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Citation

Brehm, R., & Denney, S. C. (2025). From division to democracy. *Communist & Post-Communist Studies*. doi:10.1525/cpcs.2025.2636997

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4308536>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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From Division to Democracy

Integrating Post-Socialist Citizens in Germany and South Korea

ABSTRACT This article investigates how socialist legacies influence the political attitudes and integration of two post-socialist groups—former East Germans in reunified Germany and North Korean migrants in South Korea—whose experiences underscore broader challenges of transitioning to democratic societies. Drawing on choice-based conjoint experiments and supported by observational data analysis, the study examines individuals' preferences for hypothetical politicians with varying stances on political rule, economic organization, social welfare, gender, and cultural diversity. By comparing responses between primarily native-born citizens and post-socialist subpopulations, we assess the extent of attitudinal convergence and highlight areas where socialist-era socialization likely remains influential. In Germany, the findings show that attitudes toward diversity (i.e., national identity) diverge between Western Germans—who reject nativism and support multiculturalism—and Eastern Germans and post-GDR citizens, who remain more skeptical despite formal unification. In South Korea, North Korean migrants show less enthusiastic support for democracy than native South Koreans, suggesting that early political socialization under authoritarian socialism leaves lasting imprints on democratic outlooks. This study underscores the enduring quality of formative political experiences, illustrating that effective democratic integration requires more than institutional change. It also considers how deeply held beliefs formed under socialism persist and shape contemporary political preferences—offering valuable lessons for policymakers in divided or transitioning societies.

KEYWORDS political socialization, socialist legacy, integration, Germany, South Korea

INTRODUCTION

How do the historical legacies of socialism shape the political attitudes of individuals transitioning from socialist to democratic societies? This article examines the political and social integration processes of two post-socialist groups: former East German citizens within reunified Germany and North Korean migrants in South Korea.¹ Though distinct

1. In this study, we use the term “post-socialist” to refer to individuals who were socialized in a socialist system and transitioned to a non-socialist system via either regime change or migration. Moreover, this study focuses on post-socialists originating in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea), who live in the unified Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic

in their historical contexts, these two cases share the challenge of incorporating individuals socialized under socialist rule into democratic political systems. By investigating these processes, this study provides new insights into the enduring impact of socialist-era socialization and the extent to which exposure to democratic institutions fosters attitudinal convergence.²

The transition from socialism to democracy presents challenges for individual political adaptation and broader social integration and cohesion. Early exposure to political regimes and institutional structures deeply influences political socialization—the process by which individuals acquire political beliefs and identities. Socialist systems foster distinct political norms, often emphasizing state control, collectivism, and skepticism toward market-based economies. Even after migration or regime change, these foundational attitudes may persist, shaping individual preferences toward democracy, economic policy, social welfare, and issues of diversity and gender equality. Understanding these legacies is crucial for addressing ongoing integration challenges in post-socialist societies.

This study employs a novel methodological approach to assess political attitudes among post-socialist citizens in Germany and South Korea using choice-based conjoint experiments. It focuses on their preferences for hypothetical, emerging politicians with varying stances on political rule, economic organization, social welfare, gender, and social diversity. By comparing responses across native-born citizens and post-socialist populations, we assess the degree of attitudinal convergence and identify areas where socialist legacies persist. This empirical approach allows us to move beyond observational survey measures and capture individuals' underlying trade-offs in their political preferences.

This study finds that political system preferences in South Korea and attitudes toward diversity in Germany reflect the lasting impact of socialist socialization and the complexities of integrating post-socialist citizens into democratic societies. In South Korea, North Korean migrants show weaker support for democracy than native South Koreans. While both groups prefer democracy over other systems, North Korean migrants are less enthusiastic and less likely to reject anti-democratic positions, suggesting that early political socialization under socialist and authoritarian rule continues to shape attitudes even after resettlement.

In Germany, attitudes toward diversity diverge between Western and Eastern Germans. Western Germans strongly support ethnic and cultural diversity, whereas Eastern Germans and post-GDR citizens remain more skeptical, viewing it less as a social or economic benefit. These differences persist despite formal unification, underscoring the enduring effects of economic disparities and historical socialization under socialism. However, in both country cases, respondents converge on other attributes, demonstrating

of Korea (ROK, or South Korea), respectively. We opt for the term “post-socialist” over “post-communist” to align with the self-identified governance models of the GDR and the DPRK, allowing for a focused examination of the impact of a socialist upbringing on political socialization and attitudes.

2. While the two cases differ markedly in geopolitical context and mode of incorporation, they offer complementary settings to examine how prior socialist socialization continues to shape political attitudes in democratic contexts. Each case is treated as an internally heterogeneous study of post-socialist integration, not as part of a controlled cross-national comparison.

that while some aspects of political integration are successful, others remain deeply embedded in historical experiences.

In both South Korea and Germany, there is broad agreement in favor of government responsibility for welfare, neutrality in gender roles, and moderate economic intervention. These preferences reflect a balance between state support and individual responsibility rather than ideological extremes. While integration into democratic societies fosters significant alignment, political socialization under socialism continues to shape key differences in attitudes, particularly regarding democracy and diversity.

However, the nature of these differences varies. Skepticism toward democracy among post-socialists is more pronounced in Korea, while divergence on diversity is starker in Germany. Notably, Germans show less resistance to gender equity initiatives than their South Korean counterparts, where opposition to gender equity remains high, reflecting deeper social and cultural challenges in adapting to progressive gender roles.

The overall trends highlight how the specific historical and social contexts of each country shape the integration experiences and persistent attitudinal differences linked to legacies of a socialization under different examples of socialism. These findings illustrate the broader challenge of overcoming these ingrained attitudes formed by political socialization, even decades after regime change or migration. The persistence of differences in democratic support and attitudes toward diversity suggests that political integration is a matter not merely of institutional change but also of addressing more deeply held beliefs that may or may not change in a society without generational replacement. As global discussions on migration, unification, and democratic resilience continue, these cases offer important lessons on the long-term effects of political socialization and the conditions under which democratic values take root.

POLITICAL SOCIALIZATION AND SOCIALIST LEGACIES

The collapse of the Eastern Bloc in the late 1980s marked a pivotal geopolitical moment, triggering a wave of democratization in former socialist states and culminating in Germany's reunification. This transition spurred academic interest in understanding how socialization under socialism shapes political attitudes, decision-making, and the integration of individuals into non-socialist environments with different political, social, and economic structures.

Political socialization, a process through which individuals acquire political beliefs, values, and identities, is central to shaping these transitions. Early socialization experiences, influenced by institutions such as family, education, media, and government, have long-lasting effects, fostering alignment with values and beliefs of the dominant political system, and shaping attitudes even after individuals move to a different environment. Political regimes and the institutions that define them are pivotal in shaping these perspectives.³

3. Regarding the critical periods for political socialization, scholars point to the early-to-late adolescent years as the most formative (Bartels and Jackman 2014; Jennings and Niemi 1981; White et al. 2008), with some extending

For individuals from former socialist countries whose exposure to the system began during adolescence, the experience of living under a socialist system has enduring effects on their political attitudes, thereby shaping the contemporary social and political identities of citizens from post-socialist countries within a non-socialist context (Becker, Mergele, and Woessmann 2020; Neundorf and Smets 2017; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017).

Anja Neundorf (2010) posits that formative experiences in socialist regimes can create lasting anti-democratic attitudes, particularly when compounded by poor economic conditions in democratic regimes. Studies have shown that regime-specific socialization effects lead to differing civic attitudes, with socialist states fostering dependencies on the state through welfare policies and contributing to anti-democratic legacies (Albertus, Fenner, and Slater 2018; Neundorf, Gerschewski, and Olar 2020). While both North Korea and the former GDR are characterized as socialist one-party regimes, they vary greatly in how tightly outside information is sealed off and in the degree to which citizens encountered (unwanted) external information (Hoyer 2023; Hunter 1999). Consequently, the depth and persistence of socialist-era legacies vary with that informational insulation. Foreign-information penetration differed not only between East Germany and North Korea but also within each regime, varying sharply by region, social stratum, and historical moment (Kuhnhehn, Lee, and Zhang 2020).

These socialization effects extend to attitudes toward institutions. For example, individuals who have lived under socialism are more inclined than those who have not to hold beliefs aligned with government positions and exhibit lower levels of trust in democratic institutions (Heineck and Süßmuth 2013).⁴ On the other hand, institutions are pivotal in shaping enduring attitudes, such as a stronger preference for equitable resource distribution (Kim et al. 2017). Similarly, Alberto Alesina and Nicola Fuchs-Schündeln (2007) highlight that more prolonged exposure to socialism among former East Germans correlates with a greater preference for an active state involvement regarding financial support when faced with unemployment, albeit an observation that converges with the attitudes of Western Germans over time.

However, the impact of post-socialist socialization on social values and attitudes is not static, nor does it directly dictate political outcomes, for example, voting behavior.

this formative window to include the early twenties (see Neundorf and Smets 2017). Regardless of the precise timing, formative political experiences clearly cement enduring political viewpoints, influencing voting patterns, policy preferences, and broader political attitudes (Bartels and Jackman 2014; Sears and Valentino 1997). Public education is one of the principal vectors through which regimes seek to align citizens' political views with official ideology (Koskimaa and Rapeli 2015; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2012, 2017; Wiseman et al. 2011). However, learners may reinterpret or resist such messages, so the efficacy of schooling is contingent rather than uniform (see Yurchak 2006). In this study, we consider those having spent at least the first 12 years of their lives under the institutions of a respective country as being socialized. We draw on Stephen White et al. (2008), among others, to inform this measurement decision.

4. While individuals socialized under socialism may generally exhibit lower levels of trust in democratic institutions, this effect varies by regional historical factors. For instance, areas in former East Germany with a higher density of informants for the Ministry of State Security, commonly known as the Stasi, demonstrate notably lower levels of trust in people and institutions following German unification (Lichter, Löffler, and Sieglösch 2021).

Circumstantial factors often sway public sentiment toward autocracy or democracy. To understand these effects, we need to be aware of heterogeneity, respectively, the individuality of socialist regimes and their socialization impact on the individual (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2014).

Eastern Europe showcases the variability in how post-socialist systems evolve: Hungary, despite its liberal economic past under communism (Benczes 2016; Kornai 1992), has shifted toward competitive authoritarianism (Bozóki and Hegedűs 2018), while countries like Romania and Bulgaria have maintained their democratic openness (Bochsler and Juon 2020). Despite a period of democratic backsliding, Poland's 2023 elections led to the removal of a government widely criticized for authoritarian tendencies, signaling a possible change in political direction (Markowski 2024).

Moreover, intergenerational differences in attitudes need to be considered, which diminish, however, when individuals are content with their economic circumstances. For instance, East Germans born before 1930 are significantly more supportive of redistribution policies than their Western counterparts, but this preference for state intervention decreases in younger Eastern cohorts, such as those born after 1975, narrowing the gap (Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln 2007). Similarly, the post-Cold War generation in Eastern Europe shows higher satisfaction with democratic systems, particularly when they view economic conditions favorably, suggesting that economic perceptions mediate generational differences in democratic support (Neundorff 2010).

(RE-)SOCIALIZATION IN A NEW ENVIRONMENT

Transitioning to democracy involves re-socialization, requiring individuals to recalibrate their understanding of political, social, and economic norms under different conditions than what they have previously experienced. While complete convergence with the host society's attitudes is not guaranteed, varying degrees of alignment of "newcomers'" attitudes and values toward those prevalent in their new environment are observed (Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln 2007; Svallfors 2010; White et al. 2008). Our study builds on this literature to examine the dual challenges of unification and integration in two distinct national contexts.

The extent of adaptation or assimilation is influenced by both the culture of the country of origin and the host country's attitudes toward new residents and citizens. This aspect is crucial in understanding the integration of groups like North Koreans in South Korea or East Germans after reunification. Internal migration within Germany, for example, suggests that migrants to the West may adopt democratic and pro-market values more readily, influenced by exposure to alternative perspectives, even within the former East Germany, where access to external information varied (Kern and Hainmueller 2009). The German reunification expedited this exposure in a complex and challenging process for both sides' governments and societies. By contrast, North Koreans' exposure to information about life and society in South Korea remains comparatively limited before defection, although it varies substantially by region and demographic group (Chung 2019; Kang 2021) and is still markedly higher than during the Cold War (Baek 2016).

The integration process and acculturation in a new environment serve as precursors to re-socialization, affecting political attitudes. Research suggests that migrants can adapt and modify their views on democracy (Eskelinen and Verkuyten 2020), welfare (Luttmer and Singhal 2011; Reeskens and van Oorschot 2015), gender equality (Röder and Mühlau 2014), and social trust (Dinesen and Hooghe 2010).

Circumstantial or situational economic and social factors of an individual during socialization and re-socialization in a new environment affect such views, for example, support for democracy and a market-oriented economy or the alternatives. Those having made arduous experiences in the new environment may become disappointed or resentful, resulting in disapproving attitudes and behaviors toward the new system.

Despite significant strides in economic and social integration in what is generally considered a successful reunification, according to subjective (Gramlich 2019a) and objective indicators (Gramlich 2019b), disparities in social behavior (Brosig-Koch et al. 2011), levels of social trust (Heineck and Süßmuth 2013), and dissatisfaction with the performance of democracy (Pickel and Pickel 2023) persist between the eastern and western regions of Germany today as well as an objective economic gap (Rensmann 2019). Pro-socialist attitudes re-emerged after reunification following controversial privatization efforts in the 1990s that gave rise to the perception that Western elites benefited disproportionately from a reunified Germany. This contributed to distrust in the capitalist system and disappointment with the reunified state, influencing political behavior and support for equality (Hager et al. 2022).

For North Korean migrants in South Korea, the comparatively higher entry barriers to the new environment related to education, employment, and social norms, among others, amplify this issue of social alienation and inability to “catch up,” which obstructs the integration process and marginalizes migrants (Lankov 2006; Lee 2011). In extreme cases, the mounting issues and lingering trauma from past experiences can lead North Korean post-socialists to become disenchanted with their environment and move onward to other countries, re-defect to the DPRK (see Green, Denney, and Gleason 2015), or develop suicidal tendencies (Lim et al. 2024).⁵

In the existing literature, studies analyze the satisfaction level or views of democracy (e.g., Neundorff 2010; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017), gender roles (Galligan, Clavero,

5. In both cases, the “new” citizens are subject to, albeit different forms of, discrimination. In South Korea, those who migrated from the North face a similarly complex challenge of integrating into the new, liberal, and capitalist society (Denney and Green 2024). They encounter significant cultural and linguistic barriers, including discrimination due to their accents, contributing to their “othering” (Chung 2008; Ha and Jang 2016). North Korean migrants and their children often face negative stereotypes and discrimination in schools (Kim 2016; Park and May 2025), and adults experience everyday discrimination (Kim and Jang 2007; Noh et al. 2018), despite many South Koreans viewing them as part of the national community (Yoon 2021). In the German case, this discrimination and the disappointment of the developments after unification led to growing disapproval of the state and democratic values. Aside from similar sociocultural disadvantages (see Dickey and Widmaier 2021; Süß 2018), the individual life story and merit in the GDR is understated and even framed as a burden. A prominent case is the speech of former German Chancellor Angela Merkel on October 3, 2021, in which she emotionally dismissed the framing of her GDR past as *Ballast* (baggage) as it was portrayed in an essay collection published by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (Merkel 2021).

and Calloni 2007; Inglehart and Norris 2003; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017), and markets (Otrachshenko, Nikolova, and Popova 2023; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2014, 2017; Rakhmanov 2023). While pooled modeling techniques exhibit strengths in testing different factors, they also have drawbacks such as their reliance on direct and abstract survey question responses, often leading to a lack of construct validity.

Some scholars use experimental designs to address the inherent methodological issue. For example, Christian Pfarr, Andreas Schmid, and Volker Ulrich (2017) present experiment findings suggesting that support for the welfare state remains consistent across Eastern and Western Germans when faced with budgetary decisions with the need to satiate. This indicates that while responses to abstract inquiries may vary, practical considerations may reveal similar preferences among both populations. However, contrasting evidence from field experiments suggests that individuals from former East Germany exhibit behaviors reflecting lower levels of social trust and solidarity (Brosig-Koch et al. 2011; Ockenfels and Weimann 1999). This evidence implies potentially lower levels of support for welfare than indicated by Pfarr, Schmid, and Ulrich (2017). Nonetheless, it remains evident that much of the existing literature relies on observational surveys such as the World Values Survey (WVS), whose data and questionnaires are becoming outdated in certain aspects. These surveys do not directly address which value positions are most salient or most strongly held when respondents answer questions. We propose building upon the post-socialist and socialization literature with new experimental designs to address empirical and methodological gaps.

CASES, DATA, AND METHODOLOGY

The selection of Germany and South Korea as cases for this study stems from their unique yet similar historical experiences of national division and the integration of post-socialist populations into liberal democratic societies.

In both cases, we can investigate the long-term effects of political socialization under socialist systems, the challenges of political and social integration, and subsequent re-socialization in a new and democratic environment. For instance, individuals from the former GDR or North Korea may retain attitudes reflecting their socialist upbringing, while those socialized in West Germany or South Korea may exhibit beliefs more aligned with longer-standing democratic systems. Examining these dynamics reveals the persistence of socialist legacies and their influence on contemporary attitudes and behaviors.

Although we examine the two settings in parallel, we do not treat them as directly comparable. Germany and the Korean peninsula differ on key dimensions relevant to democratic integration: the timing of regime change, geostrategic context, mode of incorporation (internal reunification vs. cross-border migration), and the economic, linguistic, and institutional distance between the socialist and democratic systems.

In South Korea, post-socialists refer to North Korean migrants who were socialized under the DPRK's socialist system before defecting and resettling in the South. All attitudes reported below were measured post-arrival; we therefore treat them as the

outcome of early socialist socialization with several years of re-socialization in South Korea. In Germany, integration involves former GDR citizens who either migrated to West Germany before reunification or became part of the unified country afterward. This distinction highlights two different integration experiences: one involving North Korean migrants adapting to a new political and economic system, and the other focusing on former East Germans integrating into a reunified state while navigating regional differences.

The case study design reflects these contextual differences by examining distinct subpopulations in both countries (see Table 1). In South Korea, the study differentiates between South Koreans, who were socialized in the Republic of Korea (ROK) with no migration experience, and post-DPRK citizens, North Korean migrants who spent their formative years in the DPRK before resettling in the South. In Germany, it categorizes Western Germans as individuals socialized in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), including West Berlin, before or after reunification. Post-GDR citizens are those who spent their formative years in the former GDR and remained in its territory at least until adulthood.⁶ Lastly, Eastern Germans are individuals who did not socialize in the GDR but resided in its former territory. The inclusion of Eastern Germans acknowledges that these individuals will have been socialized in an environment of post-socialist citizens. It also accounts for the ongoing economic, social, and institutional distinctions in the former East, which persist despite formal unification and continue to shape political attitudes and regional identity (Brosig-Koch et al. 2011; Glorius 2021; Pickel and Pickel 2023; Rensmann 2019). Comparing attitudes among subnational groups allows us to assess the extent to which political socialization shapes contemporary political attitudes and to identify areas of alignment or divergence. Despite their unique historical trajectories, North Korea and former East Germany are examples of socialist countries.

Using a choice-based conjoint, this research asked respondents to evaluate the opinions of two hypothetical emerging politicians. Participants reviewed each politician's positions on key issues and selected the one they agreed with most. While prior studies have largely relied on observational survey data from cross-sectional populations, this study incorporates updated questions to reflect current political and cultural developments.

Five attributes, each with varying levels, represent opinions that politicians in either country might express to appeal to voters. This choice-based conjoint design offers respondents a multidimensional framework to articulate their political attitudes, preferences, and beliefs, introducing trade-offs and complexity that more closely mimic real-world political decision-making as opposed to inquiring about each attribute separately. Because every attribute value appears multiple times in different configurations, we can isolate the weight of each value in deciding for a particular politician across our sample. Table 2 outlines the attributes and their corresponding values, alongside design rationale and theoretical expectations.

6. The sample of Germans captured by the study, who were socialized in the GDR, and moved to jurisdiction associated with West Germany, either before or after reunification, is small and thus not included in the analysis.

TABLE 1. Populations Studied in South Korea and Germany

Country	Population	Description	Measurement
South Korea	South Koreans	Residents of South Korea who were born and raised there without migration experience from North Korea. Includes both native-born individuals and long-term immigrants who have undergone socialization in South Korea.	Sample of individuals who (i) spent at least the first 12 years of their lives in the jurisdictions of South Korea (ii) and currently reside in the same or similar jurisdictions.
	Post-DPRK citizens	Residents of South Korea who were socialized in North Korea, later defected, and subsequently resettled in South Korea, where they have been granted citizenship. In this study, they are referred to as "North Korean migrants" or "post-DPRK citizens."	Sample of individuals who (i) previously resided in the DPRK for the first 12 years of their lives (minimum) (ii) and resettled in South Korea since then or shortly thereafter.
Germany	Western Germans	Individuals who were socialized in the Federal Republic of Germany, including West Berlin, either before or after reunification.	Sample of individuals currently residing in Germany who (i) spent at least the first 12 years of their lives in jurisdictions associated with West Germany (FRG), including West Berlin, before or after reunification (ii) and resided in the same or a similar jurisdiction at the age of 18.
	Eastern Germans	Individuals who were not socialized in the GDR and currently live in parts of Germany that formerly belonged to the GDR.	Sample of individuals who (i) did not spend the first 12 years of their lives in pre-reunification jurisdictions belonging to the GDR, including East Berlin, (ii) lived in a post-reunification jurisdiction formerly belonging to the GDR at the age of 18,
			(iii) and currently reside in the same or a similar jurisdiction.
	Post-GDR citizens	Individuals socialized in the GDR.	Sample of individuals who (i) spent at least the first 12 years of their lives in a pre-reunification jurisdiction belonging to the GDR (ii) and, at the age of 18, still resided in a jurisdiction belonging to the GDR or formerly so.

TABLE 2. Attributes and Levels for Emerging Politicians Choice-Based Conjoint

Attributes	Values	Design Rationale	Theoretical Expectation
Views on democracy	1. In a democracy, the economic system runs badly.	Evaluate perceptions of the effectiveness and value of democratic systems. It is meant to capture pro- and anti-democratic feelings.	We can expect post-socialist citizens, such as North Koreans and East Germans, to be more critical of democratic systems. Their experiences under socialism may lead them to view democracy as ineffective and disorderly. Having lived under regimes that promoted state control and order, these individuals may associate democracy with instability and inefficiency. Consequently, they might be less supportive of democratic systems compared to those without such experiences.
	2. Democratic systems are indecisive and bad at maintaining order.		
	3. Democracy may have problems but it's better than any other form of government.		
Views on the economy	1. The state should give more freedom to firms.	Measure attitudes toward economic freedom and state intervention. This provides insights into their economic ideology and beliefs about the market economy.	Individuals who endured economic challenges under socialism, like severe material shortages, may lean toward market-oriented reforms. However, caution toward a complete free-market embrace might arise if they've also seen the pitfalls of rapid market reforms. East Germans, who faced the economic turbulence of reunification, and North Koreans, with limited market exposure, could both show such reservations.
	2. The state should control firms more effectively.		

(continued)

TABLE 2. (continued)			
Attributes	Values	Design Rationale	Theoretical Expectation
Views on social welfare	1. People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves.	Determine beliefs regarding the state's social responsibility (and welfare) and individual self-reliance. Seek to measure attitudes toward personal responsibility and state responsibility.	Given the comprehensive state-driven welfare mechanisms under communism, both groups might lean toward appreciating robust state intervention in welfare. Their historical experience with socialist welfare might influence this stance.
	2. The government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for.		
Views on gender	1. Gender should not be important in determining social roles.	Assess gender role perceptions and beliefs about gender equity. This offers a lens into prevailing societal views on gender roles and gender-based opportunities.	Though socialist regimes emphasized labor equality, deep-seated gender norms persisted. For instance, despite East Germany's pro-women workforce policies, some traditional gender perspectives might linger. Similarly, North Korea's historically pronounced stance on gender might translate into more rigid gender role expectations. For this experiment, we have updated the positions to reflect current social currents and debates better.
	2. To promote equity, women should be prioritized over men for hiring decisions if equally qualified.		
	3. When jobs are scarce, men should have more of a right to a job than women.		

(continued)

TABLE 2. (*continued*)

Attributes	Values	Design Rationale	Theoretical Expectation
Views on diversity	1. Ethnic and cultural diversity erodes a country's unity. 2. Ethnic and cultural diversity should be accepted because it is an economic benefit to the country. 3. Ethnic and cultural diversity enriches the lives of people in our country.	Investigate perceptions of the implications of ethnic and cultural diversity. This measures the perceived value or threat of diversity in the socioeconomic and cultural fabric of a society.	The expectations for this attribute are unclear, although given the increase in immigration in both countries, especially Germany, it is important to explore this. Authoritarian regimes tend to emphasize national unity and homogeneity; thus, there may be reason to believe post-socialist citizens will harbor skepticism toward the benefits of cultural diversity—economic, cultural, or otherwise.

Participants were recruited through Qualtrics nationally representative online panels for Germany ($n = 2,071$), South Korea ($n = 1,994$), and a specialized panel of North Korean migrants in South Korea ($n = 311$) recruited by Woorion, an NGO focused on North Korean resettlement. The survey was translated into both German and Korean, with sensitivity to wording. Appendix A in the Supplementary Information (SI) provides more information on the samples as well as a detailed data and sampling process overview.

Each participant completed a predetermined number of unique tasks: eight for Germans, seven for South Koreans, and ten for North Koreans. The number of tasks per population was determined based on statistical power and survey length considerations.⁷ The order of attributes and their assigned values was randomized across tasks, and no duplicate profiles were shown within a given task.

For each task, respondents were presented with the positions of two fictional politicians on issues such as democracy, the economy, social welfare, gender, and diversity. Table 3 shows an example of the experimental design. After reviewing these positions, participants selected the politician they agreed with the most, introducing a forced-choice component to the experiment. The repeated task format of choice-based conjoint compels participants to make trade-offs among attributes, revealing the relative importance of each in their decision-making process and the direction of their preferences.

We estimate marginal means, or the average probability that a profile with a given attribute is chosen. In this two-profile forced-choice design, a mean of 0.50 reflects chance—that is, a 50% probability of the profile being chosen with a given attribute level. Thus, values above 0.50 show preference and values below 0.50 show aversion. We then calculate the differences between our national subgroups of interest. Our analysis begins with the native South Korean and post-DPRK populations before moving to the German sample, which comprises a subgroup examination of Western Germans, Eastern Germans, and post-GDR citizens.

Following the initial analysis, we apply nearest-neighbor matching after the primary analysis. For each post-DPRK respondent, we select two native South Koreans with similar age, sex, and education; likewise, we pair each post-GDR citizen with two West Germans. This 2:1 ratio minimizes confounding from demographics and socialization. The “treatment” then is exposure to a socialist regime, so the matched sets allow a comparison of political attitudes formed under socialism versus democracy.

In the Korean sample, we focus on matching post-DPRK respondents with South Koreans who have been socialized in a democratic environment to create a more theoretically meaningful comparison group. For the German sample, matching is particularly

7. A pre-survey power analysis was conducted to determine the minimum viable sample size for each sample population. A statistical power of 0.8 was chosen, which is a widely accepted standard, denoting an 80% chance that the study will detect an effect if there is one. Given the focus on subgroups, especially in the German case, made it more difficult to ensure the threshold was met. For the post-GDR citizens, we could only ultimately meet a 0.7 threshold.

TABLE 3. The Emerging Politician Experimental Design

Consider the following opinions from two emerging politicians. Read each person's position and then choose which of the two you agree with most.

These are hypothetical positions. You might not entirely agree with either politician but choose the person you most agree with.

	Politician A	Politician B
Views on democracy	Democratic systems are indecisive and bad at maintaining order.	Democracy may have problems, but it's better than any other form of government.
Views on markets	The state should give more freedom to firms.	The state should control firms more effectively.
Views on social welfare	The government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for.	People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves.
Views on gender	To promote equity, sometimes women should be prioritized over men for hiring decisions.	When jobs are scarce, men should have more of a right to a job than women.
Views on diversity	Ethnic and cultural diversity erodes a country's unity.	Ethnic and cultural diversity enriches the lives of people in the country.
With whom do you most agree?	☐	☐

crucial due to the significant age difference between post-GDR citizens and their Western counterparts. Age is a critical factor that can influence political attitudes and behaviors, so our matching technique helps to isolate the effect of the socialist legacy by controlling for age-related differences.

RESULTS

Main Findings

Figure 1 presents results from a conjoint analysis of the political preferences of Western Germans, Eastern Germans, and post-GDR citizens. We report marginal means in percentage form for each subgroup, followed by differences relative to Western Germans. The most pronounced gaps concern preferences related to the political system (democracy) and diversity attributes.

Across all groups, there is broad support for democratic governance, while anti-democratic statements are rejected, but the strength of this support varies. Western Germans display the strongest preference for democracy, with a marginal mean of 59%

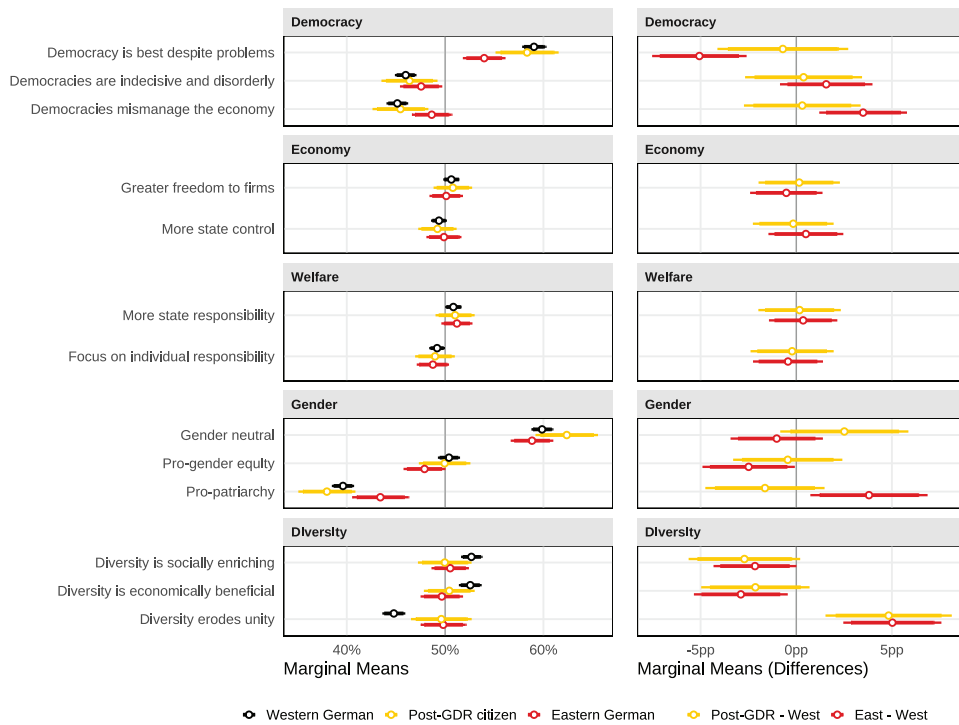


FIGURE 1. Marginal means and differences for candidate political attribute levels: Germany. *Note:* Based on the benchmark OLS model with clustered standard errors, the marginal means show the mean outcome of any given attribute level, averaged across all others. The error bars represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

for the pro-democracy position. Post-GDR citizens also exhibit strong support at 58%, while Eastern Germans show less enthusiasm at approximately 55%. When comparing the differences, Eastern Germans are notably less supportive of democracy relative to Western Germans, reflected in negative marginal mean differences (~ 5 percentage points [pp]).

Attitudes toward diversity display the most significant divergence. Western Germans prefer candidates who articulate positive views of a diverse Germany and reject those who articulate nativist views of the nation, with marginal means of approximately 53% for both positive positions and 45% for the nativist view. In contrast, Eastern Germans and post-GDR citizens are unmoved by positions on diversity. The marginal means for pro- and anti-diversity positions among post-GDR citizens and Eastern Germans comes in at $\sim 50\%$, reflecting ambivalence. The marginal mean difference is largest regarding nativist messages (~ 5 pp).

Economic preferences show minimal divergence. All groups demonstrate a near-neutral stance on the state's role in the economy. Welfare preferences, too, reveal a convergence across the groups. All three exhibit a clear preference for state responsibility in social welfare, with marginal means around 51–52%. Differences relative to Western Germans are negligible, suggesting that socialist legacies in the East do not significantly influence

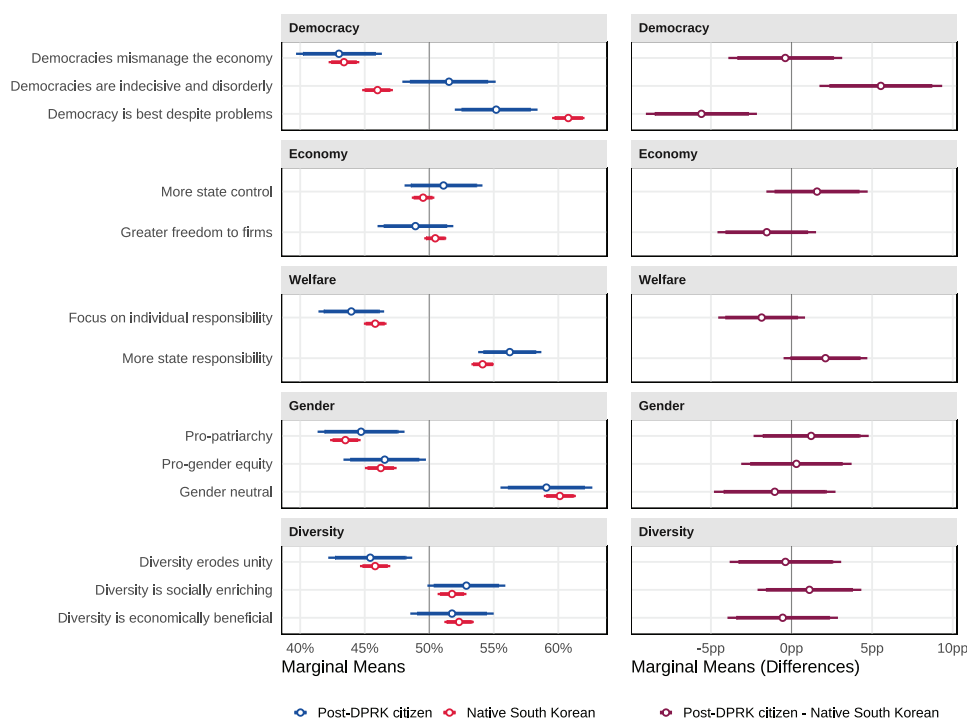


FIGURE 2. Marginal means and differences for candidate political attribute levels: Korean samples. *Note:* Based on the benchmark OLS model with clustered standard errors, the marginal means show the mean outcome of any given attribute level, averaged across all others. The error bars represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals.

attitudes toward welfare. This alignment may reflect broader German support for social safety nets across historical divides.

In terms of gender attitudes, there is a shared preference for gender-neutral positions. Post-GDR citizens show the strongest support, with marginal means of 62% for gender neutrality, slightly higher than Western Germans (60%) and Eastern Germans (58%). Notably, Western Germans exhibit a mild positive effect for pro-gender-equity positions, indicating more openness to active gender equality measures compared to their Eastern counterparts. The marginal mean differences confirm that Eastern Germans are less supportive of both gender neutrality and gender equity, while post-GDR citizens align more closely with Western Germans, even surpassing them slightly on gender neutrality. Using additional subgroup analysis, we can confirm that citizens of the East hold preferences significantly different from those in the West, in both the northern and southern states (see Figure D.1 in the Appendix).

Next, Figure 2 shows the results from a conjoint analysis comparing the political preferences of the native South Korean and post-DPRK populations concerning various attributes associated with emerging politicians. While both groups generally favor democratic governance and progressive stances on welfare, gender, and diversity, notable differences persist, particularly in attitudes toward democracy and redistribution

preferences, as evidenced by the marginal means differences. These findings reflect the likely persistence of attitudes associated with early political socialization under North Korea's authoritarian socialist regime despite resettlement in a democratic society.

Focusing on democracy, both groups prefer democratic systems over alternatives with marginal means above the 0.50 break point, although native South Koreans are more strongly motivated by this candidate's viewpoint. The probability of such profiles being preferred is 61%, but post-DPRK citizens exhibit significantly less enthusiasm (7pp less). Furthermore, while both populations reject the notion that democracies mismanage the economy, post-DPRK citizens are not opposed to the idea that democratic systems are indecisive and bad at maintaining order, an unsupportive attitude toward democracy.

Another notable difference is welfare preferences. There is broad agreement in favor of state responsibility for welfare (i.e., greater redistribution). Although both post-DPRK citizens and native South Koreans prefer candidates who support greater state responsibility, suggesting a shared belief in the importance of state welfare, post-DPRK citizens show a stronger preference at 58%, compared to 54% among native South Koreans. They also demonstrate a more pronounced rejection of individual responsibility, which may echo some of the collectivist ideas emphasized in socialist systems.

Despite the differences, the broader picture indicates significant convergence in political attitudes between the two groups. Both native South Koreans and post-DPRK citizens express strong support for gender neutrality and the positive aspects of diversity, rejecting pro-patriarchy and overtly nativist positions alike. The diversity positions are notable, given that the full statements invoke ethnic diversity, not general diversity, and South Korea has historically been ethnically homogeneous. Economic preferences regarding market freedom and state control also display a shared ambivalence. We conducted an additional cohort analysis examining pre-democratic and democratic South Korean cohorts alongside post-DPRK citizens (Figure D.2 in the Appendix). The results provide corroborating evidence for our main findings presented here.⁸

In sum, while there is general convergence in economic, welfare, and gender attitudes across the groups, significant differences remain in democratic enthusiasm and attitudes toward diversity. These findings underscore the enduring impact of socialist legacies, particularly in shaping views on political systems and cultural diversity.

Robustness Check: Matching Outcomes

To validate our findings, we employ a matching approach to ensure comparability across the German and Korean samples. This step controls for demographic and contextual

8. While our sample of post-DPRK citizens living in South Korea is too small to yield statistically significant findings for subgroups, we compared survey results across different levels of exposure, measured by the duration of stay in South Korea after relocation (Figure D.5). The data suggest a possible effect, briefly discussed in the literature review, regarding the disenchantment of post-DPRK citizens in their new environment. The marginal means for both groups are largely aligned but indicate that those with higher exposure, that is, those who have been staying in South Korea longer, are slightly less enthusiastic about democracy and diversity, and more inclined to favor state control over freedom of firms. This disenchantment may stem from a conflict between expectations and reality, the activation of socialization prior to relocation, or generally difficult financial and social circumstances.

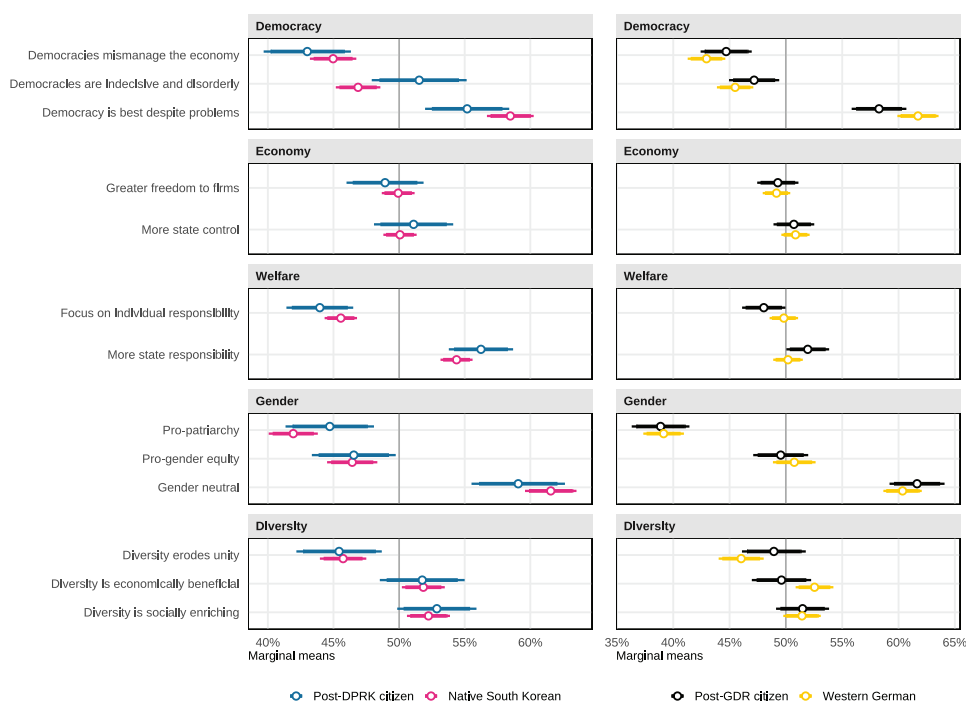


FIGURE 3. Marginal means for candidate political attribute levels: German and Korean samples with matching. *Note:* Based on the benchmark OLS model with clustered standard errors, the marginal means show the mean outcome of any given attribute level, averaged across all others. The error bars represent 90% and 95% confidence intervals. The matched sample use treatment (1 = Post-GDR citizen, 0 = Western German; or 1 = Post-DPRK citizen, 0 = Native South Korean) obtained via nearest neighbor matching on Age, Sex, and Education at a 2:1 ratio with weights re-normalized to match original totals.

differences, strengthening our claims connecting socialist legacies and political attitudes. Matching reduces biases by balancing key demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, isolating the impact of socialist socialization from other factors like migration or aging.

In Germany, age differences necessitate matching, as post-GDR citizens in our sample are significantly older than Western Germans. Thus, controlling for age differences helps distinguish socialist-era socialization from generational effects. In South Korea, migrant status presents a key confounder. North Korean defectors differ from native South Koreans due to not only authoritarian socialization but also migration-related challenges. Their stronger preference for state welfare, for instance, may reflect both socialist upbringing and immediate socioeconomic needs. By matching on age, socioeconomic status, and education, we better but imperfectly isolate political socialization effects from broader migrant experiences.

The matched results presented in Figure 3 reflect the initial, main findings: post-DPRK citizens remain less supportive of democracy and favor greater state intervention, while post-GDR citizens exhibit similar patterns regarding national identity and

diversity. The consistency of these patterns suggests that socialist legacies persist even after controlling for demographic differences.

Some notable nuances emerge in the German sample. Matched post-GDR citizens are less likely than their Western counterparts to support democracy but also less likely to oppose the idea that democracy mismanages the economy, although the latter position is still rejected overall. Additionally, post-GDR citizens show greater support for state redistribution, aligning with the pattern observed among post-DPRK citizens in South Korea.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, we examine the enduring influence of socialist-era socialization on political attitudes in post-socialist settings, focusing on support for core institutional domains: democratic governance, market economies, welfare provision, gender equality, and social diversity. Several key findings emerge. First, we see a gap in democratic support: those socialized under post-socialist regimes display weaker enthusiasm for democracy than individuals raised in stable democracies. Native South Koreans and Western Germans exhibit strong democratic preferences, whereas post-DPRK and post-GDR citizens are more skeptical, aligning with work suggesting socialist-era socialization fosters distrust of democratic institutions (Neundorff 2010; Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017). In Germany, sweeping economic changes after reunification led to job losses and inequalities, fueling dissatisfaction (Pickel and Pickel 2023; Rensmann 2019). In South Korea, post-DPRK migrants face barriers including language, education, and social stigma, all of which can erode trust in democracy (Lankov 2006; Lee 2011; Park and May 2025). Over time, these challenges may provoke nostalgia for the “old” system or disillusionment with the new.

Second, attitudes toward diversity differ across and within countries. South Koreans and Western Germans favor diversity, while Eastern Germans (including post-GDR citizens) show more caution, which may be partly associated with limited contact with ethnic pluralism under socialism. Although the GDR officially espoused international solidarity and anti-racism, it remained predominantly German in practice, with contract workers from Vietnam, Mozambique, or Cuba often isolated and discriminated against (Rabenschlag 2014; Schulz 2011). Since state propaganda framed racism as a “capitalist problem,” public discourse on fostering diversity rarely occurred, leaving inclusive policy-making underdeveloped. By contrast, post-DPRK citizens endorse diversity, possibly reflecting adaptation to a South Korea steadily embracing multiculturalism (Eskelinen and Verkuyten 2020). Yet in eastern Germany, economic insecurity, populist movements, and historical biases reinforce skepticism about immigration and cultural plurality (Esses et al. 2001; Glorius 2021).

Third, we observe strong welfare support in South Korea, particularly among post-DPRK migrants. Although German subgroups also value state involvement, welfare is less central there. For North Korean migrants, greater reliance on government assistance may stem from both socialist expectations and immediate socioeconomic needs.

This has implications for a hypothetical Korean unification (Kim 2017), where bridging skill gaps and offering social support might be critical for integrating those raised under authoritarian socialism.

Despite not centering on gender attitudes, our findings reveal notable cross-country contrasts. South Korea's marked opposition to gender equity initiatives coexists with broad support for gender neutrality, reflecting deep-rooted cultural norms. Meanwhile, Germany's progressive stance on gender quotas and childcare policies indicates a broader acceptance of gender equality (Bünning and Hipp 2022; Henninger and von Wahl 2019; World Economic Forum 2023).

Additional subgroup analyses (Appendix D) confirm that regional, cohort, and partisan patterns in Germany and South Korea align with our main experimental findings, while observational checks (Appendix E) corroborate the likely persistence of socialist socialization effects.

Furthermore, while our study focuses on institutional attitudes, these outcomes are closely linked to broader orientations such as social trust. Authoritarian socialist regimes often undermined interpersonal trust through surveillance, ideological policing, and enforced conformity, and this legacy continues to manifest in post-socialist societies (Brosig-Koch et al. 2011; Heineck and Süsmuth 2013; Yoon 2021). In both Germany and South Korea, persistent regional or subgroup distrust of institutions may partially reflect lower generalized trust, shaped by these historical experiences. Future work could explicitly examine how trust in others mediates or moderates support for democratic institutions in post-socialist settings.

Overall, socialist-era socialization continues to influence political attitudes long after regime change or migration, complicating democratic engagement and social integration. Here, we emphasize influence, not perfect indoctrination. Citizens routinely negotiate, reinterpret, or quietly ignore official messages.

In Germany, persistent disparities and mistrust in eastern regions can be traced back to socialism and its uneven aftermath. Similarly, in Korea, post-DPRK migrants' weaker commitment to democracy partly reflects dissatisfaction with a competitive, exclusionary environment.

Thus, formal unification or legal integration alone cannot overcome entrenched socialist legacies. Policymakers must address core socialization agents, such as schools, media, and community organizations, to shift attitudes. Germany's experience suggests that economic investment, civic education, and inclusive social policies help counter lingering mistrust. For Korea, anticipating these issues before unification is crucial, given the risks posed by wavering democratic support in a climate of "democratic recession" (Shin 2020). Only a holistic and sustained approach to social integration can foster enduring democratic cohesion. ■

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

This work was supported by the 2023 Overseas North Korea-Unification Policy Academic Research Support Grant.

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