

# Roll call votes in the German Bundestag. A new dataset, 1949-2013

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## **Abstract**

This letter introduces and describes new datasets that include all roll call votes (RCVs) taken in the German Bundestag from 1949 to 2013 as well as crucial contextual data on characteristics of the voting members of the Bundestag (MPs) and the RCVs taken. The data cover almost 2,000 RCVs, more than 3,500 MPs, and about 1,100,000 individual voting decisions. The data make the German case accessible for comparative roll call analysis and allow systematic longitudinal analyses of various research questions regarding legislative behavior in the Bundestag, some of which we briefly discuss in the concluding section.

**Keywords:** roll call voting; legislative behavior; members of parliament; datasets; Germany

## **Introduction**

This letter introduces a comprehensive data collection on roll call votes (RCVs) in the German Bundestag between 1949 and 2013. RCVs are one of the most important data sources on parliamentary behavior. Beyond producing legislative output, RCVs put the positions of members of parliament (MPs) and party groups on the public record, serve party leaders as instrument to monitor backbench behavior, and enable opposition parties to obstruct parliamentary business (Saalfeld 1995a). RCVs from various parliaments have been

used to investigate, among others, party competition and legislative coalition formation, strategic behavior of individual MPs and legislative parties, party unity and intra-party politics, and MP responsiveness to voters and other outside interests (e.g. Carey 2007; Carrubba et al. 2008; Eggers and Spirling 2016; Hix 2004; Hix and Noury 2016; Poole and Rosenthal 1997).

Empirical research can rely on comprehensive longitudinal roll call data for a number of countries, most notably the U.S. Congress (e.g. Lewis et al. 2017; Poole and Rosenthal 1997)<sup>1</sup>, the European Parliament (Hix et al. 2005), and the British House of Commons (e.g. Eggers and Spirling 2016; Norton 1975), on some cross-country comparative datasets for shorter periods of time (Carey 2007; Coman 2015; Hix and Noury 2016; Sieberer 2006), and on numerous contemporary and historical single-country datasets.<sup>2</sup>

For the German Bundestag, RCV data has thus far only been available for limited periods of time (Ohmura 2014b; Saalfeld 1995b; Sieberer 2010; Stratmann 2006). At the same time, the Bundestag is an attractive parliament to study. It counts as one of the most powerful legislatures in a parliamentary democracy (Sieberer 2011); its internal organization is rather elaborate (Saalfeld 2000); and its mixed electoral system offers attractive opportunities to analyze one of the most fundamental aspects of legislative behavior: the effect of electoral rules on legislative voting (e.g. Manow 2015; Sieberer 2010, 2015).

The datasets described here contain information on individual voting behavior and a wide array of variables that characterize the MPs and RCVs they voted on. The data are freely

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<sup>1</sup> Most theoretical and methodological innovations of roll call research were developed in the context of the U.S. Congress; for recent reviews see e.g. Clinton 2012; Poole 2005.

<sup>2</sup> A (selective) list of single-country studies is provided in the supplementary material.

available to the academic community at Harvard Dataverse.<sup>3</sup> In this letter, we describe the structure of the datasets, present descriptive information on key variables, and discuss potential research questions to be addressed with the data.

## **New datasets on roll call votes in the German Bundestag**

The most fundamental data for roll call analysis is an MP's decision to vote yea, nay, or abstain on a motion – or not to cast a vote at all. To this data, we add personal information on the MPs and contextual information on the motions voted upon. Both sets of variables can be used to explain various questions about roll call behavior. The combination of extensive contextual information and voting data is a distinguishing feature of this dataset compared to other roll call datasets that are often limited to voting behavior.

We record the data in three separate datasets that are linked via different identification (ID) variables. This setup allows for efficient data storage and enables researchers to create datasets at different levels of aggregation depending on their research question (we discuss some examples in the concluding section). Furthermore, we provide ID variables to link our data to datasets on party positions and government characteristics.<sup>4</sup>

The RCVs were collected from the official minutes of the Bundestag, the contextual variables stem mostly from data handbooks published by the research service of the Bundestag

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<sup>3</sup> <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/btvote>.

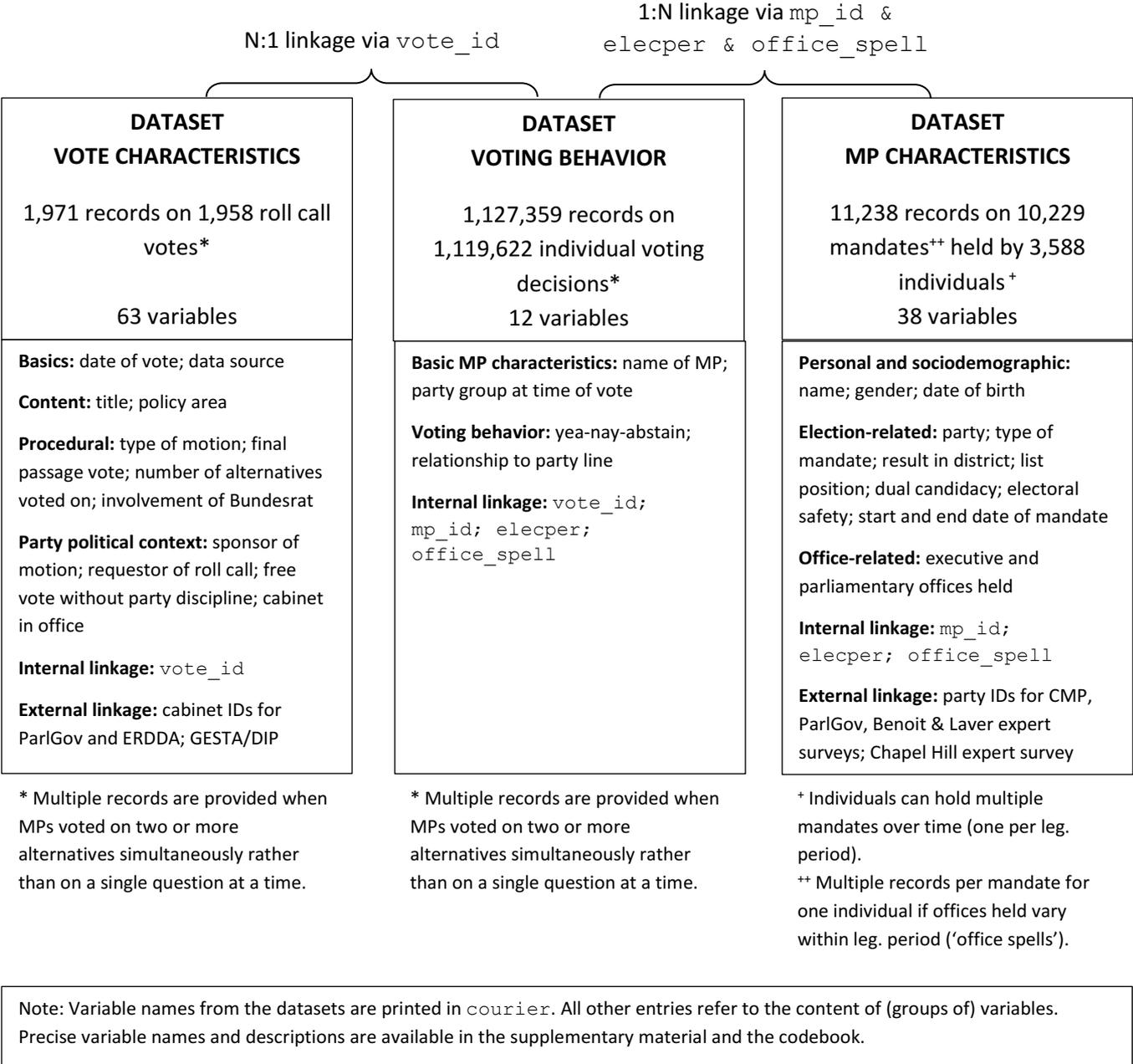
<sup>4</sup> These datasets include expert surveys on party positions (Bakker et al. 2014; Benoit and Laver 2007), the CMP/MARPOR data on party manifestos (Volkens et al. 2017), the ParlGov database (Döring and Manow 2016) and the cabinet data compiled by the ERDDA project (Andersson et al. 2014).

(*Wissenschaftlicher Dienst*).<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 visualizes the structure of the three datasets, their linkage, and the types of variables contained in each of them. The supplementary material provides a list of all variables in the dataset; further details are available in the codebook at Harvard Dataverse.

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<sup>5</sup> Most official documents are available online at <http://pdok.bundestag.de>. The most important data handbooks used were the *Datenhandbuch zur Geschichte des Deutschen Bundestages* (Feldkamp 2018; Schindler 1999) and various editions of *Kürschners Volkshandbuch Deutscher Bundestag*, which publishes short biographies of all MPs in every legislative period. Some data on MP characteristics are kindly provided by Philip Manow (Manow 2015).

**Figure 1: The structure of the datasets**



**Roll call vote characteristics**

The dataset VOTE CHARACTERISTICS contains information on all 1,958 roll calls during the first seventeen legislative periods of the Bundestag (1949-2013). A few roll calls contained a simultaneous choice with more than one alternative (e.g. a single vote on four different

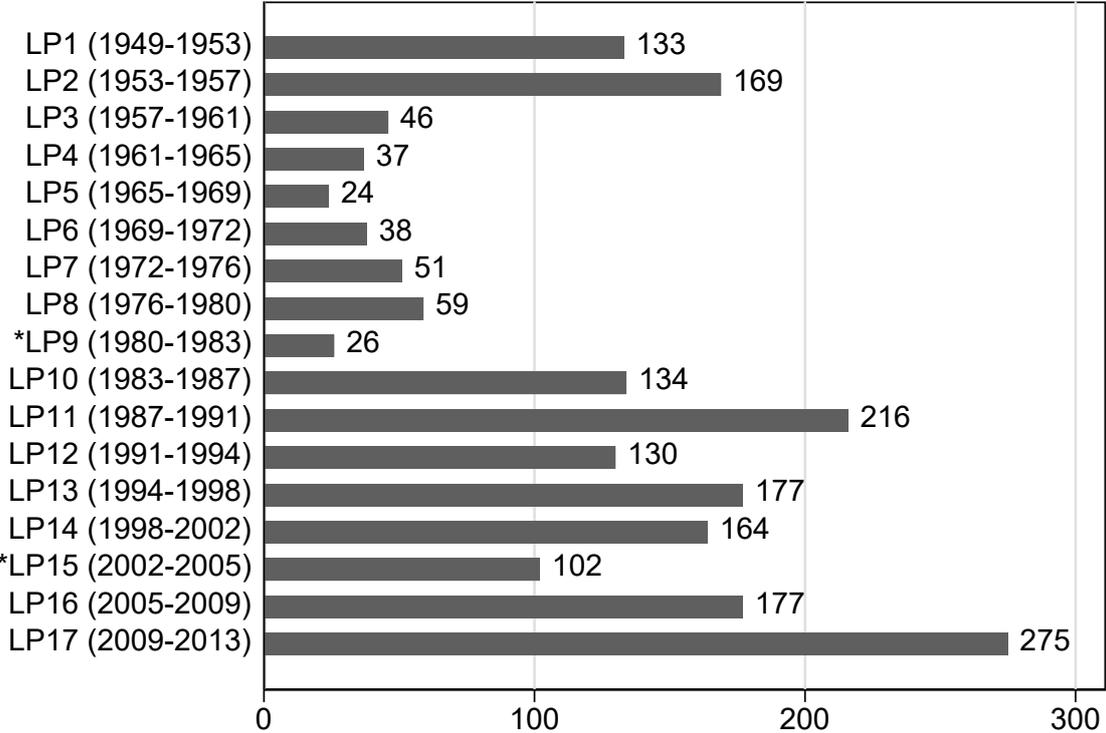
proposals to reform the abortion law in 1974). These RCVs have multiple records in the dataset (one for each alternative) to allow coding voting behavior in the same categories of yea-nay-abstention.

RCVs are not the Bundestag's default voting method. The chamber votes via roll call only if this is actively requested by a sufficiently large group of MPs, currently five percent of all MPs or a parliamentary party group.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the number of roll calls is relatively small and varies over time (Figure 2). About five percent of all final passage votes are taken by roll call (Bergmann and Saalfeld 2016); for other types of motions the share is unknown because there are no data on the number of votes taken by other procedures.

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<sup>6</sup> Routinely, votes are taken by standing up or by show of hands. In rare cases, walking through division doors ('Hammelsprung') is used, which allows a precise count of votes but does not record individual voting behavior; see Saalfeld 1995a.

**Figure 2: The frequency of roll call votes by legislative period**

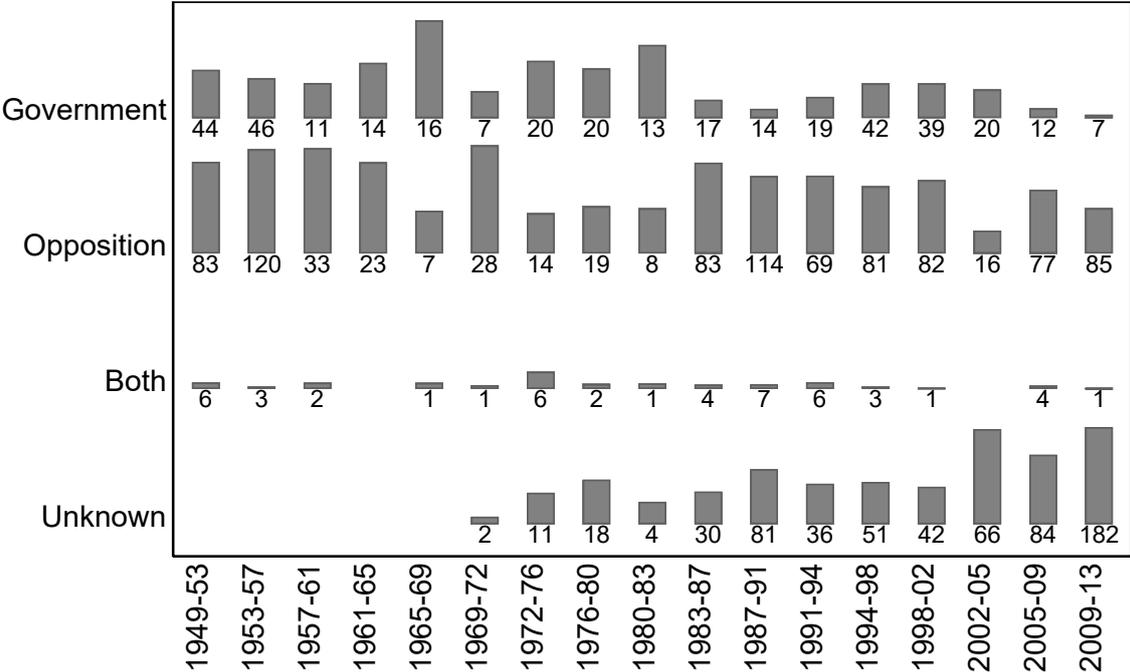


\* Legislative period ended prematurely due to early elections.

Any study of roll call voting in Germany has to be aware of this selection process because it most likely leads to an unrepresentative sample consisting of high-salience votes. Whenever possible, we coded the party requesting the roll call to allow researchers to model this selection process.<sup>7</sup> Figure 3 plots RCVs initiated by government parties, opposition parties, and both types of parties together, both in absolute numbers and as percentages of all roll calls during a legislative period (indicated by the height of the bars). The graph reveals that most RCVs were requested by opposition parties (overall 70 percent) but also shows variation over time.

<sup>7</sup> The president of parliament often but not always announces who requested the roll call prior to the vote. This information is available for 1,351 of the 1,958 roll calls.

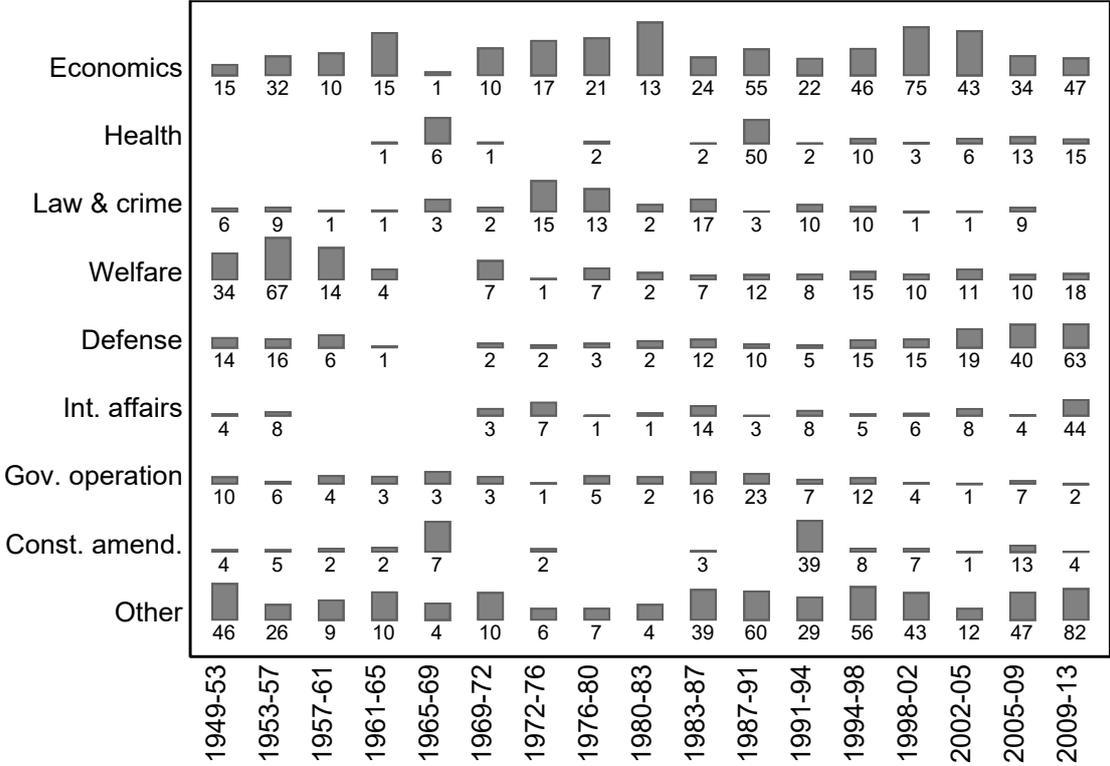
**Figure 3: Roll call request by government status and legislative period**



Numbers: absolute number of roll calls in category  
 Height of bars: percentage in this category (in this legislative period)  
 Unit of observation: roll call (n= 1,958)

The dataset contains several variables that can be used to model the roll call selection process and to explain observed voting behavior. First, we coded the policy area of the motion based on the German Policy Agendas codebook (Breunig 2014). Figure 4 indicates that most roll calls related to economic policy, welfare (esp. in early periods) and (in recent years) defense (mostly on foreign deployment of the German military).

**Figure 4: Primary policy areas of roll call votes by legislative period**



Numbers: absolute number of roll calls in this category  
 Height of bars: percentage in this category (in this legislative period)

Unit of observation: roll call (n= 1,958)

Second, we recorded the sponsor of the motion (not to be confused with the actor requesting the roll call). Over the entire period, 63 percent of all roll calls were held on motions sponsored by opposition parties, one third by government parties and the remaining small share jointly by parties from both camps. In 74 percent of all cases, the roll call vote was requested by the party that sponsored the original motion. We also identified 102 free votes on which the leadership of at least one party group waived party discipline, mostly on ethical and other conscience issues (Ohmura 2014a). In addition, we coded the formal type of motion (e.g. bill, amendment to bill, resolution, committee report, etc.), identified final passage votes, and recorded the constitutional veto power of the second chamber, the Bundesrat, with regard to the motion.

These data allow us to contribute to the ongoing international debate on strategic roll call requests and the amount of bias it introduces in roll call studies (e.g. Carrubba et al. 2008; Hug 2010; Saalfeld 1995a). A first analysis of the selection process for final passage votes shows that the likelihood of roll calls increases with the number of parties in the Bundestag, the ideological polarization of the party system on the policy dimension of the vote, and the level of electoral volatility (Bergmann and Saalfeld 2016). Furthermore, changing institutional hurdles for requesting roll calls affect their frequency, but are clearly not the only explanation as the number of roll calls varies considerably within periods with stable rules.<sup>8</sup>

### **MP characteristics**

The dataset MP CHARACTERISTICS comprises all 3,588 individuals who participated in at least one RCV in the Bundestag until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> legislative period in 2013. First, it provides basic biographic data (date of birth and gender) as well as information on MPs' partisan affiliations and their length of service. Second, the dataset includes variables on the way MPs won their seats. For each legislative period we coded how an MP was elected in the German mixed electoral system (either via a single-member district or a party list), whether she ran as a candidate in both tiers, and how competitive her election was (closeness of the district race, rank on the party list, and estimated reelection probabilities; see Stoffel and Sieberer 2018). Finally, the dataset records the exact time periods during

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<sup>8</sup> Originally, roll calls could only be initiated by a majority and were extremely rare. From 1952 until 1969, the support of 50 MPs (roughly ten percent of all members) were required. Since then, the hurdle is five percent or a parliamentary party group (which must consist of at least five percent of all MPs); see Schindler 1999, 2850.

which MPs held any of the following executive or legislative offices: cabinet minister, junior minister, president or vice president of the Bundestag, (vice-)chair of a standing committee, (vice-)chair of a parliamentary party group, and party whip.

## **Voting behavior**

The dataset VOTING BEHAVIOR records the behavior of all MPs associated with a parliamentary party group on all roll call votes (1,119,622 individual decisions).<sup>9</sup> The total number of records is slightly higher (1,127,359), because voting behavior on RCVs with multiple alternatives is split into multiple observations per MP (one for each alternative). Each record contains the MP's partisan affiliation at the time of the vote and two variables on voting behavior: One records how the MP voted on the motion (yea, nay, abstention, absence and a few residual categories). The second variable codes how the MP positioned herself with respect to the party line, which we define as the majority position within the party group or, in the few cases without an absolute majority within a group, as the position taken by the chair of the parliamentary party group.

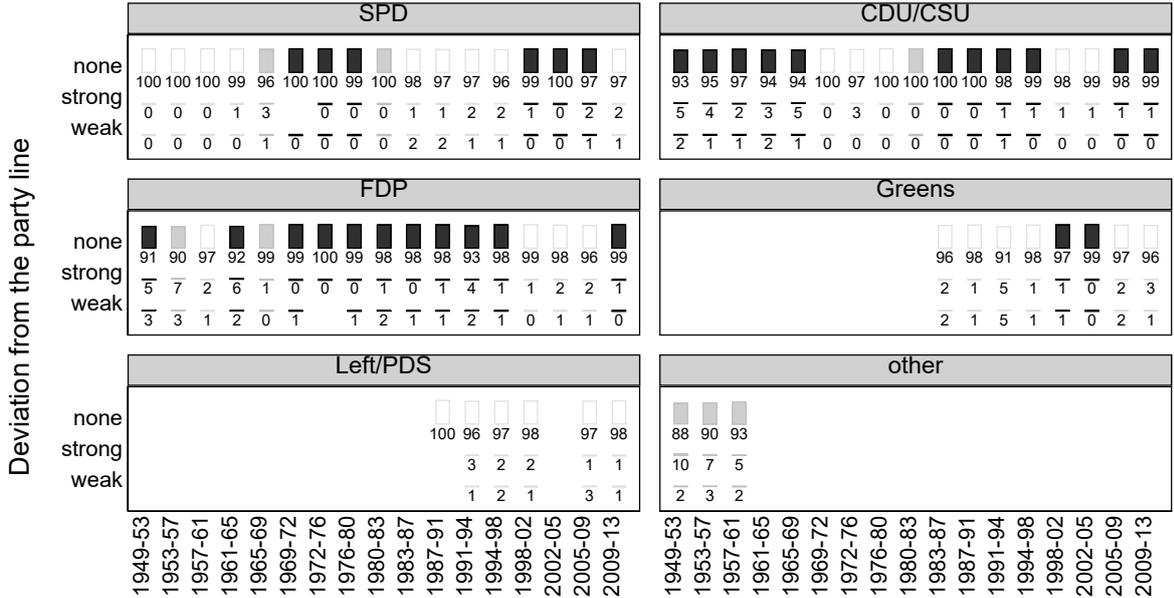
Descriptively, this variable indicates high levels of unity. Figure 5 displays, for each party and legislative period, the share of all voting decisions that (a) were in line with the party position, (b) deviated weakly from it (e.g. abstention when the party line was yea or nay), or (c) deviated strongly (yea if the party voted nay and *vice-versa*). While deviation was slightly more common among Christian Democrats and Liberals in the 1950s and 1960s and is more

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<sup>9</sup> We did not record the behavior of the very few unaffiliated MPs (usually MPs who left or were expelled from a party group during a legislative period and did not join a new party group). Unaffiliated MPs never had relevant influence on decisions in the Bundestag.

frequent for the Greens compared to other parties, the overall picture is one of strong party unity.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 5: Individual voting behavior with regard to the party line by party and legislative period**



Numbers: percentage in this category (in this legislative period)  
 Color of bars: government status during this legislative period (government=black, opposition=white, both=grey)  
 Unit of observation: behavior of individual MP on single RCV (n=925,721).  
 Free votes, absences, and votes without identifiable party line excluded.

**Possible research questions**

The datasets introduced in this letter enable researchers to study a wide range of questions with regard to legislative behavior and party competition in Germany. This concluding

<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed analysis of party unity and its variation over time based on this data see Bergmann et al. 2016.

section discusses particularly promising fields of research (beyond the question of strategic roll call request we discussed above) as well as some limitations of our data.

We start with two caveats. First, any analysis must bear in mind the selective character of the sample. Roll calls in the Bundestag are confined to motions that are sufficiently important for at least one party to request a recorded vote. Thus, they allow inferences about legislative behavior on high-salience issues where public signaling is a main concern of the relevant actors. It is an open question, however, whether and how such findings generalize to more routine matters.

Second, the high levels of party voting (see Figure 5) as well as high coalition discipline make many roll calls uninformative for reconstructing ideological positions of individual MPs through any scaling method. As in many other parliamentary democracies, such analyses mainly pick up party differences and, in particular, the government–opposition divide, but do not yield valid measures of ideological positions (Hix and Noury 2016). For this endeavor, parliamentary speeches and surveys may be a more appropriate data source (e.g. Bäck and Debus 2016; Deschouwer and Depauw 2014; Proksch and Slapin 2015).

Despite the issues of selectivity and generalizability, the roll call data can be used to address relevant questions on different levels of analysis, both specifically for the German context and, if connected to similar datasets, also in comparative perspective. On the party level, roll calls allow us to study the positions parties take on different issues and thus to map core features of party competition over time. Here, the need to request roll calls can even be an asset because it reveals information specifically on the issues for which different parties want to create parliamentary publicity. We can also compare the topics on the roll call agenda (Figure 4) to the policy agenda more broadly (e.g. as measured in the German Policy

Agendas Project, Breunig 2014) to study how political parties shape the legislative agenda. Second, aggregated voting behavior on the party level allows us to study government–opposition dynamics and the competitive strategies opposition parties choose vis-à-vis the government (e.g. Andeweg 2013; Hohendorf et al. 2018; Tuttnauer 2018). Third, the data allows a longitudinal analysis of party unity in the Bundestag and can thus contribute to the large body of literature that seeks to explain high levels of voting unity in legislatures as well as determinants of its variation (e.g. Carey 2007; Coman 2015; Kam 2009; Saalfeld 1995b; Sieberer 2006; for a first analysis of our data with regard to party unity see Bergmann et al. 2016).

On the MP level, the most obvious question is why individual MPs express dissent by voting against their parties' majority. Recent research on this question focuses on electoral incentives (e.g. Carey 2007; Coman 2015; Sieberer 2006). The German mixed-member electoral system, in which MPs are simultaneously elected in single-member districts and via closed party lists, offers good conditions for studying this relationship, even though the degree to which it constitutes a quasi-experimental setting is contested (for competing views see e.g. Manow 2015; Moser and Scheiner 2004). As previous empirical research provides mixed results for different time periods, the question of a 'mandate divide' should be revisited based on our comprehensive time-series (on Germany: Dishaw 1971; Ohmura 2014b; Saalfeld 1995b; Sieberer 2010; Stratmann 2006; Zittel and Nyhuis 2018; in comparative perspective e.g. Crisp 2007; Herron 2002; Jun and Hix 2010). Beyond electoral system effects, our data can also be used to assess how other factors discussed in the literature such as policy area, election timing, gender, career stage, electoral vulnerability, as well as constituency characteristics affect the decision to toe the party line (e.g. Andre et al. 2015; Bailer and Ohmura 2017; Baumann et al. 2015; Benedetto and Hix 2007; Ohmura

2014b). Finally, by matching our data to information on other activities within the legislature (e.g. speeches or parliamentary questions) and beyond (e.g. campaign activity) we can address broader questions on MP behavior such as the claim of an individualization and personalization of representation (e.g. Karvonen 2010; Zittel and Gschwend 2008).

Studying these questions requires different aggregations of the data, e.g. within party groups or for individual MPs over time. The disaggregated nature of our datasets provides a flexible way to easily create bespoke variables and datasets. For example, measures of party unity (such as the Rice Index) and the size of intra-party groups can be calculated by aggregating individual voting behavior within party groups for individual roll calls and subsequently for any chosen interval. Variables on legislative competition such as party seat shares or the margin of the government over the opposition are obtained by aggregating the number of MPs from each party or group of parties (such as government parties) at any point in time. Particularly interesting MPs (e.g. party leaders or MPs with particular personal backgrounds) can easily be identified based on MP-specific variables in the dataset (such as age, gender, regional background, and the various leadership positions coded) and data from other sources (e.g. on MPs' a professional background or self-reported links to interest groups). Such MPs can subsequently be tracked over their entire career in the Bundestag.

To conclude, the datasets presented here provide ample opportunity for studying legislative behavior in the Bundestag over time and make the German case accessible for comparative roll call analysis. We hope legislative scholars will make active use of this new resource.

## **Supplementary material**

Supplementary material (a brief description of the variables in the datasets; a selective list of single country studies using roll call vote data; and full replication material for the analyses reported in this letter) are available at [ADD THE DOI OF THE PUBLISHED LETTER HERE => MATERIAL TO BE PUBLISHED ON THE CAMBRIDGE CORE PLATFORM]. Replication data is available at Sieberer *et al.* 2018.

The full datasets described in the letter and a detailed codebook are available at Harvard Dataverse: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/btvote>.

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The data, replication instructions, and the data's codebook can be found at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VBWHRO>.

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