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## Differences in political trust between migrants and non-migrants in pandemic times\*\*\*\*\*

**Abstract:** Political trust is one aspect that might be affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and the strict government-implemented measures to fight the virus. Previous studies report an increase in political trust at the onset of the pandemic in several European countries, followed by a marginal decline over the further course of the pandemic. However, it is unclear how political trust changes among first and second generation migrants in Germany compared to natives throughout the pandemic. To address this question, we use data from the adult cohort of the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) at one measurement point before, and two during the pandemic. Consistent with previous studies, our data show that pre-pandemic, political trust is higher among first generation migrants than among second generation migrants and natives. We examine how these previous differences evolve throughout the pandemic. Our results indicate that political trust increases significantly only for natives and second generation migrants, but not for first generation migrants at the beginning of the pandemic. Later in the first year of the pandemic, political trust is higher than pre-pandemic for all groups. Neither vulnerabilities nor sociodemographic control variables can explain the differences between the groups.

**Keywords:** Political Trust; COVID-19; Pandemic; Migration Background

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# Unterschiede im politischen Vertrauen zwischen Personen mit und ohne Migrationshintergrund in Zeiten der Pandemie

**Zusammenfassung:** Das politische Vertrauen stellt einen Aspekt dar, der möglicherweise durch die COVID-19-Pandemie und die strengen staatlichen Maßnahmen zur Bekämpfung des Virus beeinflusst wurde. Bisherige Studien berichten von einem Anstieg des politischen Vertrauens zu Beginn der Pandemie in verschiedenen europäischen Ländern, auf den ein geringfügiger Rückgang des Vertrauens im weiteren Verlauf der Pandemie folgte. Bisher ist jedoch unklar, wie sich das Vertrauen bei Personen mit Migrationshintergrund in Deutschland im Vergleich zu Personen ohne Migrationshintergrund im Verlauf der Pandemie verändert. Um dieser Frage nachzugehen, nutzen wir Daten der Erwachsenenkohorte des Nationalen Bildungspanels (NEPS) zu einem Messzeitpunkt vor und zwei weiteren während der Pandemie. Unsere Daten zeigen, dass das politische Vertrauen von Personen der 1. Migrationsgeneration höher ist, als das von Personen der 2. Migrationsgeneration und ohne Migrationshintergrund. Wir untersuchen, wie sich diese Unterschiede im Verlauf der Pandemie entwickeln. Unsere Ergebnisse weisen darauf hin, dass das politische Vertrauen zu Beginn der Pandemie nur unter Befragten ohne Migrationshintergrund und der zweiten Generation, nicht jedoch der ersten Generation signifikant steigt. Im weiteren Verlauf des ersten Pandemiejahres liegt das politische Vertrauen bei allen Gruppen signifikant höher als vor der Pandemie. Weder Vulnerabilitäten noch soziodemografische Kontrollvariablen können dabei die Unterschiede zwischen den Gruppen erklären.

**Stichworte:** Politisches Vertrauen; COVID-19; Pandemie; Migrationshintergrund

## 1 Introduction

The global spread of COVID-19 starting in 2020, meant that many societies were challenged with facing an extreme pandemic for the first time in their recent histories. In most countries, including Germany, this pandemic changed well-established norms and rules regarding physical contact (“social distancing”). This disrupted well-organized structures in child care, education, and work environments (e.g., closure of schools, universities, shops, restaurants, and cultural places), among others. The drastic measures implemented by political institutions to fight the pandemic constrained people’s daily lives, unprecedented in post-war Germany. These restrictions impacted many individuals’ social interactions, their mental health as well as people’s attitudes in terms of how they thought of others, of science, and of politics (Bromme et al. 2022; Esaiasson et al. 2021; Vindegaard/Eriksen Benros 2020).

Individual political trust is one aspect that might be affected by the pandemic and its consequences (Devine et al. 2020). Empirical evidence shows that overall levels of trust in political institutions in Germany increased at the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Delhey et al. 2021; SVR 2020). For the further course of the pandemic, empirical studies found slightly declining levels of trust in German political institutions compared to the beginning of the pandemic (Busemeyer et al. 2021; Delhey et al. 2021). Besides these overall changes in political trust, evidence also suggests inter-individual differences in changes in political trust during the pandemic, which seem to depend on individual vulnerabilities such as health or economic insecurities or personal exposure to the virus (Delhey et al. 2021; Devine et al. 2020; Dryhurst et al. 2020; Kritzinger et al. 2021).

One population group that has been widely neglected in this discourse is that of migrants, despite their being described as particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic, social, and health consequences, e.g., due to higher risk of infections or loss of job (Brücker et al. 2021; Guadagno 2020; OECD 2020; Plümecke et al. 2021). Higher vulnerability of migrants could lead to differences in political trust compared to natives in pandemic times. Beyond migrants' higher vulnerability, previous studies report higher levels of trust in German political institutions for migrants and their descendants compared to natives in pre-pandemic times (Raschke/Westle 2018; Röder/Mühlau 2012; SVR 2020).

Therefore, this article examines how political trust in Germany differed between migrants and non-migrants before the COVID-19 pandemic, how it changed during an early and a later stage of the pandemic, and whether migrants' levels of trust during the pandemic are related to their economic, and health vulnerabilities.

## 2 Political trust

### 2.1 Definition and formation of political trust

Easton's concept of system support (1965) describes individuals' attitudes towards the political system consisting of the nation-state, its political institutions, and its actors. Positive attitudes towards the political system lead to its acceptance and legitimacy. Easton distinguishes between diffuse and specific support. Diffuse support is defined as support for political institutions, as well as political arrangements of policies, and is decisive for their continued existence. Specific support relates to trust in the political institutions and policies (Fuchs et al. 2002). Based on this theoretical framework, Norris (2017) conceptualizes system support or political support "as a multidimensional phenomenon ranging on a continuum from the most diffuse to the most specific levels" (Norris 2017: 23). In this article, we follow this theoretical framework and argue that political trust includes the two most specific levels of political support *confidence in regime institutions* and *approval of incumbent office-holders*. For *confidence in the regime institutions*, citizens' "trust and confidence in the core institutions of state, including the legislature, executive, and

judicial branches of government, as well as other public sector agencies” (Norris 2017: 28) are crucial. At the most specific level of *approval of incumbent office-holders*, citizens’ evaluations and attitudes include assessments regarding the honesty, probity, and responsiveness of particular presidents and prime ministers, party leaders, and elected representatives.

Political trust is “a general belief in the performance capacity of political institutions and/or belief in the benevolent motivation and performance capacity of office-holders.” (Norris 2017: 24). Empirical evidence indicates that citizens do not necessarily differentiate trust in political institutions from trust in the incumbents of these institutions (Marien 2017; Zmerli/Newton 2017). In the German political system, the *Bundesregierung* (federal government, executive authority) and the *Bundestag* (federal parliament, legislative authority) constitute the most relevant institutions for political leadership next to the federal state government (*Landesregierungen*). These institutions are responsible for the legal framework of measures and constraints in the COVID-19 pandemic, although the practical implementation of specific measures and restrictions were handled differently in the sixteen federal states.

## 2.2 Political trust among migrants

Cross-European empirical evidence finds that pre-pandemic, migrants showed higher political trust in the host-country than natives (Raschke/Westle 2018; Röder/Mühlau 2012; SVR 2020; Verwiebe/Wiesböck 2021).<sup>1</sup> The *dual frame of reference* approach (Suarez-Orozco 1987) argues that migrants may use different evaluation frameworks than natives. Suarez-Orozco (1987) observed that migrants compare their current situation to that experienced in the past in their (or their families’) country of origin. According to this approach, these comparisons of economics, education, and politics between host-country and country of origin should lead to positive evaluations of the host country for most migrants (Röder/Mühlau 2012).

This ‘over-confidence’ of migrants in the political institutions (Röder/Mühlau 2012) decreases over time and across generations. Studies indicate that second-generation migrants show lower levels of trust in politics and government than first-generation migrants, with trust scores similar to those of natives (Maxwell 2010; Röder/Mühlau 2012; Wenzel 2006). Supporters of the *assimilation theory* (Alba/Nee 1997) explain this decrease in trust with acculturation processes. These processes include a gradual adaptation (assimilation and integration) to the host country’s cultural patterns (Gordon 1964). Hence, migrants’ political trust adjusts across generations to those of the native population (Röder/Mühlau 2012; Wenzel 2006). However, some empirical evidence indicates that differences in political trust between migrants and non-migrants can also be partially explained by socioeconomic factors (Adman/Strömlad 2015; Vroome et al. 2013).

1 The results of Decker et al. (2019) are an exception as they report (without statistical testing) that migrants in Germany show lower levels of trust in both executive and legislative authority.

### 3 Political trust in pandemic times

#### 3.1 Importance of political trust in pandemic times

Political trust is crucial in crises (OECD 2013) such as the COVID-19 pandemic because it plays an important role in individuals' acceptance of governmental measures and restrictions to fight the virus (van Bavel et al. 2020). Devine et al. (2020: 275) describe political trust as "essential to facilitating good governance of the pandemic." Research from previous epidemic events (e.g., Ebola in Liberia; SARS in Hongkong) shows that low political trust goes hand in hand with citizens taking less preventative action against the disease (Blair et al. 2017; Tang/Wong 2005). First empirical evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic likewise shows that higher political trust is associated with higher compliance with social-distancing and hygiene instructions (Caplanova et al. 2021; Nivette et al. 2021), acceptance of COVID-19 vaccines (Lindholt et al. 2021), and lower mortality rates (Farzanegan/Hofmann 2021; Oksanen et al. 2020).

#### 3.2 Changes and drivers of political trust in pandemic times

In January 2020, when the first COVID-19 infections were confirmed in Europe, little was known about the virus and how it spreads. Since then, incidences and mortality rates have dominated the news. The first lockdowns aimed at containing the virus spread followed in March 2020. Empirical evidence shows an initial rise in political trust at this early stage of the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic times in many countries (Bol et al. 2021; Edelmann 2020; Esaiasson et al. 2021; Johansson et al. 2021; Kritzinger et al. 2021), including Germany (de Vries et al. 2021; Delhey et al. 2021; Dietz et al. 2021). This increased support towards the political leadership during dramatic events affecting an entire society (e.g., war, terror attack, international crisis) is known as the *rally 'round the flag effect* (Hetherington/Nelson 2003; Mueller 1970). However, a small number of studies actually failed to find this initial rise of political trust, or only observed it for certain subgroups (Hegele/Schraff 2020; Kritzinger et al. 2021). Kritzinger et al. (2021), who report the *rally 'round the flag effect* for Austria but not France, explain the missing effect in France by a sharp polarization in the discourse between support for and rejection of the COVID-19 measures brought in by the governing and opposition parties. Thus, this effect seems to be related to the implemented political actions fighting the virus spread and to the political parties' publicly announced opinions about the actions. The literature suggests different underlying mechanisms explaining this phenomenon. Some authors see psychological effects as drivers of citizens' political trust in pandemic times; others citizens' perceptions of government competence in crisis management.

The psychological construct of fear is considered to affect political trust. As COVID-19 incidences and mortality rates increased at the beginning of the pandemic, citizens experienced pronounced levels of fear and uncertainty in reaction to

the unknown crisis. Based on data from Denmark and Italy, Baekgaard et al. (2020) and Roccato et al. (2021) assume that this fear led to the *rallying effect*, which is assumed to be a coping mechanism which offers individuals psychological reassurance.

Evidence from the Netherlands indicates that an anxiety effect determines increased levels of trust and suggests that health-related and economic costs and risks in the Dutch population affect those, depending on age, socioeconomic status, and health status (Hegewald/Schraff 2020; Schraff 2020). In addition, direct personal experience with the virus, perceived personal threat and risk perception seem to determine trust (Dryhurst et al. 2020; Esaiasson et al. 2021; Kritzinger et al. 2021).

The perceived governmental competence in crisis management is also related to political trust in pandemic times (Kritzinger et al. 2021). Citizens' evaluations of political institutions at the beginning of the pandemic are driven by the relative salience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the respective measures to contain it (Baekgaard et al. 2020; Esaiasson et al. 2021; Johansson et al. 2021; Roccato et al. 2021). Further, governmental implemented "lockdowns" are linked to increased support at the beginning of the pandemic (Bol et al. 2021; Sibley et al. 2020), even if the lockdown was implemented by the neighboring country (de Vries et al. 2021). Results from Kye/Hwang (2020) indicate a causal direction between an institutional reaction to the pandemic and political trust. For instance, low mortality rates can occur due to appropriate interventions and may serve as an indicator for policy outcomes positively influencing political trust. Rieger/Wang (2022), for example, showed that smaller numbers of COVID-19 fatalities led to higher political trust worldwide in March and April 2020.

So far, most previous studies have investigated the initial period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Little is known about the development of political trust in Germany for the ongoing pandemic. The few existing studies suggest a decline in political trust after the initial rise at the beginning of the pandemic: descriptive data from Busemeyer et al. (2021) reveal declining political trust in Germany between April 2020 and May 2021, whereas levels of trust were stable between April and November 2020. However, the authors did not compare the results to pre-pandemic times. Delhey et al. (2021) found an overall marginal, non-significant decline in trust in the German government between spring 2020 and spring 2021 and explain this decline with a fading *rally effect*. Despite this decline, political trust was still high compared to a pre-pandemic survey in 2017. Individuals who had experienced health insecurities were more likely to trust the German government less in the second year of the pandemic. Increasing political trust during the pandemic was only found for less-educated individuals (Delhey et al. 2021). Results from other European countries show similar patterns during the pandemic: a decline in political trust in the summer/fall of 2020 after the initial peak in trust at the beginning of the pandemic was observed, for instance, in Sweden (Johansson et al. 2021) or in

the UK (Davies et al. 2021). The authors suggest individual's perception of poor crisis management and criticism of the governmental approach as possible reasons for the decline (Davies et al. 2021; Johansson et al. 2021).

### 3.3 Political trust of migrants in pandemic times

So far, it is unclear how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected migrants' political trust and if the pre-pandemic differences between first-generation migrants, second-generation migrants, and natives in Germany (Röder/Mühlau 2012; SVR 2020) have persisted during the pandemic.

As a first factor, pre-pandemic differences could lead to different changes in political trust between these three groups during the pandemic. Results from Hegewald/Schraff (2020) indicate that citizens with low pre-pandemic levels of trust show the strongest increases in political trust at the beginning of the pandemic. Knowing that first-generation migrants show higher pre-pandemic levels of political trust in Germany than second-generation migrants and natives (see section 2.2.), it is reasonable to assume that second-generation migrants and natives show more pronounced increases in political trust at the beginning of the pandemic than first-generation migrants. These differences could lead to converging levels of trust between first-generation migrants and second-generation migrants and natives – at least for the beginning of the pandemic.

Secondly, some groups of migrants, especially the first generation, seem to be more vulnerable to the virus and health-related, economic, and social consequences of the pandemic (Guadagno 2020). First evidence indicates that migrants have a higher risk for infection than non-migrants (Clark et al. 2020; Guadagno 2020; Hayward et al. 2021; OECD 2020) and report higher COVID-19-related mortality rates (Plümecke et al. 2021). The employment and social situation of first-generation migrants might explain their higher morbidities and mortalities. They work disproportionately often in so-called “system-relevant” jobs like health care, retail, delivery, or facility management (Hayward et al. 2021; Khalil et al. 2020) and have fewer options for working from home (Brücker et al. 2021). Furthermore, migrants are more likely to use public transportation to commute to work and live in more crowded and multigenerational housing, which increases their risk of infection (Clark et al. 2020; Fasani/Mazza 2020). Migrants in Germany were, moreover, at a higher risk than natives of losing their employment, suffering financial losses, or being obliged to transition from full-time to short-time-work during the first lockdown in spring 2020. Additionally, migrants often have fewer financial reserves with which to deal with months of reduced income (Brücker et al. 2021; Khalil et al. 2020). In a few studies, first- and second-generation migrants in Germany reported having a higher risk perception for health and financial risks (Hövermann 2020; Soiné et al. 2021). Moreover, first- and second-generation migrants showed higher mental stress, more symptoms of depression or anxiety, and a greater sense of



loneliness compared to natives during the first lockdown (Entringer et al. 2020) and in the further course of the pandemic (Dale et al. 2021; Entringer/Kröger 2021; Pieh et al. 2022). First empirical evidence indicates that these health-related and economic vulnerabilities seem to be related to migrants' political trust in pandemic times. Lee (2022) found significant and high correlations between political trust and economic factors (e.g. housing and job security, changes in economic situation) and health-related factors (e.g. mental health, self-rated health) during the pandemic.

To summarize, pre-pandemic differences in political trust and health-related as well as economic vulnerabilities are potential mechanisms explaining the possibly different changes of political trust during pandemic times for first- and second-generation migrants and natives. Fearing or experiencing health-related and economically hardship during the crisis, might lead to a loss of political trust by losing confidence in government competence in crisis management and the benevolent motivation of office-holders. However, empirical evidence regarding the comparison between migrants' and natives' political trust and their possible changes during the COVID-19 pandemic is scarce.

#### 4 The present study

In this study, we examine if and how political trust changes during the COVID-19 pandemic for first- and second-generation migrants and natives in Germany. Specifically, we investigate if political trust differs in the exceptional situations of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Empirical evidence for pre-pandemic times shows that migrants have higher political trust than non-migrants. Based on the *dual frame of reference* approach, we assume that pre-pandemic first-generation migrants compare the perceived performance of German political institutions with those in their country of origin. Following arguments of the *assimilation theory*, second-generation migrants should not perform this comparison, or at least should do so to a lesser extent, and thus approach natives in their levels of trust. We therefore hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 1a:** Pre-pandemic, first- and second-generation migrants have higher political trust than natives.

**Hypothesis 1b:** This difference in political trust between natives and migrants is more pronounced for first-generation migrants than for second-generation migrants.

Further, the current literature (see section 3.2) reports increased political trust at the onset of the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic times, independent of the underlying mechanisms. In the further course of the pandemic after the first lockdown in Germany, we assume a marginal decline in political trust compared to the beginning of the pandemic, which could be explained by a fading *rally 'round the flag*



*effect* over the ongoing pandemic situation. Possible reasons for this could be that citizens became used to the uncertainties of the crisis and were influenced by rising criticism in the public and political discourse over restrictions. Yet, as the crisis is still present, political trust should still be situated on a higher level compared to pre-pandemic times. Therefore, we assume:

**Hypothesis 2a:** For natives, first- and second-generation migrants alike, political trust increases at the onset of the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic times.

**Hypothesis 2b:** For natives, first- and second-generation migrants alike, political trust marginally declines during the ongoing pandemic, yet is still higher compared to pre-pandemic times.

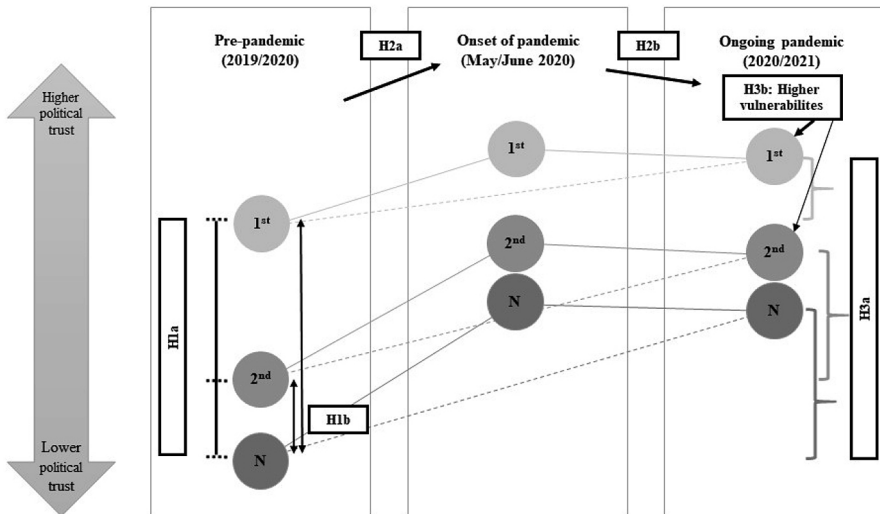
Some groups of migrants are especially vulnerable to the virus and its economic and health-related consequences. Despite of the overall increase in political trust (*rally effect*), we expect vulnerable migrant groups, especially first-generation migrants, to show a lower increase in political trust in pandemic times (see section 3.3). Thus, we expect:

**Hypothesis 3a:** The increase in political trust in the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic times is less pronounced for first-generation migrants than for natives and second-generation migrants.

**Hypothesis 3b:** The difference in the increase in political trust between natives, second- and first-generation migrants can be explained by migrants' vulnerability in times of pandemic, which is more pronounced in first- than second-generation migrants.

Figure 1 summarizes and illustrates our hypotheses.

**Figure 1:** Hypotheses on political trust in natives and migrants at the three points of measurement.



Notes: 1st=1st generation migrants, 2nd=2nd generation migrants, N=natives; H=Hypothesis.  
Source: Own illustration.

## 5 Data and research design

### 5.1 Sample

The analyses are based on the NEPS (National Educational Panel Study) adult Starting Cohort (SC6, NEPS-Netzwerk 2022).<sup>2</sup> We use data from three NEPS panel waves that were conducted in 2019/20 (September 2019 to March 2020), in May/June 2020, and in 2020/21 (September 2020 to April 2021). The 2019/20 and 2020/21 panel waves were conducted as telephone or face-to-face interviews. The May/June 2020 panel wave was a specifically applied NEPS-C[ovid] interview, which was conducted as a web-based interview between the regular panel waves. Because some information (e.g., gender, age, migration background) was collected earlier than 2019/2020, we also use this information from earlier waves.

### 5.2 Measurements

Based on Norris' (2017) theoretical conceptualization *political trust* was measured as confidence in regime institutions. It was assessed in September 2019/March 2020, May/June 2020 and September 2020/April 2021 with an adapted version of the SOEP- and ALLBUS-questionnaires (Beierlein et al. 2012; Schupp/Wagner 2004).

<sup>2</sup> This paper uses data from the National Educational Panel Study (NEPS; see Blossfeld/Rossbach 2019). The NEPS is carried out by the Leibniz Institute for Educational Trajectories (LifBi, Germany) in cooperation with a nationwide network.

Respondents were asked to indicate their trust in the federal government and the federal parliament on a 4-point-rating scale. We recoded the responses so that higher values represent higher levels of trust, ranging from “no trust at all” (1) to “very much trust” (4) and created a combined mean scale.

Our main independent variable is individuals’ *migrant status* (Olczyk et al. 2014). Based on case numbers and theoretical considerations, when taking into account the country of birth up to the parental generation, we differentiated between respondents who migrated themselves (first generation),<sup>3</sup> respondents with at least one parent born abroad (second generation), and respondents without a migration background (non-migrants).

We operationalized economic vulnerability by monthly household income in 1000 Euros, divided by the number of persons in the household, and used satisfaction with individuals’ health as indicator for health-related vulnerability.

Variables like age, gender, and socioeconomic status have been found to be related with political trust before and during the pandemic (Dryhurst et al. 2020; Esaiasson et al. 2021; Hegewald/Schraff 2020; Kritzinger et al. 2021; Schraff 2020). To take this into account, we consider several control variables: age, squared age, gender, and education (measured as ISCED-97 level). We furthermore control for the respondents’ federal state of residence, because spreading dynamics and preventive COVID-19 actions differed at the federal state level (Schuppert et al. 2021).

Table 1 gives further information on descriptive values of our main variables, as well as sample composition in 2019/20, and lists descriptive values for all variables used in our analyses. Further information, such as wording and scales, can be found in table A1 in the appendix.

**Table 1:** Description of variables and sample in wave 2019/2020.

	N	%	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Political trust	6805	-	2.48	0.64	1.00	4.00
Age	6805	-	56.39	10.54	32.88	76.15
Household income	6802	-	1.75	0.90	0.00	11.58
Satisfaction with health	6805	-	7.00	1.94	0.00	10.00
<b>Immigrant generation</b>						
Natives	5759	84.63				
1 <sup>st</sup> generation	455	6.69				
2 <sup>nd</sup> generation	591	8.69				

3 We consider respondents born abroad as belonging to the first generation, irrespective of their parents’ country of birth, see Olczyk et al. (2014: 4). Among those, 10.0% had parents born in Germany. We considered this in our robustness checks (see section 6).

	N	%	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<b>Gender</b>						
Male	3344	49.14				
Female	3461	50.86				
<b>Federal State</b>						
Schleswig-Holstein	207	3.04				
Hamburg	126	1.85				
Lower Saxony	744	10.93				
Bremen	54	0.79				
North Rhine-Westphalia	1471	21.62				
Hesse	528	7.76				
Rhineland-Palatinate	316	4.64				
Baden-Wuerttemberg	796	11.70				
Bavaria	1069	15.71				
Saarland	79	1.16				
Berlin	302	4.44				
Brandenburg	235	3.45				
Mecklenburg-West-Pomerania	110	1.62				
Saxony	366	5.38				
Saxony-Anhalt	207	3.04				
Thuringia	195	2.87				
<b>ISCED-97</b>						
0A/1A – No qualification	34	0.50				
2B – Basic school-leaving qualification	134	1.97				
2A – Intermediate school-leaving qualification	124	1.82				
3A – Higher education entrance qualification	163	2.40				
3B – Apprenticeship, vocational school	2335	34.32				
3C – Civil servant clerical class	55	0.81				
4A – Higher education entrance qualification (second cycle)	84	1.24				
4B – Apprenticeship, vocational school (second cycle)	364	5.35				
5B – Diploma from a Fachakademie and Berufsakademie	1433	21.06				
5A – Bachelor, Master	1955	28.73				
6 – Doctorate, habilitation	123	1.81				
Sample Size	6805					

Source: NEPS SC6, our analyses. Based on the sample of table 2, model 1.

### 5.3 Analytical strategy and methods

We used pooled OLS regression models including participants of the waves 2019/20, May/June 2020, and 2020/21 to test our hypotheses. As NEPS is a panel study, most participants in our sample participated in more than one of these waves, which violates the assumption of independence. Therefore, we used cluster robust standard errors, with each respondent representing one cluster.

We used listwise deletion for missing information, and excluded cases with an implausibly high reported monthly income (for which we set the threshold at  $> 3^{\text{rd}}$  quartile +  $3 * \text{interquartile range (IQR)}$ ,  $n = 492$  across the three panel waves), as well as one case with an implausibly large household. This results in a sample of 15912 cases<sup>4</sup> across all waves. Table 2 shows that samples of our main analyses vary between 15830 and 15849 cases, indicating negligible losses in sample size due to missing values.

For the analyses, we used Stata 17.0 (StataCorp 2021) and report unstandardized beta-coefficients. Using Wald F tests (Wald 1943), we tested whether the differences in regression weights between the variables were statistically significant.

## 6 Results

Results of the pooled OLS regression models are presented in table 2 and additionally illustrated in Figure 2. In hypothesis 1a we assumed that pre-pandemic, first- and second-generation migrants have higher political trust than natives. Testing for this assumption, the results show significantly higher political trust among first-generation migrants compared to natives in 2019/20. In contrast to hypothesis 1a, no significant difference between second-generation migrants and natives can be reported (table 2, model 1). Thus, hypothesis 1a is partially confirmed. Further, we hypothesized (hypothesis 1b) that this difference in political trust between natives and migrants is more pronounced for first-generation migrants than for second-generation migrants. We performed a Wald-Test that revealed significant differences between first- and second-generation migrants, with  $F(1, 7224) = 8.19, p < 0.01$ . Therefore, we find support for hypothesis 1b: the difference in political trust between migrants and natives was more pronounced for first-generation migrants than for second-generation migrants in pre-pandemic times.

Using the same model, we see that political trust increases in May/June 2020 for natives, as well as for first- and second-generation migrants (table 2, model 1). This provides support for hypothesis 2a: for natives, first- and second-generation migrants alike, political trust increases at the onset of the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic times. Political trust increased at the onset of the pandemic in all three groups compared to pre-pandemic times. Furthermore, political actually con-

<sup>4</sup> One case represents one person participating in one wave. Thus, persons participating in multiple waves are counted once for each wave.

tinued to increase between May/June 2020 and 2020/21. We conducted supplementary analyses<sup>5</sup> to assess the significance of the changes across waves within natives as well as first- and second-generation migrants to test hypothesis 2b: for natives, first- and second-generation migrants alike, political trust marginally declines during the ongoing pandemic, yet is still higher compared to pre-pandemic times. We estimated empty regression models on the changes in political trust between waves, and restricted the sample to the respective subgroup. For natives and the second generation, we find significantly positive changes from 2019/20 to May/June 2020, and from May/June 2020 to 2020/21, while for the first generation, we find no significant changes between these points of measurement. However, for all three groups, the overall changes between 2019/20 and 2020/21 were significantly positive. Therefore, we reject hypothesis 2b, as we did not find a marginal decline in political trust during the ongoing pandemic, but an increase, which was significant for natives and second-generation migrants. Overall, we found significantly higher political trust during the ongoing pandemic compared to pre-pandemic times for natives and migrants alike.

Further, we assumed that the increase in political trust in the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic times is less pronounced for first-generation migrants than for natives and second-generation migrants in hypothesis 3a. Adding interaction effects between migration status and panel waves (table 2, model 1), the results reveal significantly negative interaction coefficients between the first generation and wave May/June 2020, as well as wave 2020/21. No significant interaction coefficients were found for second generation and wave May/June 2020, as well as wave 2020/21. The increase in political trust between pre-pandemic and pandemic times is significantly lower for first-generation migrants, but not for second-generation migrants, compared to natives. An additional Wald-Test showed no significant difference in the interaction coefficients between the first- and the second-generation in May/June 2020, with  $F(1, 7224) = 1.02, p = 0.314$ , while a significant difference between both migrant generations can be found in 2020/21, with  $F(1, 7224) = 5.98, p < 0.05$ . This means that first-generation migrants do not differ significantly in their increase in trust between 2019/2020 and May/June 2020 from second-generation migrants, but differ significantly regarding the increase between 2019/2020 and 2020/2021. Therefore, hypothesis 3a is partly supported.

To account for pre-pandemic group differences in the vulnerability indicators, we conducted additional analyses which showed that pre-pandemic, household income per person is indeed significantly lower, but satisfaction with one's health is significantly higher for first-generation migrants than for natives in our sample. The second generation does not differ significantly from natives in regard to household income or health satisfaction.

5 While we do not report the results of supplementary analyses and robustness checks in detail, they can be replicated using our replication package.

**Table 2:** Pooled OLS models

Political trust	Model 1 b (SE)	Model 2 b (SE)	Model 3 b (SE)
<b>Immigrant generation</b>			
Natives	(ref.)	(ref.)	(ref.)
1 <sup>st</sup> generation	0.134*** (0.033)	0.148*** (0.033)	0.128*** (0.032)
2 <sup>nd</sup> generation	0.018 (0.026)	0.017 (0.026)	0.021 (0.025)
<b>Wave</b>			
Wave 2019/20	(ref.)	(ref.)	(ref.)
Wave May/June 2020	0.342*** (0.014)	0.342*** (0.014)	0.314*** (0.013)
Wave 2020/21	0.382*** (0.014)	0.373*** (0.008)	0.371*** (0.008)
<b>Immigrant generation status * wave</b>			
1 <sup>st</sup> Generation * wave May/June 2020	-0.138* (0.064)	-0.161* (0.064)	-0.163* (0.064)
1 <sup>st</sup> Generation * wave 2020/21	-0.112** (0.035)	-0.106** (0.035)	-0.108** (0.035)
2 <sup>nd</sup> Generation * wave May/June 2020	-0.058 (0.041)	-0.059 (0.040)	-0.057 (0.040)
2 <sup>nd</sup> Generation * wave 2020/21	-0.008 (0.028)	-0.008 (0.028)	-0.007 (0.028)
Household income		0.102*** (0.007)	0.057*** (0.007)
Satisfaction with health		0.047*** (0.003)	0.043*** (0.003)
Constant	2.474*** (0.008)	1.962*** (0.027)	1.655*** (0.187)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.075	0.120	0.162
R <sup>2</sup> adj.	0.074	0.119	0.160
N	15849	15832	15830

*Note:* ref.=reference category. OLS regressions, unstandardized regression coefficients, cluster-robust standard errors in parentheses. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Model 3 controlled for: age/age<sup>2</sup>, gender, ISCED, federal state.

*Source:* NEPS SC6, own analyses

Our final hypothesis 3b stated that the difference in the increase in political trust between natives, second- and first-generation migrants can be explained by migrants' vulnerability in times of pandemic, which is more pronounced in first- than second-generation migrants. To examine this assumption, we added household

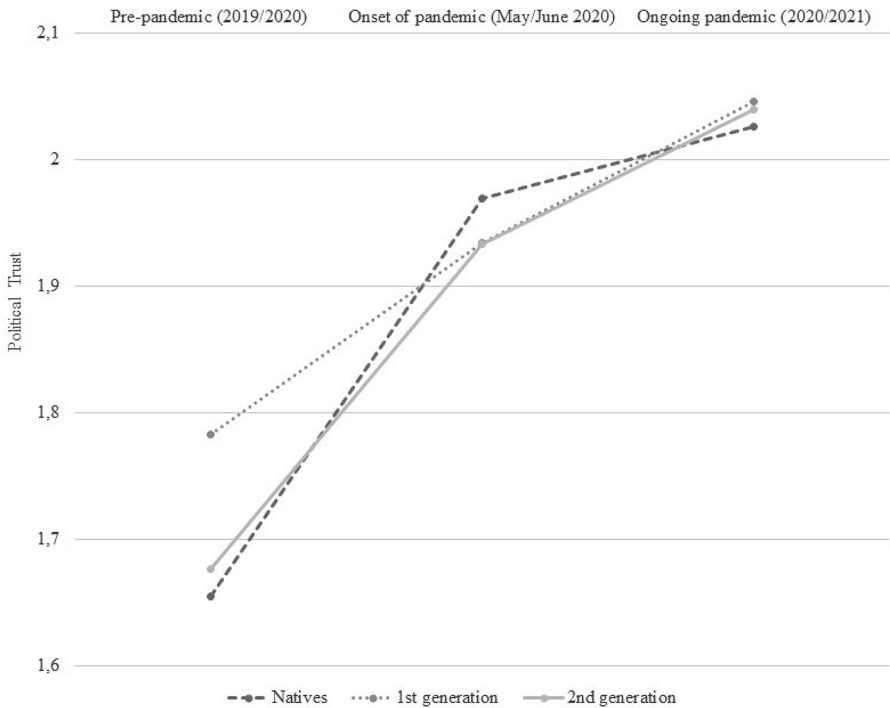


income per person and satisfaction with respondents' health as indicators for economic and health vulnerability in model 2, as well as additional socio-demographic control variables, in model 3. We found that higher household income and higher satisfaction with individuals' health are significantly related to higher political trust. After adding these vulnerability indicators, all previously mentioned effects remained significant (table 2, model 2). Thus, we reject hypothesis 3b: higher economic and health-related vulnerabilities did not explain the smaller increase in political trust from pre-pandemic times to pandemic times for first-generation migrants compared to second-generation migrants and natives. Also the controls did not reduce the aforementioned described effects (table 2, model 3).

Out of our control variables, being female was associated with significantly less political trust, whereas education tended to be associated with higher political trust. East and south German federal states showed significantly less political trust than the reference category (Schleswig-Holstein), while age had no significant effect.

As figure 2 shows, pre-pandemic differences in political trust between migrants and non-migrants did not persist during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, first-generation migrants showed significantly higher political trust compared to natives and second-generation migrants. In addition, we conducted cross-sectional analyses for the May/June 2020 and the 2020/21 wave. In these analyses, we see no significant differences between either of the migrant generations and the natives. We therefore assume that the higher increase in political trust in natives and the second generation compared to the first generation leads to an alignment of political trust between those groups at the onset of, and during the ongoing pandemic.

**Figure 2:** Political trust of natives, first- and second-generation migrants at three points of measurement.



Notes: For better readability, we did not include confidence intervals.

Source: NEPS SC6, own analyses, based on table 2, model 1.

We conducted several robustness checks for our analyses. Even after adding *trust in the police* to our combined mean scale of political trust, and excluding first-generation participants whose parents were not born abroad (i.e., one parent born in Germany, and the other parent born in Germany or missing), results did not change substantially. This also applies to the usage of a balanced panel for our analyses. Only excluding cases with high values of political trust (i.e., 3.5 points or larger) in the 2019/20 wave, resulted in an insignificant first-generation main effect except for the respective model with vulnerabilities, but without further controls ( $p < 0.05$ ), as well as the interaction coefficients between the first generation and the 2020/21 wave. Therefore, we suspect that a ceiling effect may lie behind the differences between the first generation and second generation, as well as the natives: because the first generation has higher pre-pandemic levels of political trust, there is less room for it to rise further.

## 7 Discussion

In this paper, we investigated pre-pandemic differences in political trust between first- and second-generation migrants and non-migrants, and whether these differences continue to be present at the onset and a later stage of the COVID-19 pandemic using data from the NEPS adult cohort. Moreover, we examined if health-related and economic vulnerabilities were relevant for migrants' political trust in pandemic times. This study is novel in exploring changes in political trust before and during the pandemic between September 2019 and March 2021 in Germany, with a special focus on migrants.

In line with previous studies on the political trust of migrants in pre-pandemic times (Raschke/Westle 2018; Röder/Mühlau 2012; Verwiebe/Wiesböck 2021), first-generation migrants showed higher political trust than natives. This could be explained with the *dual frame of reference* approach of Suarez-Orozco (1987), who argues that migrants compare their current situation to the past situation they experienced in their country of origin, leading to more positive evaluations of the political institutions of the host-country. Further, second-generation migrants did not differ from natives in our sample regarding their pre-pandemic political trust. This result supports the assimilation theory (Alba/Nee 1997), which argues that migrants adjust their attitudes, bringing them closer to natives' attitudes across generations, even though previous research has been undecided as to whether political trust could be expected to have only diminished or to have completely disappeared for the second generation. As the second generation has grown up in the host country and is more familiar with the social system and political institutions, it therefore comes closer to natives in terms of various attitudes, including political trust.

For the onset of the pandemic in May/June 2020, political trust increased for migrants and natives, as we assumed. This result is in line with previous research showing the *rally 'round the flag effect* in Germany and other European countries (Bol et al. 2021; Delhey et al. 2021; Dietz et al. 2021; Kritzinger et al. 2021; Schraff 2020).

In contrast to our expectations and results of previous studies (Busemeyer et al. 2021; Davies et al. 2021; Delhey et al. 2021; Johansson et al. 2021), political trust did not decline in the ongoing pandemic from September 2020 to April 2021. Instead, natives' and second-generation migrants' political trust increased significantly between May/June 2020 and September 2020/April 2021. There are several reasons possibly explaining this unexpected result. The COVID-19 crisis is to this extent unique, it is a health emergency and therefore not comparable to other previous crises (e.g. wars, terror attacks, and financial crises) investigated in the *rally 'round the flag* literature (Hetherington/Nelson 2003; Mueller 1970). It has emerged as a long-term crisis with on-going but irregular peaks regarding lockdowns, incidences, death-rates, economic impacts, and restrictions. This may have

influenced political trust more long-term and also rendering political trust less affected by criticism of government approaches, as would be expected by the classical literature on the *rally 'round the flag effect*, which conceptualizes the effect as a short-term response to a major crisis (Hetherington/Nelson 2003; Mueller 1970). In our study we could not take into account individuals' perceived personal threat and risk perception, nor their perception of government competence in crisis management, which could be a main influential factor for political trust in pandemic times. Further studies should include those measurements.

Our dissenting findings regarding the increase in political trust in the ongoing pandemic could also be explained by the comparatively long time period considered, from September 2020 to April 2021, whereas other studies had close meshed measurement points (Busemeyer et al. 2021; Delhey et al. 2021). Over this period of time, the pandemic situation and the government implemented measures changed significantly, which could have influenced political trust ratings differently depending on the time of data collection.

Regarding group differences in political trust in pandemic times, our results indicate a weaker increase in political trust between pre-pandemic and pandemic times for first-generation migrants, but not for second-generation migrants, compared to natives. The lower increase in first-generation migrants' political trust could not be explained by economic and health-related vulnerabilities. Nevertheless, the results indicate that better economic and health situations were related to higher political trust for all groups investigated. The lack of explaining power of vulnerabilities for first-generation migrants' smaller increase in political trust could also be due to the selected vulnerability indicators. Previous studies reported that direct personal experience with the virus, perceived personal threat, and risk perceptions could be more relevant for political trust than objective economic and health-related insecurities (Delhey et al. 2021; Dryhurst et al. 2020; Esaiasson et al. 2021; Kritzinger et al. 2021). First evidence indicates that high level of pre-pandemic political trust could reduce negative impacts of the crisis and therefore maybe lead to a more positive evaluation of the crisis situation (Lee 2022), which may also influence political trust. Further, a ceiling effect may explain the lower increase in the political trust of first-generation migrants compared to the other groups. The larger increase in political trust of natives and second-generation migrants results in converging levels in all three observed groups over the course of the pandemic. This convergence in political trust is in accordance with studies that report the highest increase during an exceptional situation for those individuals who expressed the lowest level of trust before this situation (Hegewald/Schraff 2020).

However, our study has several limitations. For our analyses of the early pandemic, we rely on data from May/June 2020, which consists of a much smaller sample than the regular NEPS waves. This wave was conducted using web-based, self-administered interviews instead of personal interviews, and thus lacks information collected

in other NEPS waves due to the limited scope of the survey questions. The change of survey mode between the May/June 2020 wave and the previous wave might lead to an underestimation in the increase in trust during the early pandemic, since pre-pandemic respondents were more likely to report higher trust levels in personal interviews than in web-based surveys (Kreuter et al. 2008; Schwarz et al. 1991). Overall, case numbers pose some limitations, even for the general NEPS waves, regarding analyses for sub-groups such as migrants. While it would have been interesting to not only differentiate between natives and first/second-generation migrants, we therefore refrained from further examining migrants according to their different countries of origin. Further, as NEPS is a panel study, some subgroups have a higher dropout probability in the course of the survey (Zinn et al. 2018). This could affect our results as we use later panel waves.

Our study provides initial insights into changes in migrants' and non-migrants' attitudes toward political leadership during the exceptional situation of the COVID-19 crisis in Germany. It remains to be seen whether higher levels of political trust during the first year of the pandemic will persist as the health crisis unfolds. Given a possibly emerging pandemic fatigue, constantly changing government coronavirus-related restrictions and public health measures, and the emergence of other global crises (e.g., the invasion of Ukraine), political trust in Germany may change again. Finally, it is also not known how group differences between migrants and non-migrants will develop in the future, and whether they will return to pre-pandemic levels as the pandemic recedes into the background of public awareness.

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