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**Cultural and Economic Threats.**

**A Causal Analysis of Party Identification with the “Alternative for Germany” (AfD) using the German Socio-Economic Panel 2016**

Kulturelle und ökonomische Bedrohung.

Eine Analyse der Ursachen der Parteiidentifikation mit der „Alternative für Deutschland“ mit dem Sozio-oekonomischen Panel 2016

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**Abstract:** In this paper we test and discuss two theories on why people choose to identify politically with the AfD in which attitudes towards refugees in Germany take a central role. According to the ‘losers of modernization’ thesis, people of a low social status tend to reject refugees as they associate their presence with a rise in competition for jobs and a strain on social services. The thesis of ‘cultural threat’ states that a new conflict line has emerged between cosmopolitan and communitarian groups, whereby the latter will, among other things, reject the in-coming of refugees by perceiving them as a threat to the cultural homogeneity of German society. By means of a regression analysis on data provided by the 2016 Socio-Economic Panel, we find that a person’s inclination to reject refugees has a strong direct effect on the likelihood of them identifying with the AfD. In addition, we also found an albeit weaker effect of a person’s social status on party identification being moderated by their attitudes towards the influx of refugees. The results indicate the need for more evidence to back up the cultural threat thesis.

**Keywords:** Alternative für Deutschland; Cultural Threats; Migration; Losers of Modernization; Party Identification; German Socio-Economic Panel; Survey Research.

**Zusammenfassung:** Wir diskutieren und testen zwei Thesen zur Identifikation mit der AfD, in denen die Einstellung zu Flüchtlingen in Deutschland eine zentrale Rolle einnimmt. Nach der Modernisierungsverliererthese lehnen Personen mit niedrigem sozialen Status die Fluchtzuwanderung als Konkurrenzanstieg um Arbeitsplätze und Sozialleistungen ab. Die These der kulturellen Bedrohung besagt, dass eine neue Spaltungslinie zwischen Kosmopoliten und Kommunitaristen entstanden ist, wobei letztere u.  a. die Flüchtlingszuwanderung als Gefahr für die kulturelle Homogenität der Gesellschaft ablehnen. Anhand des Sozio-oekonomischen Panels 2016 finden wir regressionsanalytisch einen starken direkten Effekt der Ablehnung von Flüchtlingszuwanderung auf die Wahrscheinlichkeit, sich mit der AfD zu identifizieren. Zudem zeigt sich ein schwächerer, über die Einstellung zur Flüchtlingszuwanderung vermittelter Statuseffekt. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass die These der kulturellen Bedrohung größere Evidenz beansprucht.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Alternative für Deutschland; kulturelle Bedrohung; Migration; Modernisierungsverlierer; Parteiidentifikation; Sozio-oekonomisches Panel; Umfrageforschung.

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**1 Introduction**

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) is the most successful party in recent German political history. Only a few years after its formation in 2013, it has gained seats in the European Parliament, represents the third-largest parliamentary group in the German Bundestag, and has so far been successful in all state elections, in some cases with results in the double digits. This rapid success of a newly established party has led researchers and members of the public to ask: Who are the voters who have made the AfD successful, and what explains their political choice? This question is of interest to analysts, as demonstrated by a recent debate in the *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie (Vol.* 2/2018). However, it also has clear practical applications. As indicated by exit polls from the 2017 parliamentary elections, 39 percent of 2017 AfD voters had voted for another party that was represented in the Parliament in 2013, and 35 percent emerged from the ranks of non-voters (Foreschungsgruppe Wahlen 2017). This demonstrates that the AfD succeeded in winning over a substantial number of other parties’ voters, thus making it an increasingly serious political competitor to the established parties. A better understanding of the reasons for these citizens’ support of the AfD can help provide clues as to whether the established parties might be able to win back lost voters in the intermediate term, or whether the AfD may become a permanent part of the German party system.

In this article, we examine reasons for identification with the AfD compared to reasons for identification with another party. “Party identification” expresses voters’ long-term, affective ties to a particular party (Arzheimer 2012; Mayer 2016). In our view, it is more suitable for identifying value-driven association with a party than for explaining concrete voter behavior or voter intentions (the so-called “Sunday question:” “Which party would you vote for if the election were held this Sunday?”), which can also be influenced by voters’ tactical considerations. Research suggests that these ties develop primarily in the course of political socialization in young adulthood. This would mean, however, that there could be little to no value-driven identification with the AfD, since it has not existed for long as a political party. As we will see, this is not borne out by empirical data: it seems that ties can also develop after the preformative stage.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In sections 2 and 3, we outline two theses that proffer different explanations for identification with the AfD. The first, the “cultural threat” thesis, is derived from a current debate according to which, in recent years, a cultural dividing line has developed in many European countries between “communitarians” and “cosmopolitans” ((Merkel 2017; Zürn & De Wilde 2016). The two groups are distinguished by different attitudes toward the idea of a culturally open society, both internationally, with respect to immigration and international solidarity, and domestically, with regard to acceptance of multiculturalism and non- traditional (LTBTQ, etc.) lifestyles. Communitarians tend to be drawn to the AfD because they believe that the party stands for the political and economic autonomy and cultural homogeneity of German society. As opposed to those with a cosmopolitan inclination, they perceive the arrival of immigrants and refugees as a threat to the cultural identity of the German majority. AfD sympathizers are thus opposed to the societal changes that have taken place as the nation has opened up to the outside world (Europeanization, globalization) and the shifts in values that have demonstrably occurred in the last 20 years. In this article, we assess the extent to which rejection of the influx of refugees, a (theoretical) core component of the communitarian worldview, is associated with increased identification with the AfD.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The second thesis is the “losers of modernization” thesis., which has long been discussed in the context of radical right parties (e.g. in Falter 1994; Spier 2010). We apply it here to identification with the AfD, thus continuing a conversation we have begun elsewhere (Lengfeld 2017). This thesis suggests that, in the wake of economic globalization in the past two decades, individuals with minimal human capital and low income have experienced a marked increase in economic insecurity and have therefore become especially dependent on social welfare benefits. Since the fundamentally economically liberal AfD does not evince any social or economic political platform that serves the material interests of these “losers of modernization,” we assume that these socially weaker groups’ identification with the AfD is based in perceived resource conflicts with immigrants and refugees: “Losers of modernization” fear that immigration intensifies competition for low-skill jobs and social services. They identify with the AfD because the AfD promises to close national borders to refugees, to expel economic migrants, and thus to minimize the pressure of competition for German nationals. As contrasted with the “cultural threat” thesis, then, in which value-driven motives are central, the AfD is theorized to appeal to “losers of modernization” on the basis of their material interests. It is thus evident that the two theses are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The empirical value of the present article consists in examining both theses in light of current data that adheres to the highest standards for survey research. We use the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), Welle 33 (2016) and especially refer to its new indicator measuring attitudes toward refugees (Sections 4 and 5). Employing descriptive, multivariate logistic, and other regression analyses, we find that rejection of the influx of refugees strongly influences AfD identification. Furthermore, we show that individuals with low social status and/or those with major economic concerns demonstrate an increased likelihood of identifying with the AfD. This effect is moderated by the effect of rejection of refugees, however, and thus becomes insignificant when the latter variable is included in the multivariate models. This suggests that “losers of modernization” identify with the AfD when they are also against the influx of refugees. We conclude that it is not their weakened social position itself, but rather its connection with their preference for closing the country to refugees, which drives people toward the AfD.

 Our results also indicate that (for the factors examined by our study) reasons for identification with the AfD are nearly the same in the states of former East and West Germany, with one exception: In the former states of East Germany, the effect of negative attitudes toward the influx of refugees on identification with the AfD is greater than in the former states of West Germany.

The final section contains our conclusion: Preferences for the cultural closing-off of Germany are of twofold significance for identification with the AfD. On the one hand, the rejection of refugees leads to a value-driven embrace of the AfD. On the other hand, it also influences AfD identification indirectly, by means of resource conflicts that stem from social status: “Losers of modernization” are more positively inclined toward the AfD than people who are better-positioned because they reject refugees as competitors for scarce resources. From this analysis emerges a conclusion with practical applicability for competing parties that wish to attract AfD voters. Our findings suggest that political competitors will find it difficult to convince AfD sympathizers to vote for them in the next election based purely on appeals of social policy and allocation of resources without also taking a more restrictive stance on refugee migration in such a way that is both recognizable and believable to voters.

**2 The “cultural threat” thesis**

Political scientists are currently discussing the emergence of a new cultural dividing line in Germany and other developed OECD societies (Inglehart & Norris 2016; Merkel 2016, 2017; Teney& Helbling 2014; Teney et al. 2014; Zürn & De Wilde 2016). This debate is tied to other (social psychology) studies of ethnocentrism (e.g. Kinder & Kam 2009; Sniderman et al. 2000; Wright et al. 2012). We take one of this debate’s central arguments and apply it to citizens’ identification with the AfD.

The debate centers on the (ideal-typical) assumption that the population is divided into two different cultural camps: cosmopolitans and communitarians. This dividing line is characterized by different cultural values regarding the openness of domestic society toward immigrants and refugees, the relationship between international cooperation and national sovereignty, and the extent to which equality and justice serve as the basis for international solidarity (Kinder & Kam 2009; Sniderman et al. 2000; Wright et al. 2012). In this theory, cosmopolitans hold a universal worldview. According to them, law and justice apply to all people without restriction, no matter where they live. They regard international trade, labor migration and asylum laws as highly legitimate. The opening of national borders is viewed as a necessary consequence of increasing globalization as well as a chance for more globally just policies. Central demands of cosmopolitans also include the protection of human rights and ethnic minorities (Zürn & De Wilde 2016).

By contrast, the worldview of communitarians is contextual: For them, equality and justice are not universally applicable values; instead, they only apply to limited socio-geographical spaces and culturally integrated communities. Accordingly, they emphasize accountability within smaller communities, the close links between law and nation state, and the significance of shared language and culture for solidarity. Stable national borders are regarded as necessary to protect the community. Stable national borders are regarded as necessary to protect the community, and opening them to immigrants, as well as to international trade and political cooperation, thus threatens social cohesion (Zürn & De Wilde 2016).

As Ingelhat and Norris (2016, 2017)[[4]](#footnote-4) argue, the undisputed opening and liberalization of OECD societies over the past twenty-plus years has led to a counterreaction among portions of the European population. Communitarians reject this process, in the course of which “new ways of life, same-sex marriages, equality of the sexes, multiculturalism, and ecological questions” have dominated political discourse (Merkel 2016: 11), as fundamentally wrong. This cultural backlash has been expressed politically in the election successes of populist parties (Inglehart & Norris 2016, 2017).

We assume that this context also applies to Germany and to the rise of the AfD.[[5]](#footnote-5) Our thesis is that the in-migration of more than a million refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries in 2015 and 2016 is one of the most central areas of conflict between the two concepts of the world. While cosmopolitans welcome the opening of the border and view assistance for refugees as an expression of moral duty, communitarians resist the cultural opening of society. For them, the AfD is a plausible, publicly visible, and effective alternative to the established parties, which explicitly permitted, welcomed, or at least did not explicitly speak out against the opening of the borders in 2015. In its 2017 Bundestag election platform, the AfD demanded tighter controls on refugee arrivals in Germany, an expansion of measures to forcibly repatriate rejected applicants for asylum to their home countries (AfD 2017: 22 ff.), and the primacy of German dominant culture over multiculturalism (AfD 2017: 47). It also aims to roll back the scope of European integration, for Germany to leave the euro zone (AfD 2017: 7, 13 ff.) and to prioritize Germany’s national interests over international cooperation (AfD 2017: 18 ff.).

With one exception (see footnote 10), we are not aware of any studies that have examined citizens’ attitudes about the 2015 surge of refugees, or even more global communitarian and cosmopolitan worldviews, around the time of the 2017 parliamentary elections as an explanatory factor for identification with the AfD. However, some (older) studies give hints of comparable attitudes. Schmitt-Beck (2014), on the basis of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES), establishes a connection between attitudes of Euroskepticism and worries about immigration and asylum and the likelihood of voting for the AfD in the 2013 parliamentary elections (Schmitt-Beck 2014: 44ff.; see also Schwarzbözl & Fatke 2016). Using SOEP data, Kroh & Fetz (2016) find that the percentage of citizens who had major concerns about immigration and who identify with the AfD rose from 4% in 2014 to 10% in 2016. Inglehart & Norris (2016) use pooled data from the European Social Survey 2002-2014 to show that the election of European populist parties can be better explained by attitudes of “cultural backlash” than by citizens’ economic insecurities (Ingelhart & Norris 2016: 30).[[6]](#footnote-6)Inglegart & Norris do not, however, differentiate between left-wing and right-wing populism, which limits the applicability of their results to the German context.

The most current study that we are aware of is by Hilmer et al. (2017). In their online study conducted in 2017, they find that AfD voters more frequently exhibited authoritarian, xenophobic, and Euroskeptical attitudes, and trusted government institutions to a lesser extent compared to non-AfD voters. The differences are especially great in the area of attitudes toward refugee in-migration: 84 percent of respondents who voted for the AfD agreed with the statement, “Immigration makes one feel like a stranger in one’s own land,” compared to only 44 percent of non-AfD voters (Hilmer et al. 2017: 37).[[7]](#footnote-7)

The data situation makes it impossible for us to fully examine the connection between communitarian and cosmopolitan worldviews and AfD identification in this paper. Instead, we analyze the effect of a negative assessment of the influx of refugees to Germany. We consider this attitude to be the central component of the communitarian image of the world (see Teney et al. 2014: 582 f. for an empirical measurement).

*H1: The more negative a person’s evaluation of the influx of refugees, the higher the likelihood that they will identify with the AfD.*

**3 The "losers of modernization" thesis**

The basic premise of the “losers of modernization” thesis has often and variably been drawn on to explain the election of radical right parties in Germany and, to some extent, elsewhere in Europe (see for example Betz 1994, Bornschier & Kriesi 2010; Falter 1994; Götz 1997; Hadler 2004; Spier 2010; early versions of this thesis can be found already in Lipset 1960; for the most current European analyses see Inglehart & Norris 2016). In our other recent work (Lengfeld 2017) we have laid out its fundamentals to explain voters’ intentions of voting for the AfD. In the remainder of this essay, we build on this previous line of reasoning and develop it further.

The "losers of modernization" thesis refers to the socioeconomic status of voters (Kriesi et al. 2008). If modernization is understood as the influence of economic globalization since the 1990s on changes in material opportunities, an increase in career insecurity can be seen in OECD societies (Blossfeld et al. 2007; Milanovic 2016). This increase in insecurity has affected society in an unequal way: Companies understood how to minimize the risks that faced them as a result of the increase in worldwide competition: by technological streamlining and external flexibilization of labor via limited term contracts, “mini-jobs,” and temporary work. As a result, it is primarily those individuals with simple work responsibilities and low levels of professional qualifications who were faced with a heightened risk for loss of income (or a comparative lack of increase in income), as well as involuntary breaks in employment (Giesecke 2006 u. 2009; Milanovic 2016). They were also disproportionately affected by so the so-called “Hartz Reforms,” especially the reduction in wage-replacement benefits (Lessenich 2008). Simultaneously, disparity in market incomes increased from 1990 to 2010. While the market income of individuals in the lowest income deciles sank (in part) significantly, it rose in the uppermost deciles (BMAS 2013; Grabka & Schröder 2018; Peichl et al. 2017; Schmid & Stein 2013). This also applies to the years 2007-2011, the time period just before the AfD was founded. In a connected development, increased concerns about unemployment occurred during the 1990s and 2000s in Germany. Research shows that the lowest social classes demonstrated the highest level of worries about unemployment (Burkhardt et al. 2013; Lengfeld & Ordemann 2017). We thus label as “losers of modernization” individuals who, in the course of globalization, have suffered *relative* reductions in opportunities or lowered wages compared to individuals with a higher social status. These are especially individuals with a low level of education, meager professional qualifications, and a low income.[[8]](#footnote-8)

If one follows the classic assumption that individuals will sympathize with whichever party best represents their (economic) interests (Downs 1957), AfD identification could be understood as an expression of the conviction that this party would make the material interests of the “little people” openly visible and would give them a voice. However, the AfD does not exhibit a social or economic policy profile that is geared toward the interests of the “losers of modernization.” Its platform takes an neoliberal economic position (Niedermayer 2015: 193), calling, for example, for incentives to take low-paying jobs and to combat the abuse of social services (AfD 2016: 36  f.). This would be contrary to the interests of the “losers of modernization.” We thus see at least two other reasons why individuals of low social status may identify with the AfD.

1. *Ethnic Competition.* “Losers of modernization” more often perceive refugees as illegitimate competitors for jobs (AfD 2016: 36  f.). References for this idea include, for example, Realistic Group Conflict Theory (Campbell 1965; Olzak 1992; Quillian 1995): “[…] group conflicts are rational in the sense that groups do have incompatible goals and are in competition for scarce resources” (Campbell 1965: 287). Empirical support for the Ethnic Competition thesis (Olzak 1992) has been seen in studies of various countries (Haslam et al. 1992; Olzak 1992; Quillian 1995; Scheve & Slaugher 2001; Raijman et al. 2003; Gorodzeisky & Semyonov 2009).

2. Welfare Chauvinism.Because individuals with low social status are more likely to be dependent on social transfer payments, compared to higher status individuals, they may more frequently regard refugees and migrants as competitors for access to social services, affordable housing, and other scarce goods. The “welfare chauvinistic” demand of the “losers of modernization” is therefore that social rights - including access to social services - should only be granted to members of the majority ethnicity and to those who had previously payed into the system. They accuse refugees of taking advantage of social services without making (longterm) contributions or paying taxes to finance them. This welfare chauvinism thesis has been discussed in numerous studies and has been extensively substantiated (Mewes & Mau 2012; Scheepers et al 2002; van Oorschot 2006; van der Waal et al. 2010).[[9]](#footnote-9)

We now apply the “ethnic competition” and “welfare chauvinism” arguments to the arrival of refugees in Germany. As shown by Worbs & Bund (2016: 6f.), refugees who arrived in 2015 and 2016 mostly had only low levels of education and professional training. The circumstances that made them refugees left them without economic means and dependent on social services. To the extent that they were able to find gainful employment in the first years after their arrival, it was overwhelmingly in low-skill jobs. These are the same jobs for which the so-called losers of modernization are competing. The obvious implication is that losers of modernization might identify more frequently with the AfD than other parties because the AfD aims to protect them from undesirable competition in the job market and for social services (Söllner 2017). Indeed, the AfD makes a clear political offer to the losers of modernization. In their parliamentary election platform of 2017, they demanded that migrants only be permitted access to social services after four years of employment in which they make contributions to the social security system. They also called for immigration to be regulated solely according to the economic interests of the receiving country (AfD 2017: 29  f.).

What evidence is there for the validity of this “losers of modernization” theory as it relates to refugee migration? According to our research, there is currently no study that directly measures the economic motives for AfD support among the “losers of modernization.” Previous studies have used either social status or subjective perception of earlier or feared future loss of status or wealth as indicators, from which they have drawn conclusions about the political motivations of voters.

1.: Studies that use social status as a predictor find contradictory connections to AfD support. Kroh und Fetz (2016) use SOEP analyses to show that the percentage of workers among all citizens who favor the AfD rose from 2 percent in 2014 to 11 percent in 2016, and the percentage of unemployed individuals rose from 1 to 15 percent (Kroh & Fetz 2016: 715). Using descriptive analyses of ALLBUS 2016 data, Brenke & Kritikos (2016) find that the percentage of voters with low educational or professional qualifications is highest among AfD voters, compared to other parties (ebd.: 599). AfD voters also have the second-lowest income, after voters of the Die Linke party (ebd.: 600).[[10]](#footnote-10)

Schmitt-Beck (2014) and Schwarzbözl & Fatke (2016) show contradictory findings in their analysis of 2013 GLES data: namely that neither level of education nor occupational status had an effect on the respondent’s likelihood of voting for the AfD in the 2013 parliamentary elections. Lendfeld (2017) arrives at similar conclusions in a secondary analysis of CATI data from the “infratest dimap” polling agency from fall 2016, on the basis of the “Sunday question.” Hilmer et al. (2017) show similar results in an online survey from February 2017. Bergmann et al. (2016) conclude from SOEP data from 2015 that about 30 percent of individuals who are positively inclined toward the AfD belong to the top 20% of household incomes, but only about 15% belong to the lowest 20%. Conversely, in a secondary analysis of election results at the district level, Bergmann et al. (2017) find that the percentage of AfD secondary votes rises slightly in conjunction with a rise in regional levels of unemployment (see also Söllner 2017).

1. For the purpose of readability, we use the terms “party ties,” party sympathizers,” “party supporters” and “party affiliation” as synonyms for the concept of party identification in this text. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Due to the limits of the survey data used for this article, we were unable to conduct a comprehensive test of AfD identification on the basis of broadly-defined communitarian and cosmopolitan attitudes. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We must emphasize that the full spectrum of possible explanations for AfD identification is not exhausted by these two theses, but such a discussion exceeds the capacity of a single academic paper. A third thesis lies in the populist appeal of the AfD - namely the rejection of established parties, of democratic practice in Germany, and in criticism of the objectivity of the mass media and the belief in conspiracy theories (the “courage for truth”) (Decker 2006, Lewandowsky et al. 2006, among others). 2016). We do not discuss this thesis in detail, but make reference to in our empirical analysis. Finally, we must also list the “protest vote” motivation (Arzheimer 2008: 104  ff.; Lengfeld 2017). However, since this thesis primarily concerns voter behavior, we exclude it from present consideration. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The authors write of “materialistic” convictions, since they adopt a postmaterialist theoretical framework. However, we view this as a merely semantic difference, since both Ingelhart and Norris as well as the authors of the communitarianism-cosmopolitanism framework assume lines of conflict that are primarily cultural, rather than socioeconomic. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Bornschier (2010: 23) argues that the New Right - that is, right-wing populist parties in Europe - has adopted concepts of communitarianism that originated in America, e.g. “cultural differentialism” and ethnopluralism. For this reason, we believe the debate that originated in the USA can plausibly be applied to Germany. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. „This perspective emphasizes that populist support can be explained primarily as a social psychological phenomenon, reﬂecting a nostalgic reaction among older sectors of the electorate seeking a bulwark against long-term processes of value change, the ‚silent revolution‘, which has transformed Western cultures during the late twentieth century.“ (Inglehart & Norris 2016: 13) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The study does not specify the sampling methods used, however. “Respondents were selected from a custom online panel that consists of a total of 100,000 test subjects who were all actively recruited, mostly via offline methods” (ibid.: 9). Since we do not know the source of this sample, how the panelists were recruited, or how high the percentage of participants actually is who were recruited offline, we cannot estimate the effects of sample bias. This leads us to exercise caution in our interpretation of the study’s results. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A possible criticism of this definition is that it is very crude, and neglects to acknowledge the fact that there are also higher-status individuals in particular branches in Germany who have lost out in the wake of economic development, as a result of the dismantling of development and production capacities, for example. However, we consider our approach appropriate due to the fact that the AfD received over 12 percent of the secondary votes in the parliamentary elections, and thus achieved success among a wide swath of the population. A branch-specific analysis of the situation of “losers of modernization” would presumably lead to more precise predictors of identification. However, since the group of “losers of modernization” calculated in this way would be significantly smaller, this approach would probably not lead to a better prediction of the extent of AfD identification. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The theory of social disintegration also arrives at similar conclusions. It assumes that individuals who are affected by a loss in positional status likewise deny status recognition to others. This especially affects the socially disadvantaged (Anhut 2008; Endrikat et al. 2002). In this way, according to Mansel et al. 2006, fear of social decline leads to xenophobic attitudes. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Hambacher & Mays 2018 arrive at similar conclusions using GLES 2016 data. Like us, they also analyze attitudes toward refugees. We are not able to fully incorporate that study’s findings in our analysis, since it became available to us only after completion of this manuscript. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)