

Unemployment and Elections in West Germany

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1. Introduction

In politico-economic research there are two major approaches to the study of the relationship between unemployment and politics. They differ in what they take to be the dependent and the independent variable. The first approach investigates the impact of political control of the economy and, specifically, of labor market policies on unemployment; the second approach attempts to clarify the effects of unemployment on political outcomes, i.e., mainly on voting or other indicators of political support or alienation. This chapter falls into the second category by presenting some findings on how voting outcomes in the ten German federal elections from 1953 to 1987 have been related to unemployment.

Studies of the impact of unemployment on political outcomes have a tradition dating back over fifty years. In terms of research design they have diversified considerably. Using a combination of the two dichotomies of aggregate- versus individual-level analysis and of cross-sectional versus longitudinal designs, most of the early investigations, in the context of the economic crises of the 1920s and 1930s, can be characterized as cross-sectional aggregate data studies (see, e.g., the pertinent chapters in Rice 1928, or the review of the literature in Rattinger 1980). The renaissance of studies of empirical political economy, stimulated by the seminal articles by Goodhart and Bhanjali (1970) and Kramer (1971), on the other hand, tended to focus on the longitudinal impact of unemployment on voting or “popularity functions,” usually at the highest level of aggregation, i.e., the national level (see Paldam 1981).

In addition, the spread of survey technology has also inspired attempts to ascertain the political effects of unemployment at the individual level. In this type of analysis, these effects have mainly been treated as being due either to the role of unemployment as a political issue (how bad is it, how salient, who is to blame, which political force is competent to solve the problem, etc.) or to personal experience with unemployment (see Schlozman and Verba 1979;

Krieger 1985). This diversification of approaches has not led to truly cumulative research with a solid theoretical integration of empirical findings from these various designs. Instead, empirical contradictions have been reported (see, e.g., Rattinger 1981), and (not quite convincing) claims to propose the “one and only” research strategy have been advanced (e.g., Kramer 1983).

This chapter does not claim to overcome the theoretical and empirical puzzles surrounding the quest for the political effects of unemployment. Instead, it goes back to the old-fashioned type of data mentioned first (i.e., cross-sectional aggregate data) in an attempt to see what they reveal about this relationship for the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) if—instead of a single cross-section—a series of such sets of data is analyzed. In this way, one of the major shortcomings of cross-sectional aggregate data analysis can be avoided, i.e., the lack of any temporal or dynamic dimension. This type of analysis has only now become possible for the FRG at a reasonably low level of aggregation, because appropriate data (see sec. 3) have only recently been compiled.

2. Theory

Before describing data, methods, and findings, a few words on what to expect are in order. To what extent one regards such considerations as “theory” is a matter of taste. For this author, the temptation to put quotation marks around the title of this section is almost irresistible. Even at the individual level I have some difficulty discerning any truly theoretical formulations linking unemployment (as an issue, a threat, or a personal experience) to political attitudes or behavior (probably the classical Downsian calculus of voting or some sociopsychological theorizing about the effects of “deprivation” come closest). But here we are dealing with territorial units that are described by their unemployment and their distributions of political preferences. Where is the pertinent theory?

Even if we ignore all dangers of cross-level theorizing, and proceed as if we could argue in the context of aggregate data analysis as we would for individuals, we can only start with a few general notions that are sometimes contradictory and in need of further conceptual distinctions. This latter necessity is obvious both for dependent and for independent variables. For the political outcome variables, we first have to distinguish between a political mobilization versus demobilization component and a partisan support component. The latter has to be subdivided, again, into a conventional versus an unconventional component. Theoretically, unemployment thus can be related to the *level of political involvement* (for the aggregate level this mainly means turnout, of course), to the *distribution of power* among the forces established

within the political system, and to the incidence of more fundamental *discontent and alienation* from the political system.

For our independent variable (i.e., unemployment) the necessary distinctions depend upon the level of analysis. With cross-sectional aggregate data, unemployment is indicative of at least two different things. First, it tells us something about the regional distribution of economic well-being and opportunities, and it reflects local economic structure. Second, the distributions of changes in unemployment mirror the local impact of the global business cycle. Both dimensions are not independent, but their interrelationship does not have to be uniform over time (and it is not, empirically).

The lack of predictive theory can be expressed very simply: We have little solid theoretical ground from which to infer which component of unemployment should be related to which dimension of the political outcome in which functional way. If we stick to the simple calculus of the rational voter's decision as developed by Downs (1957), and if we are willing to ignore problems of aggregation, we could derive some straightforward predictions based upon incumbency: high and/or rising unemployment should distract from the electoral support of incumbent parties. However, this basic logic of "bad times hurt the ins" tells us little about who would benefit, whether it should be the major opposition parties, radical fringe groups, or the "party of the nonvoters." Moreover, the simple incumbency-oriented logic has not remained unchallenged, because it ignores long-standing partisan identifications and the relation between the economic interests and the political affiliations of social groups or classes (see Hibbs 1977; Kiewiet 1983). Policy-oriented reasoning that takes such considerations into account would not predict, for example, that a left-wing government should be hurt by unemployment to the same extent as a right-wing government would be.

These arguments suffice to illustrate the difficulties that arise when familiar theorizing on the political impact of economic conditions is applied to the cross-sectional, aggregate-level linkage between unemployment and elections. Therefore, the rest of this chapter does not contain rigorous hypothesis testing. Instead, it aims at a reasonable description of the development, over time, of the cross-sectional relationship between some aspects of unemployment and electoral outcomes in the FRG, briefly interpreting these findings within the rudimentary conceptual and theoretical framework that has just been referred to.

3. Data and Research Design

Any attempt to relate West German election results to unemployment in a longitudinally comparable way at an aggregate level below the states (*Laender*)

faces two problems. First, the territorial units for both types of data are not the same; federal constituencies do not correspond to the regional structure of the labor administration. Second, neither of these two territorial units has remained constant over time; constituencies have been redistricted, and the labor administration has (with some time lag) attempted to keep up with the wave of territorial reforms that swept the FRG from the 1960s to the mid-1970s.

For these reasons a comprehensive aggregate data set for the 327 counties (*Kreise*) of the FRG in their current boundaries was constructed that, besides numerous other data, contains results of federal elections and unemployment rates. These two subsets from the comprehensive data set are the basis for most of the analyses in this chapter. Unfortunately, however, results of the 1987 federal election had not yet become available at the county level at the time of writing, so that for this most recent election, data for constituencies (*Wahlkreise*) had to be used. Thus, we have one data set containing election statistics for 1949–83 and annual September unemployment rates for 1951–86 for the 327 counties (due to missing data for Lower Saxony and Saarland, *N* is only 274 for 1949, and 321 for 1953), and a second data set containing the same data for 1983–87 for 248 constituencies. Table 1 reports average partisan vote shares, unemployment rates, and changes of unemployment rates over the preceding year for the ten federal elections during 1953–87. Note that unemployment and partisan percentages in this table are not identical with the official aggregate statistics, because they are computed as

TABLE 1. Mean Values of Party Vote Shares and of Unemployment, 1983–87

Year of Election	<i>N</i>	Turnout	CDU/ CSU	SPD	FDP	Green Party	All Other Parties	Unem- ployment Rate	Change in Un- employ- ment
1953	321	83.7	46.7	26.0	9.4	—	17.9	6.4	-0.7
1957	327	84.3	52.0	28.9	7.4	—	11.7	2.3	-0.1
1961	327	82.1	48.2	33.5	12.1	—	6.3	.5	-0.1
1965	327	81.9	50.7	36.3	9.4	—	3.6	1.2	0.3
1969	327	82.2	49.8	39.0	5.3	—	5.9	.5	-0.4
1972	327	87.3	48.5	43.1	7.5	—	1.0	1.0	0.2
1976	327	88.7	52.1	39.8	7.3	—	0.9	4.2	-0.6
1980	327	87.7	47.8	40.4	9.7	1.5	0.4	3.7	0.4
1983	327	88.2	51.8	35.7	6.8	5.2	0.5	8.2	2.5
1987	248	84.3	44.1	37.2	9.0	8.3	1.4	9.2	-0.4

Note: Unemployment rates are for September preceding the election. Change in unemployment is defined as the September unemployment rate preceding the election minus the rate one year earlier. Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent analyses are based on the numbers of cases indicated in the second column of this table.

averages across counties; also note that vote percentages are those cast for party lists (*Zweitstimmen*).

I suspect that bivariate correlations between turnout and party vote shares, on the one hand, and unemployment rates and their changes preceding elections, on the other hand, are spurious due to a common dependence of both unemployment and electoral outcomes on the social structure of countries, notably the shares of blue-collar or unskilled workers. As the data set does not yet contain data on the social structure of counties, its effect cannot be controlled directly. Failing to do so somehow, however, would not only produce spurious findings, but would also exaggerate the stability of associations between unemployment and election outcomes over time. Both party strength and the structural aspect of unemployment correlate considerably over time, indicating that parties tend to remain strong and unemployment tends to remain comparatively high where this has previously been the case, at least in the short- to medium-term perspective. In other words, cross-sectional unemployment rates and party votes shares for subsequent elections measure similar things, and thus should be related similarly.

Since data to control for the social structure of counties were not available, a simple alternative was pursued. First, turnout and party vote shares were regressed on the corresponding variables from the preceding election, and then residuals from these regressions were used as dependent variables in subsequent steps of the analysis. Provided that the impact of structural background variables on the regional distribution of voting patterns remains roughly the same in two subsequent elections, which can be reasonably assumed, these residuals should correlate only very little with such background variables. The strong temporal stability that described most percentages of party votes, in fact, is largely absent from these vote residuals.

Before investigating the impact of unemployment and of its change on the cross-sectional distribution of these vote residuals, two more problems of this research design have to be addressed. The first is whether controlling for structural correlates of party strength by analyzing residuals from autoregressive models really leads to similar results, as explicit controls of such variables would. Fortunately, the 1987 data set at the constituency level contains some variables of this sort in addition to unemployment and voting. Therefore, 1987 constituency election results were not only regressed on 1983 vote shares, but also (in separate zero-order models) on the number of people employed in mining and production per thousand inhabitants, on the percentage of wage-earners employed in the service sector, on the number of farms, of newly completed housing units, and of people moving to the constituency per thousand inhabitants, and, finally, on the overall percentage change in the number employed. These zero-order models explain between about 30 percent

(for turnout) and about 60 percent (for CDU/CSU and SPD) of the constituency variance in 1987 election outcomes. Their residuals were again saved and regressed on the unemployment rate and its change preceding the election. If one compares 1987 results for the two types of voting residuals, i.e., from autoregressive and from structural zero-order models, it is obvious that the correspondence between the two sets of findings in terms of direction and strength of associations is quite close, so that the approach adopted here can be assumed not to distort substantive findings.

The second problem concerns the difference in units of analysis for 1953–83 versus 1987. This difference is not only in the number of cases (327 versus 248), but, more important, in the size distributions of the units. Constituencies in 1987 ranged from 165,000 to 315,000 inhabitants, but counties (in their current boundaries) are as small as only 35,000 people, and as large as cities like Munich or Hamburg with upwards of a million. Therefore, for 1983 the county-level analysis was duplicated with constituency data in order to ascertain whether the use of constituency data for 1987 should be expected to lead to discontinuities against the 1953–83 findings. Comparing these two sets of 1983 results shows that there is no strong systematic deviation.

4. Results

The results obtained by regression party vote residuals from the autoregressive models on the county unemployment rate and the change of this rate preceding each election are presented in tables 2–4. Inspecting them for continuities and meaningful patterns of associations between unemployment and election outcomes, one feels confronted with the proverbial glass of water: Is it half full or half empty? Some relationships appear to be stable over time and to make sense in terms of the theoretical speculations presented earlier; others appear to be more random. In addressing these findings one by one, we will start with the effects of unemployment as they emerge from these data, later turning to changes in unemployment over time.

The series of coefficients linking unemployment rates to turnout (table 2) indicates a predominantly negative effect (seven out of ten coefficients). This might, to some extent, still reflect structural influences, e.g., the dimension of urbanization. However, what is puzzling is the occurrence of three quite strong positive coefficients (in 1957, 1976, and 1987), two of which are significantly different from zero, which forces us to conclude that a universally negative impact of unemployment on the regional distribution of turnout cannot be established with these data, even though a tendency to this effect is clearly visible.

Ambiguity is even stronger concerning the impact of unemployment on the combined vote shares of the parties of the governing coalition (table 3).

TABLE 2. Standardized Coefficients for Regressions of Turnout Residuals on Unemployment, 1953–87

Year	Unemployment Rate	Change in Unemployment Rate	Constant
1953	-.19**	-.05	0.83
1957	.11	.10	-0.34
1961	-.09	.20***	0.45*
1965	-.29	.35*	0.03
1969	-.11	.08	0.27*
1972	-.04	-.08	0.20
1976	.29***	-.01	-3.09***
1980	-.13*	.04	0.53
1983	-.48***	.38***	0.66**
1987	.33***	.13*	-0.65***

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Seven of these ten coefficients are positive, but only twice (1961 and 1972) can they really be said to be different from zero. On the other hand, for 1965, 1983, and 1987, we find moderate to strong negative coefficients. Considering the party composition of the government, one can say that no federal government with Social Democratic participation (1969–80) has been hurt electorally by unemployment. In view of the number of cases one would not want to invest too much confidence in this assertion, however.

Turning now to the three established parties of the FRG, we see that

TABLE 3. Standardized Coefficients for Regressions of Government Vote Residuals on Unemployment, 1953–87

Year	Unemployment Rate	Change in Unemployment Rate	Constant
1953	.09	.00	-0.92
1957	.06	.06	-0.34
1961	.37***	.10	-2.38***
1965	-.37*	.40*	0.53
1969	.07	.20**	0.14
1972	.43***	.03	-1.38***
1976	.05	.15*	-0.06
1980	.02	.03	-0.46
1983	-.15	.05	1.84
1987	-.32***	.18**	1.66***

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

TABLE 4. Standardized Coefficients for Regressions of Party Vote Residuals on Unemployment, 1953-87

Year	Unemployment Rate	Change in Unemployment Rate	Constant
CDU/CSU			
1953	.25***	-.11	-2.86***
1957	.18**	.14	-1.02*
1961	.43***	.14**	-2.44
1965	-.34*	.37*	0.50
1969	-.12***	.09	0.56**
1972	-.26***	-.16*	1.20***
1976	-.06	-.18**	0.04
1980	-.01	-.05	0.38
1983	-.13	.07	1.11
1987	-.17**	.01	0.73*
SPD			
1953	.06	.09	-0.21
1957	.28***	-.05	-0.83***
1961	-.10	.03	0.41
1965	.49**	-.47**	-0.92
1969	.08	.29***	0.36
1972	.50***	-.03	-1.90***
1976	-.03	.09	0.24
1980	.06	.04	-1.06
1983	.24**	-.06	-3.14***
1987	.49***	-.32***	-3.70***
FDP			
1953	-.16*	.12	0.79**
1957	-.35***	.02	1.41***
1961	.09	.02	-0.37
1965	-.17	.14	0.17
1969	-.10	-.02	0.11
1972	-.30***	.28***	0.37**
1976	-.15*	.18**	0.47**
1980	.12*	-.08	-0.38
1983	-.67***	.20*	2.26***
1987	-.01	.22***	0.12
Green Party			
1983	-.20*	.02	0.72**
1987	-.40***	.15**	1.00***

(continued)

TABLE 4—Continued

Year	Unemployment Rate	Change in Unemployment Rate	Constant
All Other Parties			
1953	.23***	-.15*	-1.83***
1957	-.01	-.18**	-0.07
1961	-.14*	.01	0.40*
1965	.04	-.28**	0.44**
1969	.00	-.15*	-0.20
1972	-.23**	.00	0.08***
1976	.03	.01	-0.01
1980	.06	-.15**	0.00
1983	.02	-.32***	0.13***
1987	-.57***	-.17***	0.75***

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

unemployment has affected the distribution of their electoral successes or disadvantages in a somewhat more consistent and stable fashion (table 4). The most coherent picture is obtained for the SPD; the cross-sectional deviations of this party's actual vote from expected vote shares have almost always been positively related to local unemployment. The two coefficients not conforming to this pattern (1961 and 1976) are very small; all five significant coefficients are positive.

For the Christian Democrats there is a reversal of this association between the 1950s and the period since the mid-1960s. In the first period we have a strong positive relation between unemployment and CDU/CSU vote shares above expectations; since the 1965 election this relationship is negative. Possible explanations may be found in two respects. First, in the 1950s, the CDU/CSU was the party identified most closely with the rapid economic recovery of the country (*Wirtschaftswunder*); its absorption of other right-wing parties, which were still quite strong in the first three federal elections, had plenty to do with this identification. So, excess support for the CDU/CSU in areas with still higher unemployment might have reflected the hope of catching up with the national downward trend of unemployment under this party's leadership. Second, unemployment in the 1950s was concentrated not only in urban-industrial areas, but also in rural areas where the CDU/CSU has had its strongholds from the beginning. With the concentration of the party system and the disappearance of unemployment as a pressing national problem, the relationship between unemployment and the electoral fortunes of the two major parties could develop into a lasting zero-sum constellation.

For the Free Democrats (FDP), high unemployment has almost con-

sistently meant vote shares below expectations. Only 1961 and 1980 have deviated from this pattern, the latter deviation being statistically significant. Since this party could never be considered to have a particular appeal for those social strata most affected by unemployment, this finding does not come as a surprise. For the residual vote shares of the new Green party and of all other parties combined, the relationship with local unemployment is also predominantly negative. This is very clearly so for the Greens, but for the remaining parties five coefficients are positive and five are negative. However, out of the five positive coefficients only the very first one (1953) has a more than negligible magnitude. We can thus summarize these findings by saying that only the Social Democrats' residual vote shares have covaried positively with local unemployment over the 1953–87 federal elections, whereas (apart from a few exceptions for the CDU/CSU up to the early 1960s) the opposite has been the case for all other parties.

Conceptually and empirically, levels of unemployment and their changes over time are not the same. Therefore, we should not necessarily expect findings on the electoral correlates of the changes in unemployment preceding elections to be identical with those just described for unemployment levels themselves. For turnout and the combined share of government parties, our data clearly show that these variables tend to be above expectations in areas where unemployment grows more strongly or falls less quickly than average. For turnout, three coefficients, and for the government parties only one coefficient, have a deviant sign; all of these are very small. For both variables, four positive coefficients are significantly different from zero. Thus, while turnout residuals usually covary negatively with unemployment levels, they are associated positively with changes of unemployment. While deviations of government vote shares from expectations did not have a uniform relationship with unemployment levels over time, they have almost consistently (but only mildly) covaried positively with changes in local unemployment. This finding, of course, can be set directly against the incumbency-oriented hypothesis: in repeated cross-sections for West German federal elections it is flatly contradicted.

At first sight, coefficients for the two major parties, the CDU/CSU and SPD, appear to vary randomly; positive signs balance negative ones, and coefficients in both directions are significantly different from zero. One could provide speculative case histories of individual elections, of course, drawing upon contemporary macroeconomic conditions and relevant issues to account for these variations. For lack of space this will not be attempted. Instead, I would suggest that these changes might have something to do with a party's participation in the government. Remembering what has just been said about government vote shares, it is striking that for the CDU/CSU, except in 1953, all coefficients are positive when this party was in power, and vice versa.

Similarly, for the SPD the same holds with the exception of 1953, 1961, and 1972, these deviant coefficients being very low in magnitude. That the major party of government coalitions cross-sectionally receives vote shares above expectations with unemployment rising more or falling less than average conforms to the results about government vote shares, but again contradicts hypotheses about anti-incumbent effects.

The same thing can be said about the FDP, which almost always has been a part of the government coalition. Eight out of ten coefficients are positive, four of them significantly different from zero, and the two negative ones (one in 1969, when the FDP was in the opposition) are very small. Together with the results for the two major parties, this clearly is consistent with the equations for residual government vote shares.

In terms of the relation between its vote shares and changes in unemployment, the Green party is unlike the other minor parties. Whereas positive coefficients are obtained for 1983 and 1987 for the Greens, this association for all the other parties is strictly negative. Seven out of ten coefficients are negative and significant; the other three are practically zero (1961, 1972, and 1976). Neither high levels nor increases in unemployment have ever been conducive to the electoral success of minor parties in the FRG in a cross-sectional perspective. In sum, given the research design used here, we cannot observe many of the political consequences that are often ascribed to changes in unemployment. There is little indication of a response pattern resembling apathy (which probably is too grand a term when dealing with fluctuations of turnout), there is no anti-incumbent effect (rather the opposite), and the more exotic parties at both extremes of the political spectrum do not benefit (rather the opposite again). They succeed above expectations where both unemployment levels and their changes are less of a problem than elsewhere. Whether the regional distribution of the successes of the Green party will establish a lasting exception to this pattern remains to be seen.

I now carry the cross-sectional analysis one step further. In politico-economic research, the idea has often been expressed that economic variables should not necessarily be expected to have uniform effects at all levels. Some important notions in this context are those of "negative voting," of "asymmetric response" to boom or recession, or of threshold levels that determine whether or not there will be any political effect (see, e.g., Bloom and Price 1975; Kernell 1977). A simple version of such considerations is that political responses could be different (i.e., as a rule stronger) in regions that are more affected by the problem if compared to regions that are less affected. Thus, each unemployment level in the data set was split into two variables, according to whether a county was below or above average, with one new variable being identical to the original variable in all above-average counties and zero elsewhere, and the second new variable being identical to the original variable

in all below-average counties and zero elsewhere. The same split at the mean was performed for changes in unemployment, and the whole analysis for tables 2–4 was rerun with these four new variables, instead of the two original unemployment variables.

Due to limitations of space, only the major results can be highlighted. Generally, this split of variables does not change the overall fit of models a great deal. However, there is a clear difference between the level of unemployment and changes in unemployment in the extent to which this split is useful and leads to the expected patterns. For unemployment levels, the expectation that political responses will be stronger at higher levels than at lower ones is borne out by the data almost without exception. For changes in unemployment, this is less clear; for more than half of these coefficients this split either leads to results that are inconclusive or contradict the expectation. This suggests that the assumption of uniformity of relationships is much more clearly contradicted for the first type of data than for the latter one. This attempt to carry the analysis a little further thus also demonstrates that some of the puzzles still present in the series of coefficients in tables 2–4 could possibly be resolved if the assumption of cross-sectional uniformity of the political impact of unemployment were given up in favor of a systematic search for structural sources of regional variations of this effect.

5. Conclusion: Problems for Further Research

This chapter has presented only a few findings on the political correlates of unemployment in the FRG that can be derived from this data base, and it has followed a simple research design. What can and should be the next steps? Obviously they can be separated into those that adhere to the cross-sectional design pursued here, and those that try to fully exploit the longitudinal component of these data. Following the logic of the first approach, it would appear useful to have a closer look at individual elections, especially if some of the parameters reported here appear odd. This could involve a more thorough breakdown of territorial units according to their unemployment experience along the lines briefly demonstrated at the end of the previous section. Repeated analyses of cross-sections could also be further differentiated according to relevant social characteristics of the territorial units; e.g., the political impact of unemployment in an urban-industrial context could be set against that in a rural environment. In this way, the shifting composition of unemployment in the FRG from the 1950s to the 1970s and 1980s could be taken into account.

The step from repeated cross-sections to a truly longitudinal approach could be taken in (at least) two ways. First, the coefficients linking unemployment to election outcomes computed here (or from more complex cross-sectional designs) can be regarded as time-series to be related to, e.g.,

incumbency, objective or perceived macroeconomic conditions, or changes in overall social structure. Some of the previously proposed interpretations correspond to such a logic of assuming that the changes of these coefficients over time can be systematically explained by third variables. In this way, the notion of an overall threshold level of unemployment at which political responses become visible could be empirically tested.

Second, and this is a possibility offered only by this data set, the data could be rearranged to allow pooled analyses across all elections and counties (for an introduction to the methodology see, e.g., Mundlak 1978; Sayers 1989), an approach that is rarely found in empirical politico-economic research (for an exception, see Pollard 1981). Moreover, the data could also be used for time-series studies for individual counties or for any meaningful aggregation of territorial units. In contrast to pooled analysis, where cross-sectional and dynamic components could be estimated simultaneously, such regionalized time-series studies would have to face a serious degrees-of-freedom problem (for this type of analysis see, e.g., Bellucci 1984), but the addition of state elections could help in this respect. Longitudinal investigations at the county level could, again, produce classifications of territorial units that might prove useful for further cross-sectional study. These few remarks do not exhaust what can and should be done in the future, but they put the first step taken here into perspective and outline the agenda.

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