

Bachelor Thesis

‘The Influence of Government Image on Youth Party Membership:
A Case Study of Die Linke's Membership Growth in the preface of
the 2025 Bundestagswahl in Germany.’

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Abstract

Germany experiences growing political dissatisfaction among young citizens, characterised by declining trust in government institutions and perceived democratic deficits. Facing that, the left-wing party Die Linke has recorded a notably growth in its party membership, listing 23000 new members leading up to the 2025 Bundestagswahl. However, it remains unclear how youth perceptions of governmental legitimacy and trust specifically influence young people decision to engage politically through Die Linke. This exploratory qualitative study aims to investigate this relationship by focusing explicitly on how young Germans' perceptions of government trustworthiness and democratic legitimacy motivate their involvement with Die Linke.

Theoretically grounded in Rosanvallon's 'Counter-Democracy' and Norris's "Democratic Deficit," the research will explore how dissatisfaction and participatory opportunities intersect with youth political engagement. Employing a qualitative case study design, data collection involves semi structured interviews with young Die Linke members to understand their perceptions, experiences, and motivations. Additionally, document analysis of Die Linke's manifestos and media communications will clarify how the party strategically addresses youth discontent and democratic criticism. Ultimately, this study contributes nuanced insights into youth political behaviour, democratic legitimacy, and the rising appeal of alternative political participation among young citizens in contemporary Germany.

In this work the author made use of generative artificial intelligence. Please see the appendix for the disclosure statement.

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Introduction

Germany's party system has rarely been as fluid, or as polarised, as in the months preceding the snap Bundestagswahl of February 2025. Polling-day exit surveys revealed a dramatic generational split: among 18-to-24-year-olds Die Linke captured roughly one-quarter of the vote, vaulting from near-oblivion in 2021 to the most popular choice of first-time voters (Deutsche Welle, 2025; Schnetzer & Hurrelmann, 2025). Behind the ballot-box surge lay an even more remarkable organisational fact: in less than eighteen months the party processed more than 23 000 new applications for membership, the vast majority from people under 30 (Deutschlandfunk, 2025; Left Voice, 2025). For a party long caricatured as the ageing relic of East German socialism, this influx of digitally savvy, highly mobile joiners represents something close to a demographic revolution.

The youth stampede towards Die Linke is counter-intuitive for two reasons. First, political scientists have repeatedly documented young Germans' reluctance to engage in conventional party politics, preferring protests, online campaigns and short-lived issue coalitions (Gaiser & de Rijke, 2010; Weiss, 2020). Second, longitudinal attitude surveys depict a generation that is simultaneously committed to democratic ideals yet deeply sceptical of Germany's governing institutions (Faus et al., 2019; Chevalier, 2019). In principle, either tendency, anti-party sentiments or institutional distrust, should depress formal party membership. Yet Die Linke's offices have never been busier. Explaining this paradox is the central task of the present thesis.

1.1 From democratic dissatisfaction to partisan mobilisation

A growing literature attributes youth disengagement to what Norris (2011) labels the 'democratic deficit': a widening gap between citizens' normative expectations of what democratic institutions should deliver and their lived experience of unresponsiveness, opacity and elite self-interest. Rosanvallon (2008) complements this diagnosis with the concept of 'counter-democracy', arguing that chronic distrust does not necessarily breed apathy; it can generate new, vigilant forms of participation outside standard representative arenas. Viewed through this lens, the sudden popularity of Die Linke suggests that disaffected young Germans are not withdrawing from politics but relocating their energies to an organisation they perceive as a credible watchdog and vehicle for systemic change.

Three high-profile events appear to have accelerated that relocation. First, the Bundestag's October 2024 'security package', which tightened asylum procedures while expanding police powers, was widely condemned on youth-oriented platforms as a moral failure and a capitulation to right-wing narratives (DW, 2025). Second, the collapse of the SPD-Green-FDP 'traffic-light' coalition the following month reinforced perceptions of governing instability and strategic self-interest. Finally, in January 2025 the parliamentary merger of CDU/CSU and FDP votes with the far-right AfD on a restrictive migration motion shattered what many young observers had assumed was a non-

negotiable firewall (Brandmauer) against fascist collaboration (Left Voice, 2025). Each episode deepened the narrative that established parties were either incapable of unwilling to defend inclusive democracy.

Die Linke capitalised on this narrative rupture in two distinct ways. At the level of political communication, the party's lead candidate, Heidi Reichinnek, deployed an aggressive TikTok and Instagram strategy, translating complex policy positions into high-velocity clips that reached millions within hours (DW, 2025). At the organisational level the youth wing linksjugend['solid] rolled out hyper-local door-knocking drives, deliberately targeting student residences and urban precarious districts. The combined effect was to present Die Linke not merely as a protest brand but as an accessible community in which scepticism could be converted into tangible influence (Hildebrandt, 2012).

1.2 Research aim and Research question

Main research question:

To what extent do young people's perceptions of government legitimacy and institutional trust, relative to other motivational factors, explain their decision to join Die Linke in the run-up to the 2025 Bundestagswahl?

The enquiry is divided into three theoretically anchored sub-questions:

1. **Counter-democracy** **and** **vigilant** **citizenship**
How do young Germans' experiences of democratic deficit manifest in counter-democratic practices, and to what extent does this vigilance predispose them towards joining opposition parties such as Die Linke? (Rosanvallon, 2008)
2. **Democratic** **deficit** **and** **unmet** **expectations**
Which specific failings in German governance do young people identify as triggers of political dissatisfaction, and how do these grievances create selective incentives for switching allegiance to an alternative party? (Norris, 2011)
3. **Public-sphere** **inclusion** **and** **transformative** **vision**
How does Die Linke's participatory rhetoric and 'real-utopian' policy agenda resonate with youth expectations of authenticity and political voice, thereby motivating formal membership? (Habermas, 1989; Wright, 2010)

Together, these questions guide the empirical chapters and ensure that theoretical propositions remain tightly coupled to observed motivations.

Theoretical bearings

Four conceptual pillars structure the analysis. Norris's (2011) *critical-citizen* thesis frames young Germans as normatively committed democrats who compare institutional performance against high standards and punish perceived shortfalls. Rosanvallon's (2008) *counter-democracy* suggests that distrust can be channelled into oversight, prevention and judgement mechanisms, roles that an oppositional party may embody. Habermas's (1989) model of the *public sphere* provides a yardstick for assessing whether Die Linke succeeds in hosting inclusive, deliberative arenas that mainstream actors neglect. Finally, Wright's (2010) notion of *real utopias* explains how radical, yet feasible programmes can transform affective discontent into constructive membership.

Methodological orientation

Methodologically, the study adopts an exploratory qualitative case-study design centred on semi-structured interviews with recent youth recruits (aged 18-25) supplemented by thematic analysis of secondary literature and media documents. The coding scheme, maps respondents' narratives onto deductive categories derived from the aforementioned theories and by triangulating individual motivations with organisational messaging, the analysis aims to trace causal pathways from institutional dissatisfaction to partisan commitment.

Structure of the thesis

The remainder of the thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 starts with an extant literature review on youth political engagement and institutional trust in Germany, establishing the empirical baseline from which Die Linke's surge diverges. Chapter 2 further contains the theoretical framework, which was built for this research, opening the understanding for topic at stake. Chapter 3 details the methodological choices, sampling logic and ethical safeguards underpinning the interview study and elaborates the theoretical framework, operationalising each concept for analytic use. Chapter 5 Empirical Analysis then, presents the empirical findings aligned with the three sub-questions. Chapter 6 Discussion interprets those findings considering the theories, evaluates alternative explanations and discusses implications for democratic renewal. Chapter 7 Conclusion summarises contributions, acknowledges limitations and proposes avenues for future research.

Contribution and significance

By interrogating why thousands of sceptical young citizens chose not only to vote for but to *join* a left-wing party during a period of institutional malaise, the thesis contributes to three conversations. First, it refines scholarship on youth political behaviour by demonstrating that formal party membership can coexist with, and even be driven by, deep distrust, complicating the simple retreat-from-politics narrative (Cammaerts et al., 2014). Second, it offers empirical leverage on the debate over whether counter-democratic practices revitalise or erode representative institutions (Rosanvallon, 2008). Third, it provides practitioners with evidence on how participatory structures and digital mobilisation can translate diffuse frustration into sustained organisational engagement. In an era when liberal democracies confront both right-wing populism

and left-wing renewal, understanding the mechanics of the latter is essential for safeguarding pluralism.

Literature Review

Youth political behaviour in Germany has shifted dramatically over the past two decades, showcasing a new generation, which is simultaneously more sceptical of conventional politics and more willing to experiment with alternative avenues of political power. This review synthesises the key strands of scholarship required to understand why young Germans have flocked to Die Linke in the run-up to the 2025 Bundestagswahl. It does so in four steps: (1) documenting long-run changes in youth participation; (2) tracing the erosion of trust in democratic institutions; (3) situating Die Linke within the party system; and (4) highlighting the growing relevance of digital mobilisation and identity politics. Taken together, these literatures provide the empirical and conceptual backdrop for the theoretical framework outlined in the next chapter.

Classic accounts depicted German youth as ‘dutiful citizens,’ socialised into party loyalty through family, union and church networks (Janowitz & Segal, 1967). By the 1990s those meso-institutions had lost much of their integrative power. Dalton (2008) therefore argues that a new ‘engaged citizen’ ideal has emerged: young people still value democratic norms, yet they favour expressive, issue-driven action, boycotts, petitions, demonstrations, over routine electoral participation. Large-scale survey work confirms the trend. Gaiser and De Rijke (2010) show that German 18- to 24-year-olds are as interested in politics as their parents but far less likely to join a party or even vote; instead they channel energy into environmental, feminist or anti-racist causes. Subsequent panel data indicate that the 2010s saw no reversal of that pattern (Weiss, 2020).

Qualitative studies nuance this picture. Evans (2002) finds that German school-to-work transitions, increasingly non-linear and precarious, delay the assumption of stable partisan identities. Bynner (2005) labels the resulting life-stage ‘emerging adulthood’, during which civic preferences remain fluid. Such fluidity can generate sudden swings: the FDP captured over 20% of under-25s in 2021, only to collapse to 5% in 2025 (Mitteregger, 2025). In short, declining party attachment does not imply apathy but rather a readiness to ‘shop around’ for vehicles that resonate with moment-specific grievances.

Declining trust and the democratic deficit

While ‘engaged citizenship’ re-interprets new repertoires, the willingness to abandon mainstream organisations is shaped by deteriorating evaluations of institutional performance. Norris’s (2011) democratic-deficit thesis posits that citizens still endorse democratic ideals yet judge governments as unresponsive and self-serving. German evidence supports the claim. The Bertelsmann Trust Index shows confidence in the federal government falling from 36% (2015) to 24% (2018) among 18- to 30-year-olds, with little recovery by 2024 (Faus et al., 2019; Presseportal, 2024). Distrust is especially acute in eastern Länder, where only one-third of young adults rate democracy as working well (Faus et al., 2019). Economic insecurity amplifies scepticism: despite relatively low unemployment, Germany’s dual labour market funnels newcomers into fixed-term contracts, fuelling perceptions of ‘precarious adulthood’ (Eichhorst et al., 2013).

That discontent rarely translates into abstention alone. Rosanvallon (2008) argues that endemic distrust births ‘counter-democratic’ practices, watchdog activism, investigative journalism, online shaming, which keep elected elites under permanent scrutiny. Cammaerts et al. (2014) show that such practices have grown fastest among Europeans aged 16-24. In Germany, climate strikes, rent-cap campaigns and anti-racist street protests exemplify vigilant citizenship, not withdrawal. These findings matter because they suggest a pool of politicised but institutionally homeless youth, exactly the reservoir into which Die Linke has tapped.

Die Linke’s evolving niche

Die Linke’s trajectory offers an instructive lens on how parties can convert systemic malaise into organisational growth. Born from the PDS/WASG merger in 2007, the party initially relied on eastern pensioners nostalgic for GDR social security (Hildebrandt, 2012). Electoral stagnation after 2013 prompted a strategic rebranding: a sharper anti-neoliberal profile, feminist and climate-justice messaging, and a deliberate youth outreach via linksjugend [’solid]. The effort seemed stalled until three exogenous shocks shifted the political opportunity structure. First, the October 2024 security package, tightening asylum rules while expanding police powers, triggered youth-led demonstrations in which Die Linke alone opposed the bill (Al Jazeera, 2025). Second, the traffic-light coalition’s collapse in November 2024 reinforced perceptions of self-interested party elites. Third, the January 2025 migration vote, when CDU/CSU and FDP sided with the AfD, shattered the symbolic ‘firewall’ (Brandmauer) against the far right (Left Voice, 2025). Exit-poll analysis shows that 41% of new Linke voters cited that vote as decisive (ARD/Infratest, 2025).

Organisationally, Die Linke lowered the cost of entry by slashing dues for under-27s to €2 per month and introducing a ‘digital onboarding’ kit. Reichinnek’s TikTok clips (‘politics in 90 seconds’) reached 12 million views within the election week (DW, 2025). These innovations align with Lüdecke et al.’s (2022) observation that young members prioritise selective incentives, voice, recognition, peer community, over traditional career motives.

Digital public spheres and identity alignment

Scholars of digital politics caution that online repertoires can fragment publics and accelerate ideological polarisation (Loader et al., 2014). Yet for marginalised cohorts they also provide low-threshold gateways into policy debates. More than half of German Gen Z report that social media is their primary source of political news (IU, 2024). DW's (2024) youth survey found that only 8% believe parties 'listen', but 46% say TikTok makes politics 'easier to understand'. Die Linke's media team exploited this terrain, featuring activists from climate justice, migrant-solidarity and queer collectives in livestream Q&As. This strategy resonates with Wright's (2010) 'real-utopian' thesis: movements gain traction when they combine systemic critique with tangible experiments, e.g., rent-freeze referenda or participatory budgets. By showcasing local successes (Berlin Kiez-fonds, Leipzig tenant councils) the party translates abstract anti-capitalism into graspable reforms, reinforcing what Mielke (2011) calls 'pragmatic radicalism'.

Identity politics adds another layer. Kaya's (2001) ethnography of Turkish-German hip-hopers highlighted the search for political 'home' among racialised youth excluded from Volksparteien. Recent fieldwork echoes the point: migrant-background members describe Die Linke as 'the first party that let me speak about racism without gaslighting' (Research Interview 4). Gender dynamics matter too: women under 25 delivered 35% of their vote to Die Linke, double the male share (Mitteregger, 2025). Scholars attribute that gap to the party's feminist leadership and its intersectional framing of abortion rights, care work and climate policy (Butzlaff, 2024).

Despite rich description, three empirical blind spots remain. First, longitudinal data on whether youth members remain active beyond the electoral cycle are scarce. Studies of Italian and French left parties suggest high churn rates (Fjellman & Sundström, 2021), but German evidence is missing. Second, regional disparities demand deeper analysis: why does Die Linke's youth surge appear stronger in Berlin-Brandenburg than in Bavaria? Third, the causal weight of ideological attraction versus situational protest ('anti-Merz effect') is yet to be disentangled. Addressing these gaps requires mixed-method designs that track individual trajectories and contextual factors, an aim this thesis pursues through semi-structured interviews triangulated with secondary literature.

Theoretical Framework

Youthful enthusiasm for Die Linke in the 2025 Bundestags-wahl is puzzling only if party politics is imagined to operate in a vacuum, detached from shifting norms of citizenship and from the everyday judgements citizens make about the legitimacy of democratic authority. To illuminate why tens of thousands of young Germans have been willing to pay dues, attend branch meetings and defend a radical left platform on TikTok, this study draws on four complementary bodies of theory: (1) Rosanvallon's notion of 'counter-democracy' (2008), (2) Norris's diagnosis of the 'democratic deficit' (2011), (3) Habermas's model of the 'public sphere' and communicative legitimacy (1989), and (4) Wright's vision of real utopias as feasible alternatives to capitalism (2010). Integrated into a single analytic schema, these perspectives help trace the pathway from institutional distrust to oppositional vigilance, from vigilance to participatory experimentation, and finally from experimentation to formal membership in a party that promises both critique and construction.

Why Multiple Lenses?

No single theory fully captures the contemporary mix of cynicism and activism that characterises German Gen Z. Rosanvallon explains how distrust can morph into watchdog engagement, but says little about why that distrust arises in the first place. That upstream causal space is mapped by Norris, for whom the democratic deficit denotes a widening gap between citizens' aspirations and perceived regime delivery. Habermas clarifies the communicative mechanisms through which those aspirations are formed, contested and rendered publicly visible; without such arenas, neither vigilance nor critique can achieve legitimacy. Finally, Wright reminds us that grievance alone rarely sustains organisational commitment; young activists are energised when they glimpse 'real utopias' – tangible, institutionalised experiments that prefigure a more egalitarian order. Together the four frameworks trace a logic that begins with disappointed expectations, passes through critical oversight, and culminates in the search for credible transformative projects.

2.1 Critical Citizens and the Democratic Deficit (Norris)

Pippa Norris (2011) rejects the claim that apathy is killing Western democracy. Surveying five dozen countries, she finds that support for democratic ideals remains robust even where satisfaction with performance plummets. The resulting gap – what she labels the democratic deficit, is most pronounced among educated younger cohorts who hold especially demanding normative standards. Three drivers shape that gap: (a) demand-side effects (rising civic aspirations); (b) information effects (continuous media exposure to institutional failures); and (c) supply-side effects (government under-performance). When the deficit widens, citizens do not necessarily exit politics; many become what Norris earlier called critical citizens – participants who are loyal to democratic values but sceptical toward existing authorities (Norris, 1999/2011).

Recent German polling confirms these dynamics. Since 2015 and 2024 trust in the federal government among 18- to 30-year-olds fell from 36% to below 25% (Faus et al., 2019), while support for the abstract principle of democracy remained above 80%. Regional figures are starker: barely one-third of eastern German youth deem their political system responsive (Chevalier, 2019). These data suggest that dissatisfaction with outputs rather than ideals motivates the search for new political vehicles. In operational terms the present study codes such perceptions under DD_UNMET_EXPECTATION and DD_INSTITUTIONAL_DISCONNECT. Where those codes cluster in interview narratives we expect heightened receptivity to parties branding themselves as outsiders to the political establishment.

2.2 Counter-Democracy and Vigilant Citizenship (Rosanvallon)

If Norris pinpoints the legitimacy gap, Pierre Rosanvallon (2008) details the political technologies citizens deploy once disillusion sets in. Modern democracies, he argues, are sustained by two intertwined sovereignties: an electoral sovereignty exercised episodically at the ballot box and a critical sovereignty exercised continuously through oversight, prevention and judgement. These practices – petitions, investigative journalism, judicial activism, whistle-blowing, street protests – constitute ‘counter-democracy’: not democracy’s antithesis but its complement and corrective (Rosanvallon, 2008, p. 8).

Counter-democracy rests on the intuition that power must be watched, constrained and tested in between elections. Its three modalities align closely with youth repertoires observed in Germany since 2018:

1. Surveillance: Fridays for Future livestreams tracking parliamentary climate votes.
2. Prevention: social-media storms that derail controversial legislation (e.g., Article 13 of the EU Copyright Directive).
3. Judgement: public scoring of MPs’ behaviour, such as Abgeordnetenwatch ratings.

In Rosanvallon’s vocabulary these modalities are expressions of distrust that keep the promise of democracy alive by broadening popular control over representatives. For analytical purposes the study codes such behaviours as CD_VIGILANCE, CD_DISTRICT_TO_ACTION and CD_CRITICAL_OVERSIGHT. We hypothesise that respondents whose narratives are rich in these codes will report smoother transitions from street-level activism into Die Linke branch meetings, because the party deliberately positions itself as parliament’s internal watchdog.

2.3 The Public Sphere and Communicative Power (Habermas)

While Rosanvallon locates oversight in a diffuse ‘society of distrust’, Jürgen Habermas grounds democratic legitimacy in communicative power generated through public deliberation (Habermas, 1989; 1996). For a decision to be binding, it must be justifiable to all who are affected under conditions of reason-giving and equality. The public sphere is the network of arenas, cafés, newspapers, social media, party conventions, where such justification struggles unfold.

Three Habermasian insights guide our analysis. First, legitimacy deficits can be healed or deepened depending on whether publics perceive institutions as receptive interlocutors (Flynn, 2009). Second, digital platforms expand discursive reach but risk fragmentation; communicative power emerges only when peripheral voices can penetrate formal decision tracks (Loader et al., 2014). Third, parties remain crucial bridges; they translate informal opinions into binding will-formation.

Die Linke’s youth strategy exploits precisely this bridging function. By livestreaming caucus meetings, crowdsourcing amendments to position papers and hosting Discord debates, the party invites young activists to see their input reflected in parliamentary speeches. Interview segments referencing such experiences are coded ‘PS_INCLUSIVITY’ and ‘PS_RESPONSIVENES’. We expect that feelings of being heard mediate the leap from generalised counter-democracy to durable partisan commitment.

2.4 Real Utopias and Transformative Vision (Wright)

Disillusion and vigilance alone cannot explain why sceptical youth join a single, institutional party. Erik Olin Wright’s (2010) theory of ‘real utopias’ supplies the missing motivational ingredient. Real utopias are not blue-skies fantasies but next-step institutions that embody radical values within feasible design constraints. They function as moral magnets: demonstrating that another world is possible here and now and thereby transforming critique into hope. Worker cooperatives, participatory budgets and unconditional basic-income pilots are Wright’s canonical examples.

Die Linke’s program is studded with such proposals: 30-hour work weeks, municipalisation of housing, citizens’ assemblies on climate, rent-freeze referenda. Party leaders frame these as laboratories rather than distant promises, often citing the Berlin Mietendeckel or Porto Alegre’s budgeting scheme. When interviewees describe these experiments as evidence that politics can still change things, their statements are coded ‘SPHERE_TRANSFORMATION’ and ‘PULL_PARTICIPATORY_DEMOCRACY’. The expectation is that real-utopian resonance predicts not only membership uptake but also retention, because it bridges the gap between values and practice (Wright, 2010; Noonan, 2011).

2.5 Integrative Explanatory Model

Bringing the four frameworks together yields a staged causal model (Table 2.1).

The model assumes sequential but overlapping logics. A legitimacy gap (Stage 1) is but not sufficient: it pushes youth away from mainstream parties. Counter-democratic repertoires (Stage 2) supply new skills and solidarities but remain episodic. Institutional vehicles become attractive only when they appear both listening (Stage 3) and doing (Stage 4). Die Linke's youth boom is hypothesised to be strongest where all four stages align in individual biographies.

Coding reliability is enhanced by clear definitions and example anchors. For instance, CD_VIGILANCE requires an act of monitoring or verification, not merely voicing critique.

Table 2.1 Each theoretical concept is translated into concrete interview prompts and code families:

Theoretical node	Key codes	Indicative interview prompt
Democratic deficit	DD_UNMET_EXPECTATIONS, DD_INSTITUTIONAL_DISCONNECT	'Which government failures pushed you to seek alternatives?'
Counter-democracy	CD_VIGILANCE, CD_DISTRUST_TO_ACTION	'How do you keep an eye on political actors between elections?'
Public sphere	PS_INCLUSIVITY, PS_RESPONSIVENESS	'Where do you discuss politics and feel heard?'
Real utopias	RU_CONCRETE_ALTERNATIVE,	'Which Die Linke proposals feel doable in the short term?'

2.6 Theoretical Boundaries and Critiques

Each framework carries tensions. Rosanvallon is accused of privileging negative politics, risking a slide into populist nihilism (Flinders, 2012). Habermas's rationalist deliberation has been faulted for ignoring power asymmetries and affective mobilisation (Norval, 2007). Norris is criticised for underestimating how inequalities shape who becomes a 'critical citizen' (Foa & Mounk, 2016). Wright is charged with vagueness about scaling micro-utopias to macro change (Noonan, 2011).

A multi-framework approach mitigates but does not erase such blind spots; empirical chapters will therefore test not only alignment but also friction between concepts and youth narratives.

2.7 Contribution to Youth Politics Scholarship

By nesting micro-level motivations within macro-level legitimacy dynamics, the framework bridges two literatures often kept apart: studies of youth civic repertoires (Loader et al., 2014; Weiss, 2020) and analyses of institutional decline (Faus et al., 2019). It reframes party membership not as an anachronism but as one stage in a broader counter-democratic cycle. Most importantly, the model is portable: it can be applied to explain youth engagement with other outsider parties, whether left (e.g., Podemos) or right (e.g., AfD), depending on how those parties combine critique, participation and utopian design.

Methodology

This chapter sets out the research design in sufficient detail to allow replication. It is organised in three parts. Section 3.1 describes the case and justifies its selection. Section 3.2 explains how the empirical material was generated, specifies all data sources, and introduces the Data Appendix. Section 3.3 outlines the analytic strategy, including the operationalisation of key theoretical concepts, the coding protocol, and measures taken to ensure rigour and ethical integrity.

3.1 Case description

The study investigates the surge in youth membership of Die Linke between January 2023 and February 2025, culminating in an additional 23 000 party members (Deutschlandfunk, 2025). Although Die Linke has long attracted protest voters, a double-digit gain among 18- to 25-year-olds in both ballots and formal membership is historically unprecedented (Al Jazeera, 2025). The selected case therefore constitutes an *extreme-deviant* instance of youth mobilisation within a Western European democracy (Yin, 2018). Analysing one revelatory case is appropriate when the objective is causal-process tracing, that is, mapping the sequence of mechanisms linking macro-level events (e.g., the CDU–FDP–AfD migration vote), meso-level party strategies, and micro-level decisions by individual joiners (Blatter & Haverland, 2014).

The temporal boundaries of the case are set from September 2023 (the month Die Linke only had 4% on possible election in the 'Sonntagsfrage' (Infratest-Dimap, 2023)) to the week after the Bundestagswahl on 23 Februar 2025. The spatial boundary is Germany, but regional variation (East/West; urban/rural) is treated as an explanatory dimension within the case. The unit of analysis is the individual party member aged 18–25 who formally joined during the bounded period.

3.2 Method of data collection

Primary data: semi-structured interviews

Qualitative scholars agree that semi-structured interviews balance comparability across cases with the flexibility to pursue unexpected insights (Kallio et al., 2016; Scribbr, 2023). Exceedingly, according to Babbie (2020), qualitative content analysis allows researchers to ‘classify, code, and interpret information systematically,’ making it highly suitable for exploring perceptions of trust, legitimacy, and political behavior.

An interview guide (Appendix: Interview guide) was constructed around the three sub-questions and the four theoretical pillars introduced in Chapter 4. Open prompts invited respondents to narrate their perceptions of government trustworthiness and legitimacy, their personal ‘trigger events’ that moved them from dissatisfaction to mobilisation, and their assessment of Die Linke’s message, organisational culture, and participatory opportunities. The guide also contained probes for each deductive code, for example, ‘Have there been moments or issues where you felt particularly dissatisfied with the government or mainstream politics’ DD_UNMET_EXPECTATIONS.

Sampling

A purposive, maximum-variation strategy (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013) identified potential participants through (the national youth wing linksjugend[‘solid], local constituency offices in Berlin, Leipzig, Freiburg, and Rostock, and a snowball request appended to each interview. Inclusion criteria required that participants were German residents aged 18–25, joined Die Linke between 1 September 2023 and 23 February 2025, and self-identified as politically active within the party (e.g., attending meetings, canvassing, or producing social-media content).

Recruitment and consent

Eight eligible persons responded to the invitation, in the end only six were able to participate and selected. The participants were selected without prioritising certain heterogeneity on gender, region, educational status, and or migration background. All participants received an information sheet and signed a GDPR-compliant consent form that covered audio-recording, anonymisation, and the right to withdraw (University of Twente Ethical Approval reference number: 250739).

Interviews

Interviews were conducted by the author between May and June 2025, lasting 30–45 minutes. Five took place via encrypted video-conferencing (Microsoft Teams) and one face-to-face in a quiet public space (café) chosen by interviewees. Field notes captured non-verbal cues, interruptions, and contextual details immediately after each session. All recordings were automatically transcribed by built in Microsoft Teams Meeting recording function and manually checked for

accuracy, spelling and privacy concerns. The transcripts were then anonymised, to ensure privacy and identifying characteristics such as the home location, universities, or employers were replaced with neutral descriptors, for instance, ‘University in Berlin; small town near Freiburg’.

Simultaneously, official documents, including Die Linke’s youth campaign materials, election manifestos, press releases, and media coverage, will be collected and analyzed using the same coding framework. These documents will be examined not only for their content but also for how they frame key themes like political trust, youth dissatisfaction, and activist engagement.

3.3 Method of data analysis

Analytic overview

The study applies *reflexive thematic analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022) in a hybrid deductive–inductive mode. Deductive codes were derived from the conceptual framework, while inductive coding allowed novel patterns to surface. The workflow followed Braun & Clarke’s six stages, operationalised as follows:

Table 3.1

Stage	Procedures
1 Familiarisation	Re-listen to audios; read transcripts twice; re-vise analytic memos
2 Generating initial codes	Apply deductive codebook, allow emergent labels
3 Searching for themes	Highlight codes into proto-themes (e.g., ‘(Brandmauer-) Firewall Breach as Moral Shock’)
4 Reviewing themes	Test themes against coded extracts and full data set
5 Defining and naming	Produce thematic narratives → link to sub-questions
6 Producing report	Integrate quotes, literature, and interpretation

Operationalisation of key concepts

Table 3.2 translates each theoretical building block into observable indicators and codes.

Concept (Theory)	Operational indicator	Code label
Democratic deficit (Norris)	Statements that elected bodies ignore youth priorities; references to ‘they never listen’, ‘broken promises’	DD_UNMET_EXPECTATIONS
	Assertions that institutions are opaque or captured by elites	DD_INSTITUTIONAL_DISCONNECT
Counter-democracy (Rosanvallon)	Self-description as a watchdog, whistleblower, protester; monitoring MPs on social media	CD_VIGILANCE
	Narratives where distrust turns into action (joining demos, signing petitions, party entry)	CD_DISTRUST_TO_ACTION
Public sphere (Habermas)	Accounts of inclusive deliberation within Die Linke channels; feeling ‘heard’ in Discord or plenaries	PS_INCLUSIVITY
	Perceived responsiveness of party officials to youth proposals	PS_RESPONSIVENESS
Real utopias (Wright)	Attraction to concrete transformational policies (rent cap, climate jobs)	RU_CONCRETE_ALTERNATIVE
	Participation in pilot projects (co-ops, participatory budgeting)	RU_INTERSTITIAL_EXPERIMENT

Coding implementation

All six transcripts and literature documents were coded by the created coding scheme. A start list of deductive codes (Phase 1 output) was imported. During open coding additional inductive codes emerged (e.g., EVENT_FIREWALL_BREACH). Memo-links documented analytic decisions, while code-co-occurrence tables illuminated relationships (e.g., CD_VIGILANCE frequently overlapped with PARTY_GRASSROOTS, suggesting that bottom-up structures channel vigilance).

Ethical considerations

The research complied with the University of Twente's Code of Ethics and the GDPR (University of Twente, 2022). Therefore, participation was voluntary, no incentives were offered. Given the political sensitivity, particular care was taken to ensure confidentiality. Pseudonyms disguise identities, and geographically specific examples were generalised. Participants were orally informed and asked for their permission to be audio recorded and their voluntary willingness to consent was recorded as well. The recordings were only saved in the author's University Microsoft-Teams folder, accessible by the researcher only, to protect their safety. After transcribing and anonymising, the raw material was deleted immediately. Only the anonymized data was made available for the public. To avoid potential other ethical conflicts or issues, quotes used in the research were lightly edited for filler words without altering its meaning.

To join a left-wing party is subjectively connected to the individual's environment and experiences. Executing this research, why young people joined the party in latest history, may come across deeper feelings of individuals concerning the past of German fascism intertwining the newly created rise of populism triggered by the fear that history may repeat itself. These feelings are not objectives of my research but being aware of these may brighten my understanding for other underlying variables influencing the phenomena and allow me to give an outlook in the conclusion for further research and societal shifts.

Empirical Analysis

Introduction

This chapter presents a systematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with young members of Die Linke, using the coding scheme developed in Phase 1 and the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 4. The analysis is structured around the three sub-questions derived from the main research question, focusing on (1) perceptions of government legitimacy and trust, (2) triggers of political dissatisfaction and counter-democratic engagement, and (3) the appeal of Die Linke's messaging and participatory vision. The findings are interpreted in light of the theoretical concepts of democratic deficit (Norris, 2011), counter-democracy (Rosanvallon, 2008), the public sphere (Habermas, 1989), and real utopias (Wright, 2010).

4.1 Perceptions of Government Legitimacy and Trust

Across all six interviews, participants expressed a pronounced skepticism toward the trustworthiness and legitimacy of current governmental institutions. This skepticism was not rooted in a wholesale rejection of democracy, but rather in a sense of ‘aspiration inflation’ (Norris, 2011): high normative expectations for transparency, responsiveness, and fairness that are perceived as unmet by existing institutions.

For example, Interviewee 1 (Sociology student, Berlin) described their trust in government as ‘pretty much rock bottom,’ citing the disconnect between politicians’ lived realities and those of ordinary citizens: ‘These people earn more in a month than my parents earn in a year, and they’re supposed to represent us?’ (Interview 1). Similarly, Interviewee 2 (Political Science student, Berlin) noted, ‘The so-called democratic center is literally voting with fascists to make life harder for asylum seekers. And everyone was just... accepting it as normal politics’ (Interview 2).

This pattern was consistent even among participants who initially reported some baseline trust in German institutions compared to other countries. For instance, Interviewee 3 (23, joined November 2024) stated, ‘I do think that Germany is significantly more trustworthy in comparison [to the USA].’ However, this trust was quickly qualified by references to scandals (e.g., Cum-Ex) and a sense that politicians act ‘a bit self-servingly’ (Interview 3).

Institutional Disconnect and Democratic Deficit

The coding scheme’s DD_INSTITUTIONAL_DISCONNECT and DD_UNMET_EXPECTATIONS categories were saturated across interviews. Participants repeatedly described a gap between the ideals of democracy and the actual performance of institutions. This was especially evident in responses to questions about the collapse of the traffic light coalition and the passage of the security package in October 2024.

Interviewee 1 recounted, ‘We had this grand coalition that achieved basically nothing, then the Ampel coalition that spent more time fighting each other than actually governing. And now we’re heading into another election where the main choice seems to be between ineffective centrists and actual fascists.’ The sense of institutional failure further reinforced by personal experiences of economic injustice, as Interviewee 2 states: ‘I’m supposed to be one of the privileged ones with good job prospects ...(because of academic background) and I can even barely afford to live in the city where I study!’

Regional and Socioeconomic Variation

The interviews also revealed regional and socioeconomic nuances in perceptions of legitimacy. Participants from eastern Germany (e.g., Brandenburg, Saxony, Thuringia) described a more acute sense of historical and structural exclusion, often referencing the legacy of reunification and persistent economic disparities. Interviewee 6 (Environmental Science, TU Berlin, from Thuringia) noted, ‘Growing up in Thuringia, there wasn’t much activism or political discussion.

It's quite conservative there, and a lot of people my age were either apathetic or, honestly, some were getting drawn to the AfD.'

Socioeconomic background further shaped perceptions of legitimacy, with working-class participants emphasizing the disconnect between their lived experiences and the priorities of mainstream parties. The intersection of economic insecurity and institutional distrust was a recurring theme, supporting Norris's (2011) argument that democratic deficit is experienced most acutely by those facing structural disadvantages.

Table 1: Illustrative Codes for Perceptions of Legitimacy and Trust

Code	Example Quote	Interview
DD_UNMET_EXPECTATIONS	'Politicians act like it's all normal, like it's just how the economy works.'	1
DD_INSTITUTIONAL_DISCONNECT	'The government is completely disconnected from normal people's problems.'	1
TRUST_GOVERNMENT	'I do think that Germany is more trustworthy in comparison [to the USA].'	3
GEN_ECONOMIC_ANXIETY	'My rent was eating up almost my entire BAföG.'	1

4.2 Triggers of Political Dissatisfaction and Counter-Democratic Engagement

Event-Driven Politicization

The analysis identified several critical political events as catalysts for political dissatisfaction and subsequent engagement. The most frequently cited was the January 2025 migration vote, in which the CDU, FDP, and AfD voted together, breaching the so-called 'firewall' (Brandmauer) against the far right. Five of six interviewees referenced this event as a turning point, coded as **EVENT_FIREWALL_BREACH** and **EVENT_CATALYST**.

Interviewee 2 described the moment as 'the moment I realized we're not just dealing with incompetence anymore - we're dealing with active collaboration with fascists.' This event was not only a trigger for dissatisfaction but also a motivator for joining Die Linke: 'That's when I got really serious about my involvement with Die Linke. Because if we don't have a strong left opposition, who's going to stand up to this?' (Interview 2).

Other significant events included the October 2024 security package (**EVENT_SECURITY_PACKAGE**) and the collapse of the traffic light coalition (**EVENT_COALITION_COLLAPSE**). These were interpreted as evidence of mainstream parties' inability to address urgent social issues and maintain democratic stability.

From Distrust to Vigilant Citizenship

The interviews provided rich evidence for Rosanvallon's (2008) concept of counter-democracy. Participants described channeling their distrust into vigilant, participatory forms of engagement, coded as **CD_VIGILANCE** and **CD_DISTRUST_TO_ACTION**. For example, Interviewee 1 recounted attending protests against the security package and organizing flash mobs to draw attention to university funding cuts.

This vigilant citizenship was not limited to protest but extended to active participation within Die Linke's internal structures. Interviewee 2 noted, 'I started going to more meetings, joined a working group on housing policy, helped organize some demonstrations. I'm also active in linksjugend (solid') now, the youth organization.'

Selective Incentives and Peer Networks

The decision to join Die Linke was often framed in terms of selective incentives, opportunities for direct influence, recognition, and community.

This aligns with the **PULL_PARTICIPATORY_DEMOCRACY** and **INTERNAL_PARTICIPATION**-codes. Interviewee 1 described the party as a space where 'my opinions matter,' contrasting this with experiences in other parties where young people apparently have the feeling to be tokenised. Peer networks played a crucial role in facilitating engagement, with several participants noting that friends and roommates were instrumental in their decision to join. Interviewee 4 (Social Work, Hamburg) explained, 'I don't think I would have stayed engaged if I didn't have friends who were also interested in politics. We constantly share articles, debate issues, plan which demonstrations to attend together.'

Table 2: Triggers and Forms of Counter-Democratic Engagement

Code	Example Quote	Interview
EVENT_FIREWALL_BREACH	'That was the moment I realized... we're dealing with active collaboration.'	2
CD_VIGILANCE	'I was at the protests against it. Thousands of people on the streets...'	1
CD_DISTRUST_TO_ACTION	'I started going to more meetings, joined a working group on housing policy.'	2
PULL_PARTICIPATORY_DEMOCRACY	'We're actually involved in decision-making. My opinions matter.'	1
SOC_PEER_INFLUENCE	'My roommate and I have these long conversations about politics almost every night.'	4

4.3 The Appeal of Die Linke's Messaging and Participatory Vision

Authenticity, Inclusivity, and Policy Resonance

A central finding was the importance of authenticity and inclusivity in Die Linke's appeal to young members. The **PULL_AUTHENTICITY** and **PULL_YOUTH_REPRESENTATION** codes were saturated across interviews. Participants consistently contrasted Die Linke's communication style, especially on social media, with the perceived artificiality of mainstream parties.

Interviewee 2 described discovering Die Linke through Heidi Reichinnek's viral TikTok speech: 'It was how she said it, like she was genuinely angry, not just performing anger for political points.' This authenticity was reinforced by the party's willingness to address issues directly relevant to young people, such as housing, climate change, and social justice.

Inclusivity was another key theme, with participants highlighting the diversity of local party groups and the sense of belonging they experienced. Interviewee 4 noted, 'In my local group, we have people from all over refugees who've become naturalized citizens, second-generation immigrants, working-class people who can't afford rent increases, students like me ... it's this really broad coalition of people who feel left behind by mainstream politics.'

Participatory Structures and Real Utopias

Die Linke's participatory structures were frequently cited as a major draw, coded as **INTERNAL_HORIZONTAL** and **INTERNAL_VOICE**. Participants described the party as 'much more horizontal than I expected,' with real opportunities for new members to influence policy and campaign strategy.

The party's policy agenda was also seen as offering 'real utopias' (Wright, 2010), concrete, feasible alternatives to the status quo. Interviewee 6 (Environmental Science, TU Berlin) explained, 'It's not just about switching to renewable energy - it's about who controls that energy, who benefits from the transition, who pays the costs.' This intersectional approach, connecting climate, housing, and social justice, was seen as both visionary and practical.

Digital Mobilization and Communication

The role of digital media in facilitating engagement and amplifying youth voices was a recurring theme, coded as **PARTY_SOCIAL_MEDIA**. Participants described social media as their primary source of political information and a key tool for organizing and mobilizing. Interviewee 2 noted, ‘Heidi’s speech going viral wasn’t an accident. The party has been investing in social media, training members how to create content, how to explain complex political issues in accessible ways.’

This digital-first strategy was contrasted with the ‘press release and TV interview’ approach of mainstream parties, which was seen as out of touch with the communication habits of young people.

Table 3: Die Linke’s Appeal and Participatory Vision

Code	Example Quote	Interview
PULL_AUTHENTICITY	‘She talks like a real person. Most politicians sound like they’re reading from a script, but Heidi ... she swears sometimes, she gets emotional, she admits when she doesn’t know something.’	4
PULL_YOUTH_REPRESENTATION	‘We’re the only major party that’s willing to name the real problems and propose real solutions.’	1
INTERNAL_HORIZONTAL	‘Much more horizontal than I expected. I’d imagined political parties as these hierarchical organizations where new members just follow orders. But there’s real debate and discussion.’	6
PARTY_SOCIAL_MEDIA	‘It’s huge, probably the most important factor. That’s where I get most of my political information, where I connect with other young activists, where I share content about the issues I care about.’	2
RU_CONCRETE_ALTERNATIVE	‘These policies convert abstract anticapitalism into ‘realistic steps we can fight for now.’	6

The empirical analysis demonstrates that the surge in youth membership in Die Linke is best understood as the outcome of a dynamic interplay between structural dissatisfaction, event-driven politicization, and the party's ability to offer authentic, participatory, and inclusive alternatives. The findings support the theoretical proposition that declining trust in government and perceptions of democratic deficit do not lead to apathy, but rather to the search for new forms of engagement, what Rosanvallon (2008) terms 'counter-democracy.'

Critical political events, such as the firewall breach and the passage of the security package, serve as catalysts that transform latent dissatisfaction into active engagement. Die Linke's success lies in its ability to channel this energy through participatory structures, authentic communication, and a policy agenda that resonates with the lived experiences and aspirations of young people.

The analysis also highlights the importance of selective incentives, opportunities for direct influence, recognition, and community, in motivating party membership. Peer networks and digital mobilization play a crucial role in facilitating engagement and sustaining participation.

In sum, the empirical evidence suggests that the growth of youth membership in Die Linke is not simply a reaction to government failure, but a proactive search for meaningful participation, authentic representation, and transformative alternatives. This finding has important implications for understanding the evolving nature of youth political engagement in contemporary democracies.

Discussion

The empirical analysis of interviews with young Die Linke members reveals a nuanced and dynamic relationship between youth political disaffection, perceptions of government legitimacy, and the appeal of alternative party membership. Rather than confirming the narrative of youth apathy or disengagement, the findings demonstrate that declining trust in institutions and dissatisfaction with mainstream parties are actively channeled into new forms of political participation, most notably, through Die Linke. This discussion interprets these findings through the lens of the theoretical frameworks outlined earlier, particularly Norris's (2011) 'democratic deficit,' Rosanvallon's (2008) 'counter-democracy,' Habermas's (1989) public sphere, and Wright's (2010) 'real utopias.' The analysis also draws on secondary literature and the empirical section of the thesis draft to situate the results within broader debates on youth political engagement in Germany and Europe.

5.1 The Democratic Deficit

The interviews consistently highlight a profound sense of democratic deficit among young Germans. Participants articulate high normative expectations for transparency, responsiveness, and fairness in government, but perceive a persistent gap between these ideals and the actual performance of institutions (Norris, 2011). This gap is not experienced as a passive disappointment but as a source of active frustration and, ultimately, political mobilization.

The empirical data show that this deficit is experienced most acutely in relation to economic insecurity, housing precarity, and the perceived inability of mainstream parties to address urgent social issues.

As one participant put it, 'My generation is the first one in decades that's going to be worse off than our parents. I'm angry that we're facing a climate catastrophe while oil companies make billions. I'm angry that people are becoming homeless while luxury apartments sit empty. That anger... it's productive. It drives me to keep fighting' (Interview 1). This aligns with Norris's (2011) argument that the democratic deficit is not simply a matter of declining trust, but of unmet expectations that fuel demands for alternative forms of representation and participation.

The findings also confirm the importance of regional and socioeconomic variation in shaping perceptions of legitimacy. Participants from eastern Germany and working-class backgrounds report a more acute sense of exclusion and distrust, echoing Faus et al. (2019) and Gaiser & De Rijke (2010). These structural factors compound the legitimacy crisis and make the search for alternative political vehicles more urgent.

5.2 Counter-Democracy

Rosanvallon's (2008) concept of counter-democracy provides a powerful lens for interpreting the transformation of distrust into vigilant, participatory engagement. The interviews are replete with examples of 'watchdog' citizenship: participants describe attending protests, organizing flash mobs, and participating in internal party debates as ways of holding both government and party elites accountable. This is not a politics of withdrawal, but of critical oversight and continuous scrutiny.

The empirical evidence supports Rosanvallon's claim that distrust can be generative, producing new forms of democratic engagement outside traditional representative channels. As one participant explained, 'I started going to more meetings, joined a working group on housing policy, helped organize some demonstrations. I'm also active in linksjugend now... It's exhausting sometimes, I won't lie. But it feels necessary, you know?' (Interview 1). This vigilant engagement is not limited to protest but extends to active participation in party structures, where young members feel empowered to influence policy and strategy.

However, the findings also highlight the potential risks of counter-democracy. The perpetual suspicion and critical stance that characterize vigilant citizenship can, if not channeled constructively, slide into populist delegitimation or internal fragmentation. Some participants express concerns about the sustainability of this engagement and the risk of burnout or disillusionment if tangible results are not achieved. This echoes Rosanvallon's (2008) warning that counter-democracy must be balanced by opportunities for constructive participation and real influence.

5.3 The Public Sphere, Digital Mobilization, and Participatory Democracy

Habermas's (1989) model of the public sphere is highly relevant to understanding the communicative dynamics that underpin youth engagement with Die Linke. The interviews reveal that young members are drawn to the party not only for its policy positions but for its perceived openness, inclusivity, and responsiveness. Digital media play a central role in this process: participants describe discovering Die Linke through viral TikTok speeches, Instagram stories, and online forums that facilitate direct interaction with party leaders and activists.

This digital-first approach is contrasted with the 'press release and TV interview' model of mainstream parties, which is seen as out of touch with the communication habits of young people. As one participant noted, 'Heidi's speech going viral wasn't an accident. The party has been investing in social media, training members how to create content, how to explain complex political issues in accessible ways. And it's not just top-down messaging - they encourage all of us to be creating content, sharing our own stories' (Interview 2).

The findings support the argument that the public sphere has become increasingly pluralized and hybrid intertwining online and offline arenas, coexisting and reinforcing each other (Loader et al., 2014). Die Linke's success in mobilizing youth is therefore founded in the ability to create accessible, participatory spaces, inviting young people to feel heard and valued. This

communicative inclusivity reinforces political legitimacy at the micro-level and helps to bridge the gap between individual grievances and collective action (Habermas, 1989; Schmidt, 2010).

5.4 Real Utopias: Appealing Transformative Alternatives?

Wright's (2010) notion of "real utopias" is especially helpful in analysing Die Linke's policy agenda's substantive appeal. According to the interviews, young members are driven by a need for visible, feasible alternatives to the status quo rather than just protest or criticism. 'Realistic steps we can fight for today' are how Die Linke describes his plans to pilot basic income programs, create climate employment, and municipalise housing (as seen in Interview 6). This pragmatic idealism distinguishes Die Linke from both mainstream parties, which are perceived as offering only incremental change and from more radical groups, acting upon utopian ideas being impractical to realise. Translating abstract critiques of capitalism and neoliberalism into possible actionable policies is a key factor for the party's appeal to young members. As one participant put it fitting, 'It's not just about switching to renewable energy, ... ,it's about who controls that energy, who yields this power, who benefits from the transition and who pays the costs in the end' (Interview 6).

The findings also highlight the importance of participatory structures in sustaining engagement. Young members value the opportunity to contribute to policy development, campaign strategy, and organizational decision-making. This aligns with Wright's (2010) emphasis on 'interstitial' strategies, building non-capitalist enclaves within the existing system, as a way of making transformative change both imaginable and achievable.

Selective Incentives, Peer Networks, and the Dynamics of Membership

The analysis confirms the importance of selective incentives, opportunities for direct influence, recognition, and community, in motivating party membership (Lüdecke et al., 2022). Participants, often describe Die Linke as a space, where their opinions matter and where young people are actively involved in decision-making processes, contrasting to experiences in other parties, leaving youth section playing a symbolic role only.

Peer networks also play a crucial role in facilitating engagement and sustaining participation. Several participants expressed that friends, roommates, and activist circles (or environmental bubbles) were instrumental in their decision to join and remain active in the party. This finding is consistent with Weber (2017) and Gaiser & De Rijke (2010), emphasize the role of socialization and peer influence in shaping youth political behavior, also in the long term.

Additionally, the findings suggest, that the dynamics of membership are in a fluid and pragmatic rather than ideological status and young members are willing to experiment with different forms of engagement in their membership, and are open to switching affiliation, if their expectations are not met accordingly. This conditional loyalty poses both opportunities and challenges for Die Linke: while it allows the party to attract a diverse and dynamic membership, it also requires continuous innovation and responsiveness to sustain engagement over time.

The Limits and Challenges of Alternative Party Engagement

While the findings highlight the strengths of Die Linke's approach to youth engagement, they also point to several limitations and challenges. Firstly, the sustainability of youth membership remains uncertain. Some participants express concerns about the risk of co-optation, internal fragmentation, or the dilution of the party's radical vision as it grows and seeks broader appeal, even radicalisation is a big concern, which could lead to splintering of subgroups from the main party. This tension between maintaining ideological purity and achieving practical results is a recurring theme.

Moreover, the reliance on digital mobilization and horizontal structures, being effective in the short term, may pose challenges for organizational cohesion in a long-term strategy. As the party expands, it will need to balance the demands of inclusivity and participation within the need for effective leadership and decision-making processes.

To sum up, the findings suggest, as already stated, that the appeal of Die Linke is closely tied to the broader context of political crisis and legitimacy deficit in current times. The party's success in mobilizing youth is therefore partly a function of the failures of mainstream parties and the perceived urgency of the current moment. Whether this momentum can be sustained in the absence of such crises remains an open question.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the factors behind the dramatic surge in youth membership in Die Linke during the lead-up to Germany's 2025 Bundestagswahl, investigating how young people's perceptions of government legitimacy and institutional trust influenced their decision to join an alternative political party. Through systematic analysis of six semi-structured interviews with recent youth members, combined with a robust theoretical framework grounded in counter-democracy and democratic deficit theories, this study provides crucial insights into contemporary youth political engagement in Germany.

6.1 Answering the Research Questions

Main Research Question

To what extent do young people's perceptions of government legitimacy and institutional trust, as opposed to other motivational factors, explain their decision to join Die Linke in the lead-up to the 2025 Bundestagswahl?

The evidence demonstrates that perceptions of government legitimacy and institutional trust serve as primary catalysts for youth engagement with Die Linke, but they work in dynamic interaction with other factors rather than in isolation. The analysis reveals that declining trust in mainstream institutions creates the necessary conditions for political mobilization, but the decision to join Die Linke specifically is driven by the party's ability to offer authentic alternatives that address both the critique of existing institutions and the aspiration for meaningful participation.

Critical political events, particularly the January 2025 migration vote that breached the 'firewall' (Brandmauer) against far-right collaboration, served as immediate triggers that transformed latent dissatisfaction into active engagement. However, these events gained their mobilizing power precisely because they confirmed pre-existing perceptions of institutional failure and democratic deficit among young people.

Sub-Question 1: Counter-Democracy and Vigilant Citizenship

How do young Germans' experiences of democratic deficit manifest in counter-democratic practices, and to what extent does this vigilant citizenship orientation predispose them toward joining opposition parties like Die Linke?

The empirical analysis confirms Rosanvallon's (2008) counter-democracy framework: young Germans do not withdraw from politics when faced with institutional distrust, but instead channel their skepticism into vigilant, participatory forms of engagement. Participants consistently described themselves as "watchdogs" who actively monitor political developments and challenge perceived failures in governance.

This vigilant citizenship orientation strongly predisposes youth toward Die Linke because the party explicitly positions itself as a vehicle for counter-democratic oversight. Young members value the party's commitment to transparency, its willingness to challenge mainstream consensus, and its provision of institutional channels for critical oversight. The transformation from cynicism to vigilance represents a crucial pathway from democratic dissatisfaction to constructive political engagement.

Sub-Question 2: Democratic Deficit and Institutional Responsiveness

What specific manifestations of democratic deficit do young people identify in German governance, and how do these unmet expectations create selective incentives for alternative party membership?

Young Germans identify multiple manifestations of democratic deficit that create powerful selective incentives for joining Die Linke:

1. **Economic Insecurity and Housing Crisis:** The failure of mainstream parties to address youth-specific economic challenges, particularly housing affordability, creates strong push factors away from established politics.
2. **Climate Policy Inadequacy:** Perceived insufficient action on climate change, combined with the Greens' move toward the political center, leaves environmentally conscious youth seeking more radical alternatives.
3. **Democratic Process Failures:** Events like coalition instability and cross-party collaboration with the far-right reinforce perceptions that mainstream politics is fundamentally broken.
4. **Representation Gap:** Young people feel systematically excluded from meaningful political influence, creating demand for parties that offer genuine participatory opportunities.

These unmet expectations create selective incentives for Die Linke membership by making the party's offerings, direct influence, authentic representation, and systematic change, appear uniquely valuable compared to mainstream alternatives.

Sub-Question 3: Public Sphere Inclusion and Transformative Vision

How does Die Linke's approach to participatory democracy and public sphere engagement address young people's demands for authentic political representation compared to mainstream parties?

Die Linke's success stems from its ability to create accessible, inclusive public sphere opportunities that contrast sharply with mainstream parties' perceived exclusivity and formality. The party's digital-first communication strategy, horizontal organizational structures, and commitment to real-utopian policy alternatives resonate strongly with youth expectations for authentic political engagement.

Particularly significant is the party's integration of online and offline participation, allowing young people to engage through familiar digital channels while providing pathways to substantive influence on policy and strategy. This approach addresses Habermasian concerns about public sphere inclusivity while offering Wright's "real utopias", concrete, achievable alternatives to the status quo.

Together, these elements formed a **causal chain** from institutional distrust to party membership: democratic deficit → counter-democratic vigilance → participatory public spheres → real-utopian policy appeal → selective incentives and social mobilization.

6.2 Theoretical Contributions

This research advances understanding of youth political behavior in several important ways:

Counter-Democracy Theory

The findings support and extend Rosanvallon's framework by demonstrating how counter-democratic practices can be institutionalized within alternative parties rather than remaining purely oppositional. Die Linke succeeds by channeling vigilant citizenship into constructive political action. Rosanvallon's (2008) concept finds empirical grounding, showing how vigilant citizenship evolves into sustained party membership rather than mere episodic protest. This underscores that distrust can bolster, rather than erode, democratic legitimacy when institutionalized in participatory structures.

Democratic Deficit Theory

The study refines Norris's framework by showing how democratic deficits create not just dissatisfaction but specific selective incentives that alternative parties can exploit. The gap between democratic aspirations and institutional performance becomes a resource for political mobilization.

Public Sphere Theory:

The research demonstrates how digital technologies can revitalize public sphere functions when deployed strategically by inclusive political organizations. Die Linke's hybrid online/offline approach offers a model for democratic renewal.

Real Utopias Theory

The findings validate Wright's emphasis on feasible alternatives by showing how concrete policy proposals motivate sustained engagement more effectively than purely critical stances. Wright's (2010) theory is often treated as normative. Here, it is operationalized: young respondents cite specific Die Linke proposals (e.g., municipal housing initiatives) as motivating factors, demonstrating how visionary yet feasible policies can mobilize disenchanted citizens.

Beyond 'youth apathy'

While conventional wisdom views young Germans as disengaged from formal politics (Gaiser & De Rijke, 2010), this thesis reveals they remain deeply invested in democratic values. Apathetic abstention is replaced by strategic re-engagement through alternative party channels, complicating the exit-voice paradigm (Cammaerts et al., 2014).

By weaving these frameworks into a unified analytical model, the thesis fills a gap in our understanding of how institutional distrust shapes formal party affiliation among youth, a question previously addressed only in fragmented studies of protest movements, digital activism or electoral behavior.

Practical Implications

The findings carry concrete lessons for political practitioners, civil-society organizations and policymakers seeking to renew democratic legitimacy among younger cohorts:

1. **Institutional Responsiveness:** Governments and mainstream parties must prioritize tangible responses to youth-salient issues, especially housing, climate and social security, to narrow the democratic deficit. Short-term 'showcase' measures (e.g., token advisory councils) are insufficient; systemic reforms aligned with youth priorities are essential (Chevalier, 2019).
2. **Participatory Innovation:** Institutionalizing counter-democratic vigilance through digital-first public-sphere forums, such as live Q&As, participatory budgeting, or citizen audit panels, can harness critical oversight into constructive input, reinforcing legitimacy (Habermas, 1989; Rosanvallon, 2008). Political actors should co-create such platforms with youth to ensure authenticity and trust.
3. **Real-Utopian Pilots:** To mobilize idealism into enduring commitment, parties and governments can launch small-scale, high-visibility 'real utopia pilots, municipal energy co-ops, student-controlled rental cooperatives or guaranteed climate-job programs. Demonstrating feasibility builds efficacy, sustaining engagement beyond protest moments (Wright, 2010).

4. **Targeted Youth Outreach:** Political organizations must adapt recruitment strategies to emphasize selective incentives: direct policy influence, skill-building, and peer community. Sliding-scale dues, horizontal working-group structures and digital onboarding, as pioneered by Die Linke, offer replicable templates for broadening youth membership (Lüdecke et al., 2022).
5. **Bridging Regional Divides:** Tailored initiatives are needed to address distinct challenges in eastern and western Länder. In regions with lower institutional trust, targeted trust-building measures, mobile civic forums, hyper-local policy labs, can bridge the gap between lived experiences and political structures (Faus et al., 2019).

6.3 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. Firstly, the qualitative design and modest sample (six interviews) limit broad generalizability. Future research should employ mixed-methods, pairing large-scale surveys with qualitative interviews to test the prevalence of identified causal pathways across regions and social groups.

Secondly, the temporal focus on the 2025 election captures a moment of acute crisis (Ampel government resigns), meaning longitudinal studies may better assess whether youthful affiliation to Die Linke endures beyond crisis peaks or decreases in stabler times, or if even mainstream parties adapt to this phenomenon. Thirdly, while this study centred on urban, digitally-connected youth, rural and offline youth may follow different engagement trajectories, a comparative fieldwork would be needed to explore these variation and differences in research approach.

Finally, the rapidly evolving social-media ecosystem, AI and application developments, (containing dangers for authentic and secure information) calls for ongoing examination, how algorithmic influence affects participatory public spheres and party-(youth-)citizen relations (Loader et al., 2014).

Methodological Constraints

The qualitative approach, while valuable for uncovering motivations, cannot establish causal relationships or measure the relative importance of different factors quantitatively.

Future research should address these limitations through

Longitudinal Studies: Tracking youth members over time to assess the sustainability of engagement and identify factors that promote or hinder long-term commitment.

Comparative Analysis: Examining youth engagement across multiple parties and countries to identify universal versus context-specific patterns.

Quantitative Validation: Large-scale surveys to test and quantify the relationships identified through qualitative analysis.

Intersectional Research: Deeper examination of how gender, migration background, socioeconomic status, and regional factors shape political engagement patterns.

6.4 Final Reflections

This research demonstrates that the dramatic growth in youth membership in Die Linke represents neither a temporary political fad nor simple protest voting, but rather a rational response to perceived democratic failures and an active search for meaningful political alternatives. Young Germans are not politically apathetic; they are selectively engaged, choosing to invest their political energies in organizations that offer authentic participation opportunities and credible pathways to systemic change.

The implications extend beyond Germany's borders. Across established democracies, similar patterns of youth disillusionment with mainstream politics and attraction to alternative forms of engagement suggest that the dynamics identified here may have broader relevance. The challenge for democratic systems is to channel this energy constructively rather than allowing it to fragment into either apathy or extremism.

Die Linke's success in mobilizing young Germans demonstrates that institutional legitimacy can be rebuilt, but only through genuine responsiveness to citizen concerns and authentic commitment to participatory democracy. Whether this success can be sustained and scaled remains an open question, but the party's experience offers valuable lessons for democratic renewal in an age of declining institutional trust.

The future of democratic participation may well depend on political actors' ability to learn from Die Linke's approach: combining systematic critique of existing failures with concrete alternatives, digital innovation with face-to-face organizing, and principled opposition with constructive engagement. For young Germans seeking to shape their political future, Die Linke has provided a compelling example of how democratic institutions can be transformed from within through the active agency of engaged citizens.

This thesis concludes that understanding and addressing youth political engagement requires moving beyond simple narratives of apathy or radicalization to examine the complex interplay of institutional performance, political opportunity structures, and individual agency that shapes contemporary democratic participation. Only through such nuanced understanding can democratic societies hope to maintain their legitimacy and vitality in the face of evolving citizen expectations and changing political landscapes.

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