

Talking Exports: The Representation of Germany's Current Account in Newspaper Media

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the literature on the politics of growth models by analysing the role of German newspaper discourse in upholding and reproducing Germany's export-led growth model. Given the narrow circle of beneficiaries of the growth model, the role of discourse becomes important in legitimising it vis-à-vis broader society. The study employs both quantitative and qualitative text analysis methods to unpack this discourse.

Amongst advanced economies, Germany exemplifies the case of an export-led economy par excellence, with a staggering 75 per cent of its GDP growth between 1995 and 2015 being attributable to its export sector (Baccaro and Pontusson, 2022). This export exuberance, however, has not come without cost. Politically, it has made Germany the target of many criticisms from its trade partners and international organisations. Economically, it has entailed a below average performance. Amongst western European countries², only Italy and Greece recorded lower average GDP growth than Germany between 1995 and 2019 (DG ECFIN, 2022b).

With the circle of beneficiaries of the growth model essentially limited to Germany's exporting industry – which employs roughly a quarter of the German workforce (BMW, 2020) – the question arises as to why it has been successfully reproduced over the past couple of decades. After all, the stability of capitalism as a social order arguably “depends on its capacity to satisfy expectations of material improvement” (Baccaro et al., 2022, p. 1). This paper addresses this question by analysing the role of newspaper discourse in upholding and securing Germany's growth model. In so doing, it contributes to the emerging literature on the politics of growth models (Baccaro and Pontusson, 2019, 2022; Baccaro et al., 2022).

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In a recent publication, Baccaro et al. (2022) provide two necessary conditions for a growth model's successful reproduction. First, a growth model requires a dominant growth coalition³ – a coalition of sectoral interests cutting across classes and incorporating political parties – that ensures that the macroeconomic policy environment is geared towards its needs. Second, the members of the dominant growth coalition have to be able to muster electoral majorities so that the growth model endures over electoral cycles. Electoral success will, in part, depend on whether a growth coalition can win the battle of ideas by positing the interests of the coalition as the national interest and by imposing a hegemonic discourse about how the national economy functions, turning its requirements into what Gramsci calls 'common sense' (Amable and Palombarini, 2009; Amable, 2017, p. 46; Amable et al., 2019; Nölke, 2020; Baccaro and Pontusson, 2022). The role of discourse here is not limited to the transmission of ideas and information but includes convincing the public of their validity and legitimacy (Schmidt, 2008, 2010). The first contribution this paper makes to the existing literature is to provide a detailed account of the form and shape the public discourse around Germany's growth model takes, thereby providing an insight to the extent it is dominated by the growth coalition and how so.

The news media play an important role in public communication. Research shows the ability of reporting to not only influence people what to think about (McCombs and Shaw, 1978), but also how to think about it (Chong and Druckman, 2007). Several studies also highlight how the media can shape public opinion (Soroka, 2006; Soroka et al., 2015; Barnes and Hicks, 2018; Ferrara et al., 2021). Because of its critical public role, traditional liberal political economy ascribes to the media the role as a 'fourth estate': a sector serving the interest of the people and acting as a check on those in power (Hampton, 2009; Mullen and Klaehn, 2010; Felle, 2016;). The second contribution this article makes is to assess the extent to which the media adhere to this ascribed role, based on its reporting on Germany's growth model. This analysis furthermore reveals in how far the media, as an institution, can be considered to be a part of Germany's dominant growth coalition.

³ Dominant growth coalitions were referred to as dominant social blocs in previous publications.

For the analysis of the German newspaper discourse, this paper employs both quantitative and qualitative text analysis methods. In a first step, a structural topic model is used to study a text corpus consisting of 5825 articles from seven German national newspapers. This quantitative analysis delivers a descriptive overview of the topics that are discussed in conjunction with Germany's current account surplus and provides the basis for the qualitative analysis. The latter is based on an analysis of opinion pieces published in the same seven newspapers between 2010 and 2020. This period was chosen because of the heightened attention Germany's current account position received in this time due to the outbreak of the Eurozone crisis, the aftermath of the global financial crisis and the trade conflict with the Trump administration. The qualitative analysis consists of a qualitative content analysis as described in Kuckartz (2014).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The subsequent section provides an overview of the components and evolution of Germany's growth model. The second section discusses the reproduction of growth models and the role of discourse and the news media in this process. Section 3 introduces the data used for the analysis. The fourth section discusses the analysis and presents results. The final section concludes.

1. The manifestation of Germany's export-led growth model

This section provides an overview of the pillars of Germany's export-led growth model. It covers its historical evolution and discusses the institutional and political configuration that has allowed Germany to enforce and maintain a regime of undervaluation vis-à-vis other economies, the central element of Germany's growth model (Baccaro and Höpner, 2022; Höpner, 2019; Nölke, 2020). Chiefly, undervaluation is achieved through wage moderation coupled with a conservative fiscal and monetary policy and a fixed or inflexible exchange rate regime.

A strong export performance is a hallmark of the post-war German economy (Holtfrerich, 1991; Höpner and Spielau, 2018; Scharpf, 2018). After the balance-of-payments crisis in 1950/51, induced by the war in Korea, Germany's current account has almost always been in surplus. The decade of deficits following reunification were an anomaly, the swing back into surplus in 2002 a return to the old

normal. Yet, the over-reliance of the German economy on exports for growth qualitatively shifted in the 1990s (Baccaro and Benassi, 2017). Indeed, between 1995 and 2015 exports accounted for 75 per cent of German GDP growth (Baccaro and Pontusson, 2022). As argued by Baccaro and Höpner (2022), the decisive moment that put Germany on its current trajectory were the consecutive interest rate hikes by the Bundesbank between February 1991 and July 1992, which ended the short-lived reunification boom and were met with “familiar patterns of wage moderation and conservative fiscal policy” (p. 263) by domestic actors (see also Scharpf, 2018, p. 28). What followed were years of poor economic performance, resulting in Germany being labelled ‘the sick man of Europe’ (see e.g. The Economist, 2004) and paving the way for the controversial labour market and welfare reforms⁴ of the second red-green government under Gerhard Schröder. Economic indicators started to improve in the middle of the 2000s. By that time, the export sector had become large enough to act as the growth locomotive for the entire economy (Baccaro and Höpner, 2022).

Germany’s lasting economic malaise following reunification together with a changing international economic landscape after the fall of the Iron Curtain provides the background for understanding important changes to Germany’s system of industrial relations that have enabled Germany to pursue effective wage moderation in its export-oriented manufacturing industries (Hassel, 1999, 2014; Kinderman, 2005; Dustmann et al., 2014; Baccaro and Benassi, 2017). In the metal sector, for example, the 2004 Pforzheim agreement institutionalised the practice of allowing companies to introduce wage reductions during difficult economic times (Baccaro and Höpner, 2022). Before that, employer associations had already started offering memberships that did not bind members to collective bargaining agreements (‘OT-Mitgliedschaft’) (Baccaro and Benassi, 2017). The result of such reforms was not only a weakening of organised labour in Germany, but also an increased decentralisation of the bargaining process (Upchurch, 2000; Bosch et al., 2007; Baccaro and Höpner, 2022).

⁴ The so-called Hartz-Reformen were introduced between 2003 and 2005.

Wage moderation in Germany is, however, not confined to the manufacturing sector. Compared to industry, wage restraint was actually worse in the construction, public and low-end services sectors (Di Carlo, 2020; Di Carlo and Höpner, 2020). Low-end private services have been starkly affected by the decline of collective bargaining coverage in Germany and workers in this sector have been harder hit by the Schröder reforms.⁵ The pronounced wage restraint in the public sector, on the other hand, is a direct outcome of German fiscal conservatism. Germany's federal states and municipalities employ around 90 per cent of public workers and when faced with consolidation pressures under the first red-green government, reacted with implementing deep wage cuts (Baccaro and Höpner, 2022).

Taken together, these developments allowed Germany to ensure very competitive price developments especially during the first decade of the euro (Hancké, 2013; Johnston et al., 2014; Flassbeck and Lapavistas, 2015; Höpner and Lutter, 2018). Wage growth in Germany accelerated during the second decade of the currency union, bolstered by the introduction of a minimum wage in 2015 and the German economy operating close to full employment towards the end of the decade. The intra-sectoral wage drift, however, survived this period of faster wage growth as did the competitiveness gap vis-à-vis the euro area periphery (Di Carlo and Höpner, 2020; Baccaro and Höpner, 2022).

The previous paragraphs have already highlighted how Germany's fiscal federalism aids its growth regime. Imposing strict budgets on lower levels of government has restrained wage growth in the public sector. Public investment has likewise been affected by this institutional configuration, with the collapse in local government investment being responsible for the overall low public investment rate in Germany (Roth and Wolff, 2018; Bremer et al., 2022). Recent research has furthermore highlighted how German tax policy has favoured the interests of the exporting industry (Rademacher, 2022) at the cost of the domestic economy (Haffert and Mertens, 2021).

Lastly, it is also important to consider how Germany's growth model interacts with monetary policy and the contemporaneous exchange rate regime. With the adoption of the euro in 1999, monetary

⁵ See also Günther and Höpner (2022) for how the German export industry uses its powers to undermine the widespread adoption of collective bargaining agreements in other sectors.

policy moved from the Bundesbank, which, historically, has been known to keep a keen eye on a competitive exchange rate (Holtfrerich, 1998; Höpner and Spielau, 2015; Höpner, 2019) and was in favour of a conservative fiscal stance (Rademacher, 2021), to the ECB. Several studies have argued that Germany managed to take advantage of the ECB's single monetary policy to boost its export sector by increasing its price and non-price competitiveness (Hancké, 2013; Johnston et al., 2014; Johnston and Regan, 2016; Vermeiren, 2017; Höpner and Lutter, 2018). The introduction of the common currency furthermore abolished any competitive realignment threats for Germany from countries within the currency union and has likewise shielded Germany from appreciation pressures, particularly after the GFC. Baccaro and Höpner (2022) therefore see the single currency as the most likely factor in allowing and sustaining Germany's pronounced export-led model.

The above exposition of the historical evolution and institutional underpinnings of Germany's growth model raises the question of intentionality. To what extent does it make sense to see Germany's growth regime as the outcome of conscious mercantilist planning? It can certainly be argued that some of the developments outlined above had not the strength and material interest of the export industry as their primary concern. The welfare reforms of the second Schröder government, for example, were foremost concerned with lowering Germany's high unemployment at the time (Scharpf, 2018). Similarly, the decision to enter a monetary union was not mainly driven by thinking around the potential benefits this would entail for the export industry, but was the price Germany was willing to pay for reunification (Mody, 2018). However, as Baccaro and Höpner (2022) argue, developments in Germany's political economy after 2005 should be viewed as intentionally geared towards supporting and sustaining the growth model. Germany's response to the euro crisis, for example, can be seen in this light (Johnston and Regan, 2018).

2. Sustainability of growth models: growth coalitions and public discourse

Baccaro et al. (2022) centre their research agenda on growth models, because they see "the legitimacy of democratic capitalism [in its] ability to produce (and widely diffuse) economic growth" and its stability in "its capacity to satisfy expectations of material improvement" (p. 1). Apart from its

flourishing export sector, however, Germany's overall economic performance since the 1990s has been mixed. The country successfully reduced its unemployment rate from a high of 10.5 per cent in 2005 to 3.2 per cent in 2018 (DG ECFIN, 2022a). But this was achieved at the cost of creating a large dualized labour market. While 7.3 million jobs were added to the German economy between 2003 and 2018, total hours worked hardly increased (Burda and Seele, 2020). Low wage employment grew by about 60 per cent between the mid-1990s and 2018, resulting in more than 20 per cent of the German workforce being employed in low wage jobs (Grabka and Göbler, 2020). At the same time, wage inequality increased noticeably in the early 2000s and has remained elevated since (Bach et al., 2021). Likewise, the at-risk-of-poverty rate increased by more than five percentage points between 1995 and 2018 (Goebel and Krause, 2021). GDP growth, at an average of 1.4 per cent per year between 1995 and 2019, was anemic. Compared to other west European countries⁶, only Italy and Greece recorded worse growth performances (DG ECFIN, 2022b). Public investment has been low, resulting in the erosion and under-provision of infrastructure and public goods (Bardt et al., 2019).

In light of this lacklustre overall performance, how has Germany managed to reproduce its growth model over the years? Baccaro et al. (2022) put forward two necessary conditions for a growth model's successful reproduction. First, every growth model relies on a dominant growth coalition. These coalitions bring together sectoral interests that cut across classes and political parties and ensure that an appropriate macroeconomic policy environment is in place for the growth model. At the core of Germany's growth coalition sits the export-oriented manufacturing sector, flanked politically by the two major political parties CDU/CSU (centre-right) and SPD (centre-left) (Baccaro and Pontusson, 2019; Baccaro and Höpner, 2022), a constellation of forces that already supported undervaluation during the Bretton Woods years (Höpner, 2019). Olaf Scholz's statement in spring 2018 during his early days as finance minister that a German finance minister is first and foremost a German finance minister (i.e. independent of party political background), illustrates how strong the political support for the growth

⁶ Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom

model is (see for example Die Welt, 2018). Corroborating this view, Hübscher and Sattler (2022) find, for example, that for countries exhibiting a pronounced growth model, the growth model better explains a government's fiscal stance than party ideology, voter preference or other economic indicators. Lately, however, the German political landscape has been shifting; and at least since the surge of the Greens it is no longer solely dominated by CDU/CSU and SPD. The last time the Greens were in government (1998 – 2005 under SPD Chancellor Schröder) they enacted sweeping liberalisations of the labour market and the welfare state, which aided the radicalisation of Germany's growth model. It remains to be seen how the Greens will position themselves with respect to the growth coalition and the growth model this time around. Interestingly, the German banking system – long seen as a key ingredient for the success of the German economic model (Hall and Soskice, 2001; Höpner, 2019) – has seen its importance for and power over the growth coalition wane. As Braun and Deeg (2020) argue, this is because the healthy profits of manufacturing firms have allowed them to become increasingly independent of their former 'Hausbanken'.

The second condition for reproduction suggested by Baccaro et al. (2022) is that the growth coalition is capable of garnering electoral majorities in order to ensure the growth model's endurance over the electoral cycle. One ingredient for electoral success that has been hypothesised in the literature is that the growth coalition can dominate the public discourse, thereby positing its interests as the national interest and ensuring that their view of how the economy works is perceived as what Gramsci calls 'common sense' (Forgacs, 2000, p. 421; Baccaro et al., 2022; Baccaro and Pontusson, 2022). Nölke (2020) similarly argues that a reason for the perpetuation of Germany's growth model is that it is shielded by an ideology which convinces people of its usefulness;⁷ and Höpner (2019) highlights how undervaluation already had to be normatively and publicly justified under Bretton Woods. More generally, Bourdieu contends that politics involves the struggle "“for the power to impose the legitimate vision of the social world”" (Bourdieu as cited in Amable and Palombarini, 2009, p. 130). Discourse matters here because it goes beyond the mere spreading of information and ideas. It also

⁷ Nölke (2020) calls this ideology 'exportism'.

convinces the public of their validity and necessity (Schmidt, 2008, 2010). It is thus reasonable to assume that discourse gains in importance the smaller the circle of beneficiaries of the growth model becomes. Likewise, it is plausible to argue that it is particularly effective in achieving its goals when the topic of concern is complex and difficult to understand (Barnes and Hicks, 2018), features that the economics of trade and the current account exhibit (Hainmueller and Hiscox, 2006 and the literature cited in their footnote 10; Rho and Tomz, 2017; Stantcheva, 2022).

Recent empirical studies support this reasoning. Ferrara et al. (2021), for example, find that public attitudes towards policies sustaining Germany's current account surplus are shaped by how it is talked about in the public sphere. Baccaro and Neimanns (2022) report that a country's reliance on export-led growth moderates individual-level wage dissatisfaction. Crucially, this effect extends to individuals not employed in the exposed sector, suggesting that the export sector's interests do indeed hold wider sway in the economy. Finally, Polyak (2022) documents how public statements about Germany's current account surplus systematically downplay or disregard the costs associated with it.

The reason this paper focuses on the news media in its analysis is twofold. First, the media plays an important role in connecting elites with the public. Few people have direct access to politicians or policymakers. The latter thus rely on the media to transmit their views and ideas. That media reporting can influence and shape the public's attitude has been highlighted by several studies (Soroka, 2006; Soroka et al., 2015; Barnes and Hicks, 2018; Ferrara et al., 2021). A study by Kayser and Leininger (2015) even suggests that public perception of the economy is influenced more strongly by media reporting about the economy than the actual state of the economy. Likewise, the role of the media as an agenda setter has long been recognised (McCombs and Shaw, 1978). The study of framing effects furthermore shows that the media not only influences what people think about, but how they think about it (Chong and Druckman, 2007). By analysing German newspaper discourse, this paper recognises the importance of the news media in public communication. Rather than quantifying an effect on attitudes, opinion or preferences, however, this article extends and complements the existing literature by providing a detailed description of the discourse around Germany's growth model. This

provides an insight to the extent the growth coalition does dominate the public discourse and how it does so.

The second reason why this study focuses on the news media is institutional. Traditional liberal political economy views the media as the ‘fourth estate’: a sector independent of the state, acting in the interest of the people and as a check on those exercising power (Hampton, 2009; Petley, 2009; Mullen and Klaehn, 2010; Felle, 2016;). Here, the media act as “the self-correcting feedback mechanism of democracy” (Culpepper, 2021, p. 139). That the media can fall short of this role has been highlighted repeatedly (see e.g. Kumar, 2006; Starkman, 2009; Berry, 2013, 2016). Nevertheless, as Hampton (2009, p. 10) writes, this ideal of a fourth estate provides a good yardstick against which to measure media reporting. Analysing and dissecting how the media portrays Germany’s growth model provides a useful case study to assess the extent to which the media adheres to this – often self-ascribed – ideal and its relationship with the dominant growth coalition.

3. Data

The analysis in this paper is based on newspaper articles from the top German national dailies (in terms of circulation)⁸ Die Welt, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), Handelsblatt, Süddeutsche Zeitung (SZ) and taz, die tageszeitung (taz) as well as the two weeklies Der Spiegel and Die Zeit.⁹ All articles were sourced from LexisNexis. The keyword string used for the article search was *Deutsch* near/75 Leistungsbilanz* OR Handelsbilanz* OR Exportübersch**.¹⁰ The term *Deutsch** was included in order to exclude articles that are not concerned with Germany’s current account. The period covered runs from 1 January 1994 until 31 December 2020, resulting in a raw total of 6705 articles.

⁸ For data access and cost reasons, the German tabloid Bild could not be included in the sample.

⁹ Results for SZ also include their online portal sz.de, as do results for Der Spiegel (spiegel.de). Results for Die Welt include their Sunday edition Welt am Sonntag.

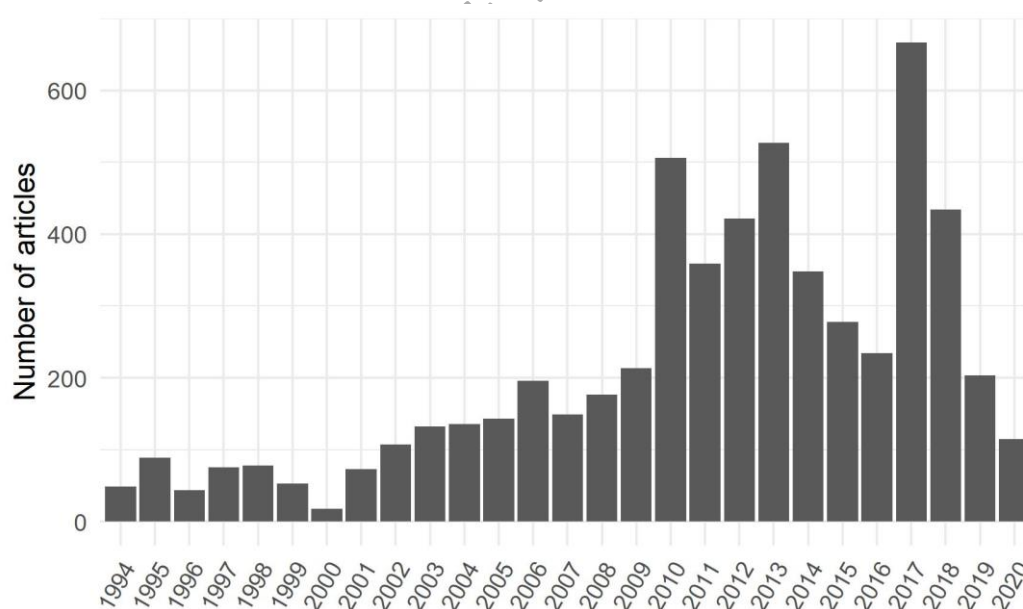
¹⁰ Table 3 in the appendix summarises the search protocol. The search and download of the articles were conducted on 11 March 2021. Since then, FAZ articles are no longer available through LexisNexis.

Articles with fewer than 75 words were discarded from the raw corpus, as were articles that manual inspection found to be unrelated to Germany's current account surplus.¹¹ Automated removal of duplicates was also performed. The 5825 articles left after this cleaning process form the base corpus for the quantitative analysis. The table below summarises the distribution of articles across newspapers and the start of the sampling period for each newspaper, while Figure 1 shows the distribution of articles over time.

Table 1: Number of articles per newspaper

Newspaper	Number of articles	Start of sampling period
SZ	1255	1994
FAZ	1251	2006
Handelsblatt	1112	2008
Die Welt	1057	1997
Der Spiegel	546	1999
taz	450	1994
Die Zeit	154	2008

Figure 1: Distribution of articles across years



¹¹ One of the reasons for this happening is that the German words 'Leistungsbilanz' and 'Handelsbilanz' do not exclusively relate to macroeconomic indicators but can also be used in other contexts. Given the size of the raw corpus, not all articles could be inspected manually.

With the exception of taz, all national dailies are represented in the sample with a more or less similar article count, even though the sampling period for FAZ and Handelsblatt starts considerably later than for the other three. This is likely due to both FAZ and Handelsblatt putting greater emphasis on business and economic reporting. Furthermore, as can be seen from Figure 1, Germany's current account became a more salient news topic in the 2010s, when the euro crisis broke out and Germany's trade conflict with the Trump administration took place. Indeed, shortening the sampling period to 2010-2020, 38 per cent of the original length, still leaves a sample of 4631 articles, or 69 per cent of the long sample.¹²

The qualitative analysis is based on opinion pieces published between 2010 to 2020. This period was chosen because it covers the Eurozone Crisis, the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis and the trade conflict with the Trump administration. The analysis focuses on opinion pieces given their influential role in public communication (Sommer and Maycroft, 2008; Coppock et al., 2018; Firmstone, 2019). Furthermore, since authors typically take a clear position in such pieces, they are particularly suitable for the present analysis.¹³ Table 4 in the appendix contains the keyword strings that were used to retrieve the opinion pieces from the base corpus and the total number of articles per newspaper. This first step gives a raw corpus of 811 articles. The subsequent rounds of coding were used to discard irrelevant articles from the corpus. The final corpus for the qualitative analysis consists of 272 articles. Table 2 provides an overview of the text corpus used for the qualitative analysis.

¹² This not a mere artefact of FAZ and Handelsblatt entering the sample at later stages. 63 per cent of SZ articles and 57 per cent of Die Welt articles also fall into the 2010-2020 period.

¹³ See for example Mercille (2014) who focuses on op-eds for his analysis of the austerity discourse in Ireland.

Table 2: Corpus of articles used for qualitative analysis

	Raw	Final
FAZ	213	76
Handelsblatt	271	96
Spiegel	10	6
SZ	129	26
taz	80	36
Welt	80	24
Zeit	28	8
Total	811	272

4. Analysis

5. Conclusion

Whether Germany will be able to continue on its path of export-led growth is uncertain. A global pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have been shifting the global economic and political order, necessarily also impacting on the German economy. In 2022, Germany had to record its first monthly trade deficit in over 30 years. Notwithstanding its endurance, the German growth model is, as Baccaro and Höpner (2022) note, highly fragile. Even before the conflicts and turbulences of the 2020s, doubts over the continuation of Germany's growth model had been raised. Amongst other factors, Nölke (2021) points to the diminishing influence of the German export industry over government policy and to a mood shift in industry favouring a more active fiscal policy.

This study's results resonate with Nölke's observation. While the growth model finds supporters in Die Welt and FAZ, the subject is contested across the wider media spectrum. The analysis suggests that the growth coalition is not able to dominate the public discourse. While discursive strategies to deflect criticisms from the current account surplus persisted throughout the decade, the outright defence of it has withered. The call to boost domestic demand to reduce the surplus raised across many outlets is further testament to this. The world might be witnessing what Hans Kundnani called for in 2014:

"Den Abschied vom Fetisch des Exports"¹⁴ (Kundnani, 2014)

¹⁴ "A farewell to the fetish of exports."

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Appendix

Table 3: Search protocol for retrieving newspaper articles from LexisNexis

Keyword string	Deutsch* near/75 Leistungsbilanz* OR Handelsbilanz* OR Exportübersch*
Time span	1.1.1994 - 31.12.2020
Location	Germany
Language	German
Sort:	oldest to newest
Publication name	SZ, sz.de, FAZ, Handelsblatt, Die Welt, WamS, taz, SPON, Spiegel, Die Zeit
Total articles	6705

Note: The search and download were conducted on 11 March 2021.

Table 4: Keywords used for selection of opinion pieces

Newspaper	Keywords	#
taz	MEINUNG	80
SZ	"Außenansicht", "Meinungsseite", "Themenkasten", "Feuilleton", "Forum", "Kommentar", "Samstagsessay"	129
Welt	Gastbeitrag, "WEGE", "Kommentar", "Gastkommentar", "Leitartikel", "FEUILLETON", "Kolumne", "Rückspiegel", "Essay", "ESSAY", "GASTBEITRAG"	80
Spiegel	"DEBATTE", "ZWEIFEL", "KOMMENTAR", "LEITARTIKEL"	10
FAZ	"GLOSSE", "LEITARTIKEL", "ORDNUNG", "VOLKSWIRT", "FEDERN", "STANDPUNKTE", "ANDEREN", "ESPRESSO", "Leitartikel", "Standpunkte", "Volkswirt", "Glosse", "FEUILLETON", "Betriebswirt", "Federn", "Eckenbrüller", "Anderen", "Espresso", "Thema", "LOUNGE"	213
Handelsblatt	"MEINUNG", "Meinung", "KOMMENTAR", "ESSAY", "GASTKOMMENTAR", "STIMMT", "Stimmt", "SPECIALS", "Wirtschaftswissenschaften", "SPEZIAL", "HOMO"	271
Zeit	"MEINUNG", "STANDPUNKT", "STÄRKE", "STRESS", "FORUM", "Exportfetisch", "FEUILLETON", "Marktpropheten", "wütend", "Exportieren", "schuld", "Zones", "zündet", "gespalten", "Exportüberschüsse", "Weltmeister", "FIRST", "Dummes"	28

Model selection

This section discusses why a topic model with 95 topics was chosen. Although setting the number of topics is important, there exists no one correct number of topics for any given text corpus. The structural topic model developed by Roberts et al. (2019) provides a range of model diagnostics. While scoring well on these is no guarantee for what Grimmer and Stewart (2013, p. 286) call a substantive fit, i.e. the amount of meaningful and interesting information conveyed by the model, these can still be used to narrow down the range of topics. Figure 2 depicts four common metrics for models with $K = \{25, 35, 45, 55, 65, 75, 85, 95, 110, 130, 155\}$. The held-out likelihood is a measure of how well

the model predicts words in a document. The lower bound metric refers to the optimization result of the objective function underlying the topic model (Lucas et al. 2015). In both cases, higher values indicate a better fit of the model to the data. The residual metric measures the overdispersion of the variance of the model and hence is another metric of model fit. Under a completely correctly specified model, this value would be equal to 1. Values above 1 indicate that more topics might be needed in order to reduce the variance. Taddy (2012) develops a test for overdispersion with the null specified as no overdispersion. All models reported here fail this test (they all report a p -value of zero). However, as noted in the main text, interest does not necessarily lie so much with statistical model fit and predictive power, but with substantive fit. Semantic coherence, finally, is meant to capture semantic quality of topics (do the topics make sense for human readers). It often decreases with the number of topics, since high scores of semantic coherence can be achieved by having a few topics which are dominated by common words (Chuang et al. 2014). For this reason, Roberts et al. (2019) propose to measure topic quality not only by semantic coherence, but also by word exclusivity. Figure 3 depicts mean semantic coherence and exclusivity for all models.

The figure suggests the models with $K = \{45, 65, 95\}$ to be good candidates. To decide on a model, the topics of these three models were inspected, as were the topics from the models with $K = \{35, 110\}$ as a robustness check. Based on the discursive usefulness of the topics, the model with $K = 95$ topics was chosen for the analysis.

Figure 2: Model diagnostics by number of topics

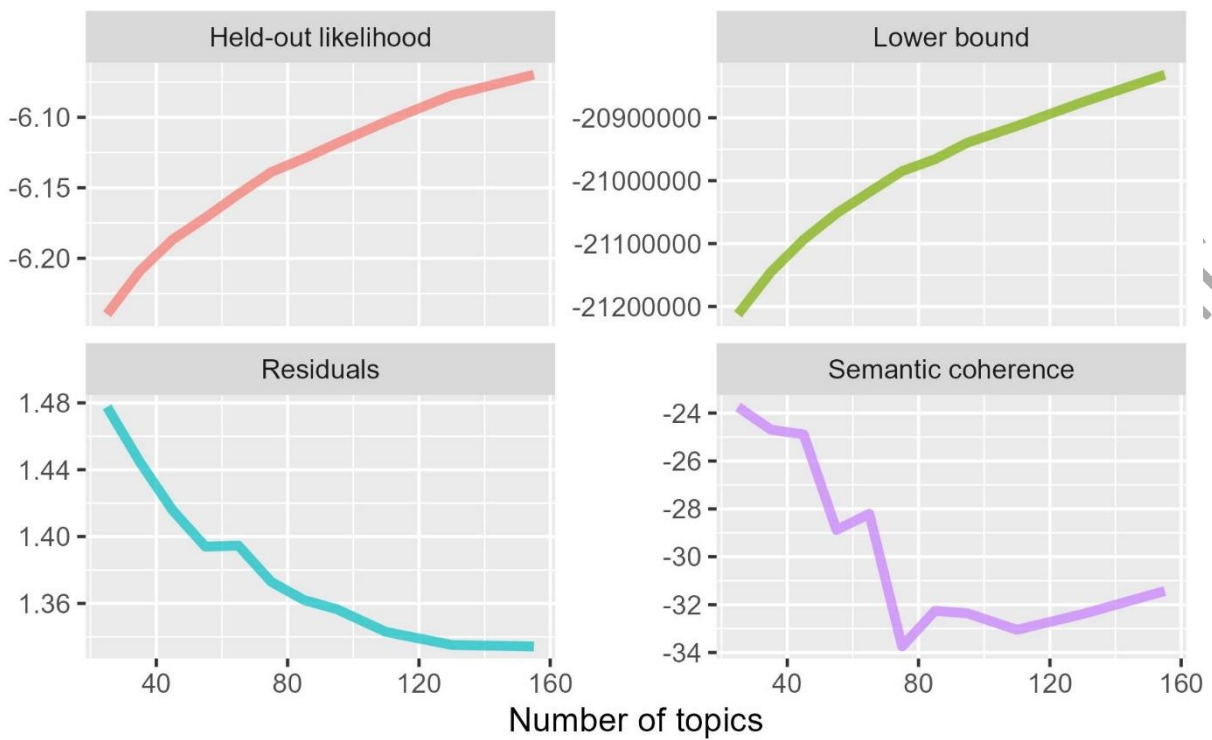


Figure 3: Average semantic coherence plotted against average exclusivity by number of topics

