each county's total population. In those six models and some of the following models, we solely include those five ancestries but all in all, 108 ancestries are available. The remaining ancestries thus fall into the excluded category. *American South* is a binary variable that controls for whether a county belongs to the American South or not.[7] To control for socio-economic factors at the county level, we also include *no college degree* and *income using* aggregated data from the American Community Survey 2015 (NHGIS data base). As done in similar papers (Bartels 2006; Carnes and Lupu 2019), we operationalize the white working-class as those respondents who do not hold a college degree and report annual household incomes below the national median. *No college degree* is a continuous variable consisting of the percent share of a county's population which has no college degree. *Income* is another continuous variable that measures the difference between the national median household income and a county's median annual household income. The US median household income in 2015 was $55,775. For each county, we thus take the $55,775 and subtract from it the respective county's median income. Positive values of *income* resulting from this calculation, therefore, indicate that a county's median income lies below the national median income. Whereas negative values of *income* indicate a median income above the national median income.

In Model 7, our dominance measure comes into play. We include two independent variables measuring German and Unhyphenated dominance: *German dominance* and *Unhyphenated dominance*. In our subsample of 476 swing-state counties, German ancestry share is highest in 326, Unhyphenated in 119, English in one, Irish in three and Italian in seven of those counties. Whilst we also calculate the dominance of English, Irish and Italian ancestry, they are not included in the regression as they are omitted during the analysis because those three ancestries do not show any variation in the dependent variable. None of the Irish, Italian or English dominated counties swung in a swing-state 2016.

In Section 5.3 of our paper, we look at individual level data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES) (Ansolabehere and Schaffner, 2016). The CCES allows us to study German American voting behavior at the individual level based on the inclusion of county fips that enable us to merge the CCES data with the ancestry data. The dependent variable *Vote Trump vs Clinton* is a dummy variable coded as 1 if the respondent voted for Trump and 0 if the respondent voted for Clinton in 2016. For investigating the influence of isolationist attitudes, we are looking at two specific dichotomous items that indicate isolationist tendencies, namely opposition to American participation in U.N. missions (*Against Help UN = 1*) and opposition to the Trans-Pacific Free trade agreement (TPPAF) (*Against Free Trade = 1*). We also include two party identity measures. *Republican PID* is a dummy coded as 1 if the respondent self-identifies as Republican and 0 if not. *No PID* is another dummy coded as 1 if the respondent does not identify with a party and 0 if the respondent identifies with any party. We also include the socio-demographic variables *age, gender, education* and *income*. *Age* is a continuous variable stating the age of the respondent at the time of the 2016 election. *Gender* is a dummy variable coded as 1 if the respondent is female and 0 if male. *Education* is a categorical variable ranging from 1 (no high school degree) to 6 (postgraduate degree). *Income* is a categorical variable measuring one's family income and ranges from 1 (Less than $10,000) to 16 ($500,000 or more). In Table 5 models 8 and 9, we test the effects of isolationist attitudes on voting for Trump instead of voting for Clinton in the 2016 presidential election. In both models, we include two interaction effects between both isolationist items and no party identity to investigate whether nonpartisans with isolationist attitudes were also more likely to vote for Trump in 2016. In model 8, we look at all respondents from all counties US-wide. Whereas we focus on respondents from German dominated counties in model 9.

In section 5.4, we relate historic election outcomes to the share of various European immigrant backgrounds at the county-level using election data from 1916, 1920 and 1924 as well as aggregated birthplace data from the 1910 census. Election data comes from the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) where we are using the *Electoral Data for Counties in the United States* (Clubb et al. 2006) and the birthplace census data was downloaded from the NHGIS data base. Data for German, Irish and Italian birthplace was collected in 1910. The three variables measure a county's share of inhabitants indicating that they were born in either Germany (we added respondents who mentioned Austria), Ireland or Italy. In Model 10 (see Table 6), we are investigating the effects of those three birthplaces on the change in vote

[7] A county is coded as 1, if the county belongs to one of the below listed states and 0 otherwise. The American South contains the following states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.

share majorities between the Democrats in 1916 and the Republicans in 1920. In Model 11 (see Table 7), we replicate Model 1 but exchange German ancestry with the Republican vote share from 1920. We aim to test whether we can predict Trump's electoral success with the one reached by the Republicans in 1920 after World War I where we expect Germans also to be especially likely to vote for the Republicans. In Model 12 (see Table 7), we replicate Model 11 but include German ancestry to demonstrate that even if we control for German ancestry, the Republican vote share from 1920 still affects the one in 2016. In Model 13 (see Table 8), we are testing the effects of German, Irish and Italian birthplace on the 1924 vote share of Robert La Follette from the Progressive Party.

5. Results

5.1. The 'Trump Effect' in 2016

A first conclusion we can draw from a descriptive perspective offered in Fig. 1 is that Donald Trump did well in areas with at least a fifth of ACS respondents self-identifying as German Americans. However, can the electoral success of Trump with German Americans be attributed to him as a candidate or is it rather a reflection of the strong identification with the Republican Party among German American Republicanism? Did self-identified German Americans support Trump because he was running as a Republican or because of his personal attributes?

We proceed in two steps. First, we show that there is a substantially polarizing effect of German ancestry on the Republican and Democratic vote shares across counties in the 2016 presidential election that occurs even if we control for a popular but questionable explanation of the Trump vote, namely that it is anchored in education and socioeconomic status (cf. Tankersley 2016; Carnes and Lupu 2019). Second, we test hypotheses 2a and 2b that help us distinguish whether the polarizing effect of German ancestry is due to identification with Republicans or due to the candidate himself.

In Table 1, we present the effects of single German ancestry on the Republican and Democratic vote share at the county level in 2016. Both models include as covariates the five largest white ancestry or ethnic groups in the U. S., i.e. the largest European ancestries, namely German, Irish, English and Italian, as well as Unhyphenated Americans in addition to an American South dummy and two socio-economic indicators. Model 1 and 2 provide support for hypotheses H1a and H1b. German ancestry share is highly significant indicating that with a 1 percentage point increase in the share of German ancestry, counties have on average a 1 percentage point higher Republican vote share and similarly an about 1 percentage point lower vote share for Clinton in 2016. Model 3 allows us to combine both effects. Together the effect in favor of Trump rather than Clinton is about 2 percentage points, as can be seen in Model 3, for every 1 percentage point increase in the share of German ancestry. A closer look at the other ancestry groups shows that the share of Unhyphenated and Irish American ancestry both show very similar patterns as we expect for the German Americans. Though, the exact opposite holds for counties with a high share of English and Italian ancestry. These patterns nicely illustrate that upon closer investigation the 'white vote' is not a homogenous coalition of voters. So far, the results establish as expected that there is a substantially polarizing effect of German ancestry on the Republican and Democratic vote shares across counties in the 2016 presidential election. In the appendix (Table A3), we replicate those three models with German birthplace data from 1910 leading to additional evidence for the effects of German ancestry. In the next step, we need to uncover evidence whether this result is due to a larger realignment trend in favor of the republican party or an effect of the candidate himself.

What would be an observable implication that the result of the 2016 Presidential election is also due to a 'Trump effect' rather than merely a tendency that German Americans are more likely to vote Republican than Democrat? In the following we present two pieces of evidence.

Table 1
Regression table investigating white ancestry groups in the 2016 general election.

	Vote Share 2016		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Trump/Pence (Republican)	Clinton/Kaine (Democratic)	Rep. 2016 – Dem. 2016
German Ancestry	1.032***	−0.940***	1.972***
	(0.033)	(0.034)	(0.067)
Unhyphenated Ancestry	0.432***	−0.418***	0.850***
	(0.030)	(0.031)	(0.061)
English Ancestry	1.042***	−1.282***	2.324***
	(0.076)	(0.076)	(0.151)
Irish Ancestry	2.181***	−1.895***	4.077***
	(0.140)	(0.141)	(0.280)
Italian Ancestry	−0.620***	0.986***	−1.606***
	(0.161)	(0.162)	(0.321)
No College Degree	0.923***	−0.815***	1.738***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.059)
Income	−0.0003***	0.0003***	−0.0006***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
American South Dummy	3.381***	0.539	2.842**
	(0.520)	(0.526)	(1.040)
Constant	−24.77***	108.6***	−133.4***
	(2.055)	(2.077)	(4.109)
N	3111	3111	3111
adj. R^2	0.530	0.486	0.509

Notes: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
In the appendix table A5, we show that the results are robust even if we fit spatial autoregressive regression models assuming that only residuals of adjacent counties are correlated with each other.
Source: County-level analysis combining 2016 county-level voting returns and ancestry group information from the *American Community Survey* (Manson et al., 2019).

First, we should find a stronger effect of the share of German ancestry in the election with Trump as candidate compared to the results of the 2012 election at the county level (H2a). Second, if Trump increased the Republican vote share more than one would expect, based on the change in Republican vote share between 2008 and 2012, then the share of German ancestry should be positively related to the additional increase in Republican vote share between 2016 and 2012 over the increase between 2008 and 2012 (H2b).

Table 2 contains a number of models that allow us to investigate a possible 'Trump effect' more directly. Again both models include as covariates the five largest white ancestries, namely German, Irish, English and Italian, as well as Unhyphenated Americans in addition to a South dummy and the two socio-economic indicators. Model 4 tests H2a and provides evidence that the share of German ancestry in a county significantly increased the vote share difference between the Republican tickets of Trump in 2016 and Romney in 2012. The highly significant German ancestry share indicates that with a 1 percentage point increase in the share of German ancestry counties have on average a 0.24 percentage point higher difference in the Republican vote share between 2016 and 2012. In Model 5, we also find evidence for H2b where German ancestry significantly increases the Republican vote share differences between 2016–2012 and 2012–2008. The German ancestry share is highly significant indicating that with a 1 percentage point increase in the share of German ancestry counties have on average a 0.12 percentage point higher difference between the Republican vote share 2016 and 2012 compared to the Republican vote share 2012 and 2008. The results confirm our assumption that our previous findings are not solely based on a larger realignment trend but on an effect of the candidate, namely Trump, himself. Any other non-isolationist Republican candidate would have been less successful with the German Americans community. If we look at the other ancestries, we find that Unhyphenated and Irish ancestry both show a very similar pattern to

Table 2
Trump-effect for white voting behavior in 2016 and previous elections.

	(4)	(5)
	Rep. 2016 – Rep. 2012	Diff (Rep. 2016–2012) – Diff (Rep. 2012–2008)
German Ancestry	0.243***	0.118***
	(0.013)	(0.018)
Unhyphenated Ancestry	0.109***	0.019
	(0.012)	(0.017)
English Ancestry	−0.367***	−0.541***
	(0.03)	(0.041)
Irish Ancestry	0.823***	0.644***
	(0.055)	(0.076)
Italian Ancestry	0.412***	0.621***
	(0.063)	(0.087)
No College Degree	0.309***	0.266***
	(0.012)	(0.016)
Income	0.0001***	0.0001***
	(0.00001)	(0.00001)
American South Dummy	−1.934***	0.09
	(0.204)	(0.283)
Constant	−23.10***	−20.98***
	(0.804)	(1.116)
N	3111	3111
adj. R^2	0.473	0.254

Notes: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
In the appendix table A5, we show that the results are robust even if we fit spatial autoregressive regression models assuming that only residuals of adjacent counties are correlated with each other.
Source: County-level analysis combining 2016 county-level voting returns and ancestry group information from the *American Community Survey* (Manson et al., 2019).

German ancestry in Table 1. Italian compared to German ancestry shows similar effects in Table 2 but it does not in Table 1 and hence, can be differentiated from German. English displays similar effects in Table 1 but behaves exactly the opposite in Table 2.

In the next step, we investigate whether these findings provide a substantial contribution to explaining how Trump won the 2016 presidential election. We therefore examine how the share of German ancestry affected the likelihood of a county to lie within a state won by Obama in 2012 and by Trump in 2016.

5.2. German American dynamics in the obama-trump-swing

So far, the evidence indicates that Trump was more attractive to German Americans than Clinton in 2016 and gained more traction than Republican candidate Mitt Romney in 2012. The question remains whether the results from above mattered for the election outcome. With the exception of Florida, the states that turned out for Obama in 2008 and 2012 and for Trump in 2016 lie along the so-called 'German Belt'. From East to West these states are Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa. After demonstrating that German ancestry systematically influenced the Republican and Democratic vote share in 2016 (H1a, H1b), that there very likely was a 'Trump effect' (H2b, H2b), we now investigate our third set of hypotheses. H3a states that an increase in the share of single German ancestry increased the likelihood that a county lies in a state won by Obama/Biden in 2012 and by Trump/Pence in 2016. Table 3 provides evidence that supports this hypothesis. With increasing German ancestry, a county is more likely to lie in a state that swung from the Democrats in 2012 to the Republicans in 2016, holding everything else constant. Also, although Unhyphenated and Irish Americans supported Trump in 2016 (Table 1), they had no impact on the thin margins by which Trump won several of the Swing states. We, therefore, also see a difference between Unhyphenated and Irish compared to German ancestry when investigating Trump's electoral

Table 3
Logistic Regression predicting if counties lie in a Democratic to Republican Swing State in 2016.

	(6)
	County in Democratic to Republican Swing State (2012–2016)
German Ancestry	0.07***
	(0.008)
Unhyphenated Ancestry	−0.007
	(0.011)
English Ancestry	−0.134***
	(0.035)
Irish Ancestry	0.015
	(0.043)
Italian Ancestry	0.323***
	(0.038)
No College Degree	0.007
	(0.009)
Income	0.00002***
	(0.00001)
American South Dummy	−0.955***
	(0.170)
Constant	−2.729***
	(0.598)
N	3111

Notes: Logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
*p < 0.05,**p < 0.01,***p < 0.001.
Source: County-level analysis combining 2016 county-level voting returns and ancestry group information from the *American Community Survey* (Manson et al., 2019).

success. Italian counties are also more likely to lie in a swing state, but they did not support Trump, as the previous models (Table 1) showed.

The substantial impact of German American ancestry on Trump's victory is further illustrated in Fig. 2. The figure builds on the observed value approach. Whilst we must be careful with inferences drawn from German ancestry shares higher than 30 percent per county (65 of 3111 counties) as the rug plot shows, we can be relatively sure about the effects below 30 percent. The figure reveals that between German ancestry shares of 0–30 percent, the predicted probability of a county lying

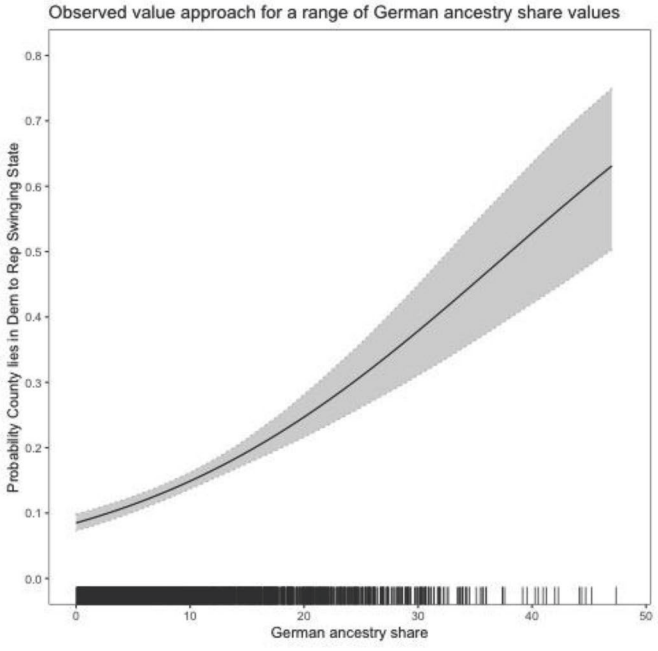

Fig. 2. Predicted Probabilities of Counties lying in States Swinging from Democrats to Republican in 2016.

within a state swinging from Democrat to Republican increases from about 10 percent to about 40 percent. Substantially, this reveals that German Americans had a considerable impact on the election outcome of the 2016 American presidential election.

The decisive nature of the German American vote is further highlighted if we zoom in on local political ecologies within the swing states. To this end, we contrast counties that exhibit steady voting behavior with counties that flipped from an Obama majority in 2012 to a Trump majority 2016. Since votes are tallied at the state-level, a county-swing does not directly predict a state-swing. But it illustrates the weight of German ancestry within the states. Our hypothesis H3b says that the more dominant the share of German ancestry, the more likely we are dealing with a county that voted Democrat in 2012 and Republican in 2016. In other words, the depth of the local German American footprint should increase the likelihood of a local swing from Democrat to Republican.

Table 4 shows the results of a logistic regression (Model 7), using the continuous dominance measure for German American and Unhyphenated American counties in the swing states.[8] There is a positive effect of being increasingly German dominated on the likelihood of being a 'Swing County' and a reverse relationship for Unhyphenated American dominance. This supports hypothesis H3b stating that the more dominant the share of German ancestry is within a swing state, the more likely that the county flipped from Democratic in 2012 to Republican in 2016. Calculating a first difference between German dominant (taking the value of the highest observed percentile) and Unhyphenated dominant counties (taking the value of the highest observed percentile), the results indicate that such a German dominant county is about 30 (95% CI: [5,50]) percentage points more likely than an Unhyphenated dominant county to swing from a Democratic to a Republican majority in 2016.

The evidence of a leading role of German dominant counties also has a geographic component that is not captured in any model. Fig. 3 shows the five swing states along the so-called German-belt: Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania from left to right. Counties that swung from Democrat to Republican between 2012 and 2016 within these states are shaded. Counties that experienced no swing are not shaded. The swing counties are broken down into three categories: First, counties which are 'German dominant' by the most conservative application of our measure. These dark shaded counties lie in the upper tertile of the measure. The mean margin by which German ancestry leads in these counties is around 16%. Typically, over 40% of the entire population in these counties claimed some type of German ancestry (multiple or single). The second category in Fig. 3 are counties where German Americans make up a majority but are not clearly dominant, meaning that they dominate other ancestries by a lower margin, usually between 1% and 6%. The third category of swing counties is labeled as 'other'. It includes all swing counties with an Unhyphenated, English, Irish or Italian ethnic lead. German dominant counties are most susceptible to swinging (as Table 4 showed). In addition, Fig. 3 reveals a clear geographic concentration: only few and scattered swing counties in the East, but a cluster of swing counties in Northeast Iowa and Southwest Wisconsin. The counties form the bulk of a region that collectively voted for Barack Obama in 2012 and later for Donald Trump in 2016. The swing in this region was clearly a German-led phenomenon.

The cluster in Fig. 3 has some telling characteristics. Typical for areas of German settlement, it is a rural region with a total of around 700,000 inhabitants and a very low percentage of African Americans (around 1% in most of these counties). Nevertheless, when Barack Obama became the first African American president in 2008, he scored higher in these counties than previous Democrats - often creating local majorities between 55% and 60%. With a vote share of nearly 52%, Trump's support in the region was not as pronounced in 2016, but the swing was substantial. Evidently, there was a substantial group of voters in these counties who supported both candidates. Instead of instantly attributing this phenomenon to racial anxiety, we believe another connection between Obama and Trump deserves closer scrutiny. As the next section argues, isolationism is key to understanding the swing.

[8] The inclusion of the dominance measures for Irish, Italian and English ancestry was not possible as those ancestries do not show any variation in the dependent variable (*swing-county*). None of the Irish, Italian or English dominated counties swung in a swing-state 2016.

Table 4
Logistic regression of Swing-State Counties swinging from Democratic to Republican.

	(7)
	Swing-county (in a swing-state 2016)
German Dominant	0.164*
	(0.097)
Unhyphenated Dominant	−0.940*
	(0.541)
Constant	−1.604***
	(0.185)
N	476

Notes: Logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses.
*p < 0.05,**p < 0.01,***p < 0.001.
Source: County-level analysis combining 2016 county-level voting returns and ancestry group information from the *American Community Survey* (Manson et al., 2019).

5.3. The causal role of isolationism in 2016

Leveraging microdata from the CCES, we will now examine the link between isolationist attitudes and Trump-support at the individual level (H4). In particular, we examine our theory that there is a general isolationist outlook among Trump-voters that goes beyond Republican Party identification. More specifically, given the two pathways how Trump profited from German American voting behavior, we not only expect that Republicans support Trump that would support the idea of a partisan pathway. We also expect that non-partisan voters with isolationist attitudes are particularly likely to support Donald Trump that would provide evidence for a non-partisan pathway. Of the few things Obama and Trump had in common during their campaigns, their opposition to the Iraq War stands out. A link to the anti-interventionist sentiment that Lubell (1956) claimed for German American communities appears likely. We examine a response item in the CCES addressing opposition to the American participation in U.N. military interventions. Another isolationist response item measuring economic protectionism is the individual opposition to the Trans-Pacific Free trade agreement (TPPAF). The two items appear as *Against UN Military* and *Against Free Trade* in Table 5. Models 8 and 9 in Table 5 compare the respondents across the entire US with respondents in German dominant counties (with much less respondents).

For both models, there is a significantly positive effect indicating that if voters held isolationist attitudes, they were more likely to vote for Trump than for Clinton in 2016 (see Table 5). Both models thus provide support for the fourth hypothesis. Unsurprisingly, Republicans were more likely to vote for Trump. However, the second pathway of isolationism also comes to bear: non-partisans, i.e., voters without a party identity were more likely to vote for Trump, holding all else constant. In addition, they have an even higher proclivity to vote for Trump rather than Clinton if they agree with the two isolationist items as the significant positive interaction effect indicates. Isolationist attitudes seem to matter for non-partisans in German dominated counties in particular when they relate to opposition to providing military support to the UN rather than concerns about free trade. To sum-up, while the dominant narrative around the white working-class is supported here as well, we uncover individual-level evidence that is consistent with our theory of a

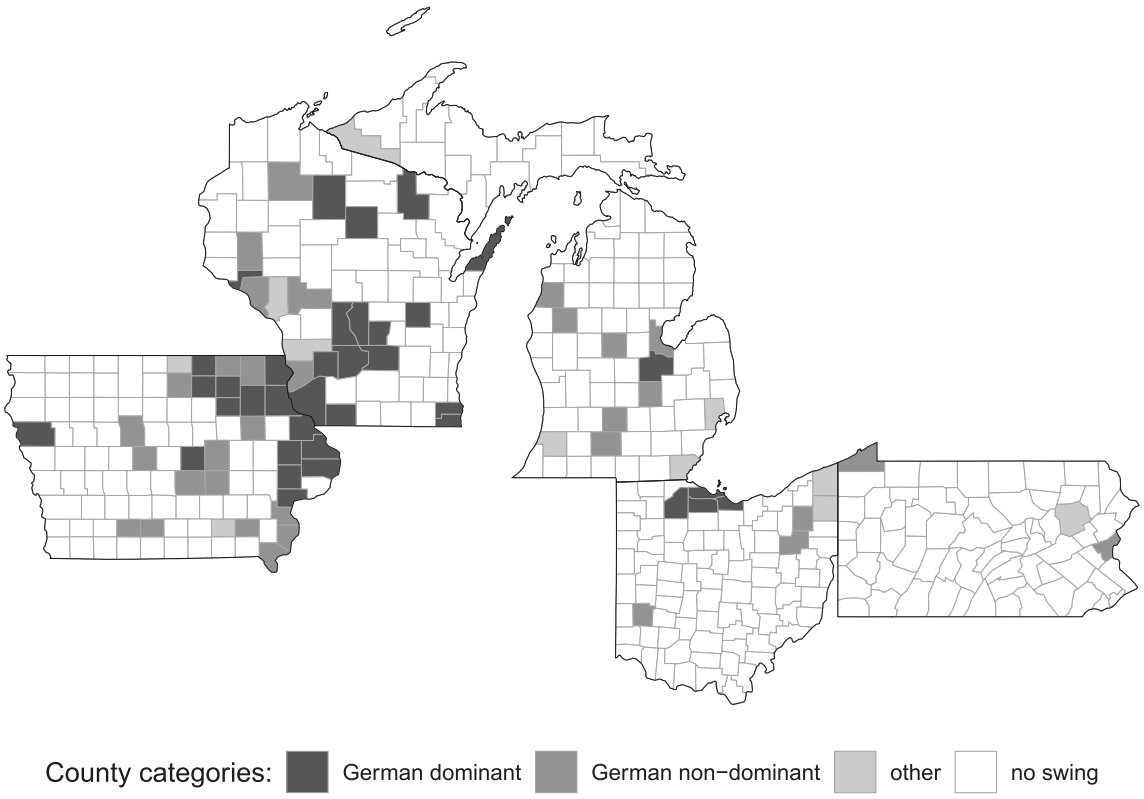

Fig. 3. Map of the swing counties within the midwestern swing states.

Table 5
The effects of isolationist attitudes on voting for Trump in 2016.

	(8)	(9)
	Vote Trump vs Clinton (All counties)	Vote Trump vs Clinton (German dominant counties)
Age	0.01***	0.008
	(0.001)	(0.005)
Gender	−0.299***	−0.345*
	(0.036)	(0.146)
Education	−0.279***	−0.332***
	(0.013)	(0.054)
Income	0.005	0.001
	(0.006)	(0.025)
Republican PID	5.109***	5.027***
	(0.053)	(0.212)
Against UN Military	0.800***	0.886***
	(0.050)	(0.198)
Against Free Trade	0.622***	0.774***
	(0.051)	(0.199)
No PID	1.819***	2.095***
	(0.066)	(0.265)
Against Military UN* No PID	0.778***	0.722**
	(0.07)	(0.280)
Against Free Trade * No PID	0.496***	0.172
	(0.07)	(0.281)
Constant	−2.491***	−2.126***
	(0.099)	(0.411)
N	34627	2095

Notes: Logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
Source: Individual-level analysis using data from the *CCES* (Ansolabehere and Schaffner, 2016).

partisan pathway and a non-partisan pathway to further explain the support of Trump.

5.4. Probing the historic pathways and their imprints today

We now turn to the two historic pathways of isolationism in German American communities: the partisan pathway and the non-partisan pathway. The root of 'America First' politics was the WWI era. In 1916, the Democratic candidate was the incumbent president Woodrow Wilson. He ran a campaign featuring the slogan 'America First' and emphasized the fact that he had kept America out of the European war from 1914. After his election, however, the war escalated into a World War with the U.S. being fully involved among the allied forces.

Table 6
Investigating the effects of white ancestry groups on the change in vote share majority between the 1916 and the 1920 US general election.

	(10)
	County showing a Democratic majority in 1916 but a Republican majority in 1920
German Birthplace 1910	0.036***
	(0.009)
Irish Birthplace 1910	0.127***
	(0.033)
Italian Birthplace 1910	0.047
	(0.067)
Constant	−1.099***
	(0.056)
N	2751

Notes: Logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
Source: County-level analysis combining election data from 1916 to 1920 from the *ICPSR* (Clubb et al. 2006) and aggregated birthplace data from the 1910 census downloaded from the *NHGIS* data base.

American involvement had consequences for German American support of the Democratic Party. Model 10 in Table 6 shows the defection of Democratic voters in counties with higher numbers of German immigrants between 1916 and 1920. Harding's 1920 Republican campaign recycled the slogan 'America First' and promised the American withdrawal from international institutions in a "return to normalcy". This initiated the realignment of German Americans with a more isolationist Republican party. We find support for H5a demonstrating that the higher the share of German immigration in a county the more likely the county's majority moved from the Democratic to the Republican Party between 1916 and 1920 (see Table 6).

The swing from 1920 remains predictive of German American Republican support. Table 7 shows the relationship between the 1920 and the 2016 election. If we replace the share of German ancestry at the national level with the Republican vote share of 1920, we can make predictions about the vote share of Donald Trump in the 2016 election. Moreover, if we introduce the German ancestry variable the effect size drops by 0.079, visualizing the connection between German ancestry and the 1920 Republican vote share. Both models in Table 7 provide evidence for H5b hypothesizing that the election results of 1920 predict the election outcome for Trump in 2016.

The non-partisan pathway of German American isolationism also followed the events of WWI. Robert La Follette who opposed American participation in WWI ran a nationwide presidential campaign on a progressive platform in 1924. He was a political outsider whose campaign was built around an isolationist agenda. He won his home state of Wisconsin, and scored moderate shares in other heavily German American states. In Table 8, we find evidence for our last hypothesis H5c. The higher the share of German immigrants in a county the more likely the county supported La Follette in 1924. Model 13 shows that out of the large European immigrant groups from the 19th century, German settlements were the only group to support La Follette in 1924.

Table 7
Connecting the Trump election in 2016 with the 1920 Republican vote share.

	(11)	(12)
	Trump/Pence (Republican)	Trump/Pence (Republican)
Republican vote share 1920	0.136***	0.057***
	(0.015)	(0.014)
German Ancestry		0.970***
		(0.034)
Unhyphenated Ancestry	0.314***	0.399***
	(0.035)	(0.031)
English Ancestry	0.610***	1.005***
	(0.084)	(0.076)
Irish Ancestry	2.069***	2.108***
	(0.159)	(0.141)
Italian Ancestry	−2.401***	−0.762***
	(0.171)	(0.162)
No College Degree	0.957***	0.907***
	(0.034)	(0.030)
Income	−0.0004***	−0.0003***
	(0.00003)	(0.00002)
American South Dummy	−0.213	4.955***
	(0.721)	(0.665)
Constant	−17.81***	−25.83***
	(2.546)	(2.278)
N	2977	2977
adj. R^2	0.391	0.520

Notes: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***$p < 0.001$.
In the appendix table A5, we show that the results are robust even if we fit spatial autoregressive regression models assuming that only residuals of adjacent counties are correlated with each other.
Source: County-level analysis combining 2016 county-level voting returns and ancestry group information from the *American Community Survey* (Manson et al., 2019) with election data from 1920 from the *ICPSR* (Clubb et al. 2006).

Table 8
Regression table investigating white ancestry groups in the 1924 general election.

	(13)
	La Follette (1924: Progressive Party)
German Birthplace 1910	1.007***
	(0.047)
Irish Birthplace 1910	0.158
	(0.178)
Italian Birthplace 1910	−0.0613
	(0.357)
Constant	3.677***
	(0.273)
N	2771
adj. R^2	0.162

Notes: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
Source: County-level analysis combining election data from 1924 from the *ICPSR* (Clubb et al. 2006) and aggregated birthplace data from the 1910 census downloaded from the *NHGIS* data base.

After two World Wars, German identity and political engagement faded and submerged in the second half of the 20th century. However, local ecologies of the German American brand with a distinct experience remained intact. A more recent example of German American support for an isolationist candidate is the success of Ross Perot, third-party candidate in 1992, in many German American counties. Among the descendents of 19th century immigrants he scored highest with German Americans (see Appendix, Table A4).

6. Conclusion

In summary, our results suggest that the German media were spot-on in their prediction: out of the largest white ethnic groups, German Americans would pave the way into the White House for Donald Trump. In this paper, we uncovered evidence consistent with two paths of support for Trump among German Americans, a partisan as well as a non-partisan one. The upshot is that until this day, there is a shared political outlook in German American communities consisting of conservatism and a remaining non-partisan isolationist appeal. This finding is in line with an emerging literature that provides evidence that historical conditions are able to leave potentially long-lasting imprints (e.g. Acharya et al., 2016). Both factors worked in favor of Donald Trump. The patterns of voting behavior do not mirror those of Unhyphenated Americans, Irish Americans or other groups. The support pattern we uncover is particularly relevant for the voting returns in swing states that supported Obama in 2012 but turned to Trump in 2016. Attributing Trump's success in former Obama strongholds to racism (e.g. Oberhauser et al., 2019) might overlook alternative explanations. Trump's appeal to isolationist attitudes within the German American communities offer such an alternative explanation that is also historically grounded. We would like to encourage further research to tease apart the different predictions of both explanations.

At the granular level, we are able to observe the non-partisan pathway of isolationism at work: in German-dominated counties non-partisan voters were more likely to vote for Trump if they were opposed to American participation in U.N. military operations, for instance. The remaining isolationist impulses could indeed be connected to the German American war-time experience, as Lubell (1956) suggested. Finally, we probe the causal mechanism of our theory, using historical election returns. We find that counties with larger shares of German Americans supported isolationist candidates within and outside of the Republican Party after World War I. The Republican votes from 1920 as well as the German settlements of 1910 can be linked to Republican votes in 2016 (Table 7, Appendix: Table A3). The patterns we uncover are consistent with our theory of a particular German

American vote motivated by isolationism. More importantly, though, the patterns we find are at the same time inconsistent with expectations of a homogenous pan-ethnic coalition of white voters. We acknowledge, however, that we cannot rerun history. Our results are correlational and, hence, primarily suggestive. For instance, the Trump effect we find could conceivably also be a combination of a positive reaction to Trump as candidate and a gender effect that materializes as a negative reaction towards Clinton. We cannot disentangle this possibility because, so far, Hillary Clinton is the only female presidential candidate of a major party. In any case, gender effects cannot explain away the candidate effects we find in historical elections, and the links we find to recent elections.

With regard to future research, German Americans offer a peculiar case study of assimilation. Our findings raise the question what being 'assimilated' actually entails and to what extent 'whiteness' is a reliable category when regional identities come into play. At least in the political realm there is converging evidence (Gimpel and Cho 2004; Arbour 2018) that distinguishable patterns continue to exist. Our results show that counties with many voters of German ancestry behave quite differently from counties with many Unhyphenated American or Irish voters, for instance. This is particularly striking because it implies that the decision of voters to self-report as having German ancestry rather than identifying as Unhyphenated American or Irish has strong political connotations that have not been recognized so far. While it is widely accepted that migration and integration experiences as well as racial experiences determine the political behavior of various Hispanic American groups and African Americans, our findings imply that European American experiences of migration and integration are also relevant. While the role of ethnic self-identifications among white voters needs closer examination in combination with other social variables, its current exclusion from most analyses is problematic. The historical presence of white ancestry groups may be linked substantively to contemporary voting due to the intergenerational durability of ethnic and family ties. Crude racial terminology may be shrouding the diverging motivations for different heritage regions to support a specific candidate. Due to the nature of the American presidential election system, it is by no means trivial if crucial swing regions hold lingering isolationist views. Our findings entail that established politicians with a record of support for interventionist policies would have a harder time winning the German American vote. Indeed, Joe Biden received the votes he needed to win several heavily German American states in 2020 by very thin margins - as did Trump in 2016. This was not predicted by most polls. German Americans in the Midwest remain crucial for winning or losing elections.

Finally, with the end of the Trump-era on the horizon, an important question appears to be whether there are other politicians who embody the 'American First' agenda and might mobilize the support of German American regions in a similar way. Ron Paul and his son Rand Paul are examples of politicians who vocally oppose U.S. military interventions, for instance. A younger isolationist voice in the Republican Party is Matt Gaetz from Florida. It is peculiar that Trump, the Pauls and Gaetz all come from German American backgrounds. Whether and how the migration heritage of political figures is related to their political views is another important question for more granular research. The future calls for a closer examination of possible ethno-political links.

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Appendix

The tables A1 to A2 in the Appendix replicate our findings we report in the main body of the paper by using total ancestry as a measure of the size of different voter groups rather than single ancestry. The total ancestry share consists of single ancestry indications and multiple ancestry indications. Multiple ancestry indications should be interpreted as indicators of increased intermarriage (Alba 1990) as would be expected in urban surroundings. The influence of German ancestry is lower in these areas than in rural areas of German settlement which is confirmed in that the effect size is lower in most models below. In general, however, we find the same results for total and single ancestry.

Table A1
Replication of the regression models 1 to 5 with total instead of single ancestry

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Trump/Pence (Republican)	Clinton/Kaine (Democratic)	Rep. 2016 – Dem. 2016	Rep. 2016 – Rep. 2012	Diff (Rep. 2016–2012) – Diff (Rep. 2012–2008)
German	**0.610*****	**−0.579*****	**1.188*****	**0.134*****	**0.046*****
Ancestry	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.040)	(0.008)	(0.011)
Unhyphenated	**0.485*****	**−0.465*****	**0.950*****	**0.123*****	**0.029**
Ancestry	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.055)	(0.011)	(0.016)
English	**0.732*****	**−0.957*****	**1.689*****	**−0.308*****	**−0.449*****
Ancestry	(0.045)	(0.045)	(0.089)	(0.018)	(0.025)
Irish	**0.818*****	**−0.685*****	**1.503*****	**0.379*****	**0.343*****
Ancestry	(0.058)	(0.058)	(0.116)	(0.023)	(0.033)
Italian	**−0.652*****	**0.763*****	**−1.415*****	**0.096*****	**0.195*****
Ancestry	(0.072)	(0.072)	(0.143)	(0.029)	(0.040)
No College	**1.031*****	**−0.937*****	**1.968*****	**0.299*****	**0.238*****
Degree	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.056)	(0.011)	(0.016)
Income	**−0.0003*****	**0.0003*****	**−0.0006*****	**0.0001*****	**0.0001*****
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.00001)	(0.00001)
American	**8.507*****	**−4.835*****	**13.34*****	**−1.199*****	**0.026**
South Dummy	(0.543)	(0.540)	(1.077)	(0.215)	(0.303)
Constant	**−42.54*****	**128.2*****	**−170.7*****	**−23.66*****	−18.68***
	(2.151)	(2.137)	(4.263)	(0.850)	(1.200)

(*continued on next page*)

Table A1 (*continued*)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Trump/Pence (Republican)	Clinton/Kaine (Democratic)	Rep. 2016 – Dem. 2016	Rep. 2016 – Rep. 2012	Diff (Rep. 2016–2012) – Diff (Rep. 2012–2008)
N	3111	3111	3111	3111	3111
adj. R^2	0.574	0.551	0.563	0.514	0.288

Notes: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***$p < 0.001$.

Table A2
Replication of the regression Model 6 with total instead of single ancestry

	(6)
	Democratic to Republican Swing State (2012–2016)
German Ancestry	**0.067*****
	(0.006)
Unhyphenated Ancestry	−0.003
	(0.011)
English Ancestry	−0.028
	(0.018)
Irish Ancestry	0.006
	(0.018)
Italian Ancestry	**0.176*****
	(0.018)
No College Degree	0.013
	(0.009)
Income	**0.00003*****
	(0.00001)
American South Dummy	**−0.415***
	(0.189)
Constant	**−4.760*****
	(0.692)
N	3111

Notes: Logistic regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
Source: County-level analysis combining 2016 county-level voting returns and ancestry group information from the *American Community Survey* (Manson et al., 2019).
Source: County-level analysis combining 2016 county-level voting returns and ancestry group information from the *American Community Survey* (Manson et al., 2019).

Table A3. Replication of the regression models 1 to 3 with birthplace data from 1910.

In this table, we replicate the first three models of Table 1 with German birthplace data from 1910 instead of German ancestry. The correlation between German ancestry 2015 and German birthplace 1910 is 0.67 significant at 0.05. The findings provide additional evidence for the long lasting connections between German settlements from the 19th century and the vote choice in 2016.

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Trump/Pence (Republican)	Clinton/Kaine (Democratic)	Rep. 2016 – Dem. 2016
German Birthplace 1910	**0.372*****	**−0.315*****	**0.687*****
	(0.059)	(0.058)	(0.116)
Unhyphenated Ancestry	**0.368*****	**−0.358*****	**0.726*****
	(0.035)	(0.034)	(0.069)
English Ancestry	**0.719*****	**−0.961*****	**1.680*****
	(0.092)	(0.091)	(0.181)
Irish Ancestry	**2.085*****	**−1.829*****	**3.914*****
	(0.164)	(0.162)	(0.325)
Italian Ancestry	**−2.214*****	**2.451*****	**−4.665*****
	(0.172)	(0.171)	(0.342)
No College Degree	**0.992*****	**−0.882*****	**1.874*****
	(0.034)	(0.034)	(0.068)
Income	**−0.0004*****	**0.0004*****	**−0.0008*****
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
American South Dummy			

(*continued on next page*)

(*continued*)

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Trump/Pence (Republican)	Clinton/Kaine (Democratic)	Rep. 2016 – Dem. 2016
	−3.236***	**6.420*****	**−9.656*****
	(0.555)	(0.550)	(1.101)
Constant	**−14.54*****	**99.54*****	**−114.1*****
	(2.415)	(2.393)	(4.787)
N	2893	2893	2893
adj. R^2	0.393	0.361	0.376

Notes: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
Source: County-level analysis combining 2016 county-level voting returns, ancestry group information from the *American Community Survey* (Manson et al., 2019) and 1910 birthplace data from the *NHGIS* data base.

Table A4. Regression table investigating white ancestry groups in the 1992 general election.

The end of the Cold War saw a resurrection of 'America First' politics. The most prominent example is Texas business magnate Ross Perot with his Reform Party movement. His platform pursued protectionist policies and he vocally opposed the Gulf War. Ross Perot ran for President in 1992. We expect that German Americans supported him above average at the national level. Table A4 confirms that Ross Perot had nation-wide German American support. Other white groups reacted differently: Unhyphenated Americans and Italian Americans opposed Ross Perot, Irish American counties supported him far less. Only the old English ancestry regions found Perot as attractive as German Americans.

	Vote Share 1992
	Ross Perot
German Ancestry	**0.139*****
	(0.011)
Unhyphenated Ancestry	**−0.249*****
	(0.019)
English Ancestry	**0.326*****
	(0.025)
Irish Ancestry	**0.115***
	(0.047)
Italian Ancestry	**−0.183****
	(0.057)
American South Dummy	**−5.054*****
	(0.266)
Constant	**20.00*****
	(0.377)
N	3111
adj. R2	0.438

Notes: OLS estimates with standard errors in parentheses; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
Source: County-level analysis combining 1992 county-level voting returns from the *Congressional Quarterly* (Congressional Quarterly Voting and Elections Collection 2019) and ancestry group information from the *NHGIS* data base for the census years of 1980, 1990 and 2000.

Table A5. Estimates of a spatial autoregressive regression models.

Our final set of robustness tests concern the effect of potentially correlated residuals in our county-level analysis. For the regression analysis in the main body of the paper we assume the residuals to be independent and identically distributed (iid). Neighboring counties, however, potentially exhibit common attributes that are not part of our models' systematic components but nevertheless shape the counties' behaviors. Processes like this violate standard OLS assumption and produce spatial error dependence. Thus, as an alternative we conduct another set of robustness test assuming now some form of dependency across counties. In lieu of accepted theory of spatial effects, the simplest and also most plausible assumption is that only residuals of adjacent counties are correlated with each other.

We use Moran's *I* to test whether we can reject the null that the residuals are iid in favor of our assumed form of spatial correlation. Therefore, we construct a respective spatial weighting matrix that reflects our assumption that residuals of the model are spatially autocorrelated, i.e., adjacent counties have similar residuals. For all models in Tables 1, 2 and 7 of the paper, we find that Moran's *I* is positive and differs significantly from the expected value under the null that the residuals are iid. We conclude that for those models, the assumption of spatially autocorrelated residuals are more likely to hold than the typical OLS assumption of iid residuals.

Assuming that only residuals of adjacent counties are correlated with each other instead of iid, we fit spatial autoregressive regression models. With the exception of model 5, the effect of German Ancestry in all other models is robust to assuming some form of spatial correlation of the residuals. The strongest deviation from the results presented in the paper is the estimated effect of Italian Ancestry that most often comes out insignificant when assuming that only residuals of adjacent counties are correlated with each. Nevertheless, we conclude that the results of the paper are robust even to some form of spatially autocorrelated residuals.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Trump/Pence (Republican)	Clinton/Kaine (Democratic)	Rep. 2016 – Dem. 2016	Rep. 2016 – Rep. 2012	Diff (Rep. 2016–2012) – Diff (Rep. 2012–2008)
German Ancestry	**0.880***** (0.036)	**−0.829***** (0.036)	**1.709***** (0.072)	**0.127***** (0.015)	0.021 (0.021)
Unhyphenated Ancestry	**0.557***** (0.029)	**−0.545***** (0.029)	**1.102***** (0.057)	**0.075***** (0.012)	0.015 (0.017)
English Ancestry	**1.079***** (0.070)	**−1.154***** (0.07)	**2.234***** (0.140)	**−0.110***** (0.029)	**−0.234***** (0.042)
Irish Ancestry	**1.729***** (0.117)	**−1.609***** (0.117)	**3.337***** (0.233)	**0.437***** (0.048)	**0.331***** (0.072)
Italian Ancestry	0.300 (0.164)	−0.162 (0.164)	0.460 (0.326)	**0.350***** (0.067)	**0.374***** (0.098)
No College Degree	**0.831***** (0.023)	**−0.739***** (0.023)	**1.571***** (0.045)	**0.329***** (0.009)	**0.311***** (0.014)
Income	**−0.0005***** (0.00002)	**0.0005***** (0.00002)	**−0.001***** (0.00004)	**0.00002**** (0.00001)	**0.00004**** (0.00001)
American South Dummy	**2.206**** (0.757)	0.665 (0.763)	1.532 (1.511)	**−2.461***** (0.302)	**−1.117**** (0.420)
Constant	**−17.30***** (1.670)	**103.2***** (1.665)	**−120.5***** (3.317)	**−22.35***** (0.680)	**−22.40***** (1.014)
Spatial autocorrelation parameter					
ρ	**0.893***** (0.014)	**0.895***** (0.013)	**0.894***** (0.013)	**0.851***** (0.013)	**0.787***** (0.015)
N	3110	3110	3110	3110	3110

Notes: Spatial autoregressive regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.
Source: County-level analysis combining 2016 county-level voting returns and ancestry group information from the *American Community Survey* (Manson et al., 2019).

	(11)	(12)
	Trump/Pence (Republican)	Trump/Pence (Republican)
Republican vote share 1920	**0.098***** (0.016)	**0.059***** (0.015)
German Ancestry		**0.816***** (0.037)
Unhyphenated Ancestry	**0.499***** (0.031)	**0.540***** (0.029)
English Ancestry	1.011*** (0.076)	1.046*** (0.071)
Irish Ancestry	**1.711***** (0.126)	**1.710***** (0.118)
Italian Ancestry	**−0.291** (0.176)	**0.138** (0.164)
No College Degree	**0.856***** (0.024)	**0.816***** (0.023)
Income	**−0.001***** (0.00002)	**−0.0005***** (0.00002)
American South Dummy	**−0.023** (0.917)	**3.339***** (0.849)
Constant	**−13.59***** (2.016)	**−18.04***** (1.885)
Spatial autocorrelation parameter		
ρ	**0.952***** (0.0134)	**0.918***** (0.0143)
N	2977	2977

Notes: Spatial autoregressive regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses; *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***$p < 0.001$.
Source: County-level analysis combining 2016 county-level voting returns and ancestry group information from the *American Community Survey* (Manson et al., 2019) with election data from 1920 from the *ICPSR* (Clubb et al. 2006).

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