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Carl C. Berning

Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) – Germany’s New Radical Right-wing Populist Party



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Radical right-wing populist (RRP) parties are present and successful all over Western Europe. Until very recently Germany was one of the few exceptions. The German general elections in 2017 changed that and the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) is now a member of Germany’s national parliament. The rise of the AfD has fuelled scientific and public debate over the party’s ideological position and its electorate’s profile. The AfD’s short history has been characterised by power struggles and transformations. Germany witnessed the party’s shift from an initially Eurosceptic party to a RRP party. While the AfD is heterogeneous, there is now some scientific consensus on what the party stands for. Looking at the demand side, i.e., the electorate, empirical evidence is still rather limited, but voters’ main incentives for supporting the AfD seems to have been identified. The AfD is not the first far right-wing party to seek seats in the German Bundestag after World War II, but it is by far the most successful.

This paper offers an overview of the trajectory and conceptualizations of the AfD, discusses the factors most relevant to its emergence and highlights underlying theoretical explanations. It also presents aggregate level data on the German general elections in 2013 and in 2017. The AfD is subject to constant change. It is a new party and its (potential) electorate is far from established. This review therefore provides more of a summary of what we know to date, than a projection of future volatility.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF THE FAR-RIGHT AND THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS

The third wave of far-right parties has generated a great deal of scientific interest. There are currently probably more scientific studies on RRP parties, than on any other party family (Mudde 2007, 2). Their classification, and especially their label, was subject to lively academic debate. Scholars have used many names for far-right parties, including, but not limited to, extreme right (Arzheimer 2012; Ignazi 1992), radical right (Kitschelt and McGann, 1995; Norris 2005), anti-immigrant (Fennema 1997; Van der Brug et al. 2005), neo-populist (Taggart 1995), and populist radical right (Mudde 2007).

Mudde (2007) gives a practical definition and identifies the core ideology as “a combination of nativism,

authoritarianism, and populism” (Mudde 2007, 26). The party family is certainly heterogeneous and evolving. Nevertheless, following Betz (1994) “radical right-wing populist parties are radical in their rejection of established socio-cultural and socio-political systems and their advocacy of individual achievement, a free market, and a drastic reduction of the role of the state without, however, openly questioning the legitimacy of democracy in general. They are right-wing first in their rejection of individual and social equality and of political projects that seek to achieve it; second in their opposition of the social integration of marginalised groups; and third in their appeal to xenophobia, if not overt racism and anti-Semitism. They are populist in their unscrupulous use and instrumentalisation of diffuse public sentiments of anxiety and disenchantment and their appeal to the common man and his allegedly superior common sense” (Betz 1994, 4). The economic policy of these parties has changed since Betz conceptualised the far-right, and today, while some still support free market and little government involvement, others advocate protectionism. The economy, however, is not the core issue of RRP parties.

Existing research has identified a rather broad spectrum of factors that determine voting for RRP parties. It mostly differentiates between demand and supply side explanations (Eatwell 2003, 48). Demand-side explanations focus on the electorate at an individual-level, while supply-side explanations capture the cross-national differences of the so-called political opportunity structures (Arzheimer 2009; Arzheimer and Carter 2006). In the literature on demand-side explanations, group threat and group conflict theory are probably the most important theoretical frameworks (Rydgren 2007). Ethnic group threat is the anticipation of negative consequences due to immigration. These ethnic threats arise from perceived competition over scarce material resources, such as employment or housing on the one hand; and relate to non-tangible goods, such as language or religion on the other (McLaren 2003; Stephan and Renfro 2002). The latter is conceptualised as cultural group threat and there is evidence that its effect on preferences for RRP parties is much stronger compared to the effect of economic threat perceptions (Lucassen and Lubbers 2012). A common narrative for the support of RRP parties is the preference for economic liberalism or a pure political protest. There is, however, no empirical evidence for either motivation. Arzheimer (2008) shows that once perceived group threat is controlled for, neither economic liberalism nor political protest significantly affect RRP party preference. RRP parties certainly benefit from dissatisfaction and resentments against established parties (Mudde 2007), but it is not only a vote against an authority, it is usually a motivational mix of dissatisfaction and perceived ethnic threat (Knigge 1998; Swyngedouw and Ivaldi 2001).

Cross-national differences can be partly attributed to differences in socio-demographic composition.

Institutional, political and structural factors are nevertheless relevant too. The position adopted by the far-right's main rival, for example, is expected to provide an opportunity for a new party to rise. Some argue that the AfD's success was only possible, because the CDU moved to the left and created a vacuum on the right. Empirically, there is not much support for this claim (Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Lubbers et al. 2002; Carter 2005).

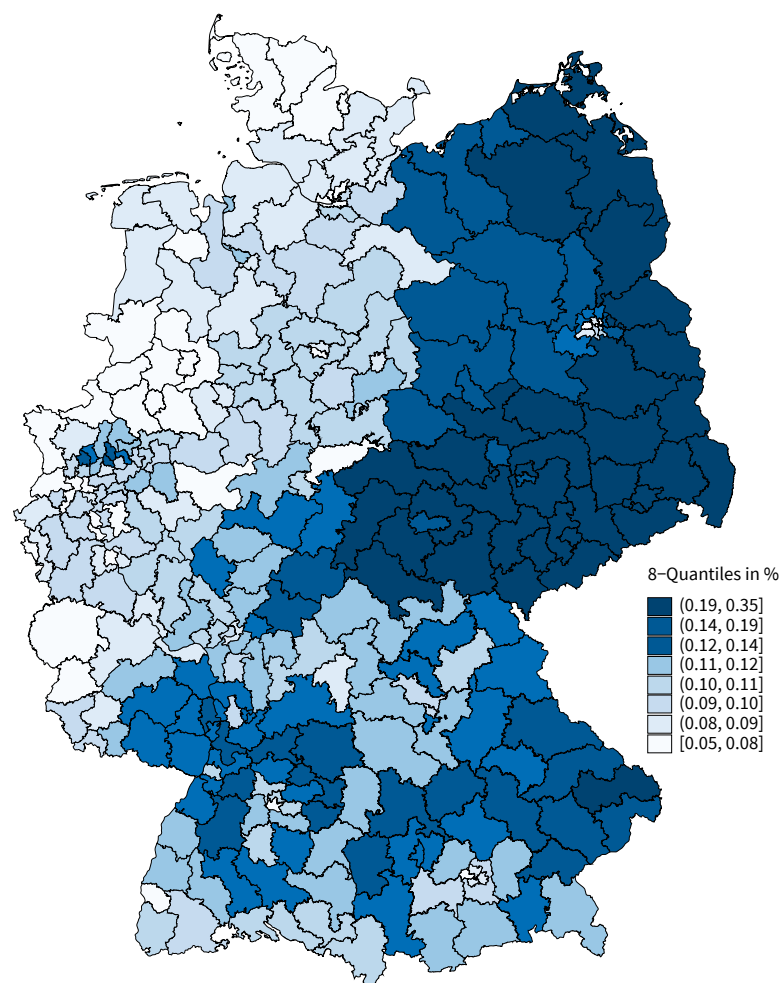
THE TRAJECTORY OF THE AfD

The AfD was founded in February 2013, just seven months before the general elections. The party arose from neo-liberal political movements, like the Wahlalternative 2013 led by Bernd Lucke, Konrad Adam, and Alexander Gauland. The party's initial policy focus was very clear: the Euro. In 2013, the AfD was therefore what some call a single-issue party. It was only month prior to the 2013 elections and the party programme was relatively short. The media and other political actors repeatedly questioned whether the AfD is a conservative or a far-right party. While the public face of the party, Bernd Lucke, occasionally used populist rhetoric, the party programme provided no evidence for such speculation. In the 2013 general elections, the AfD missed the threshold for entering the German Bundestag by only 0.3 percentage points. After the general elections, the party's programme broadened, but the fiscal focused remained. In the following year, the party won seven seats in the European Parliament. A study by Arzheimer (2015) of the party's European Election manifesto showed that the AfD placed right of the CDU and the FDP on a general left-right dimension, but not significantly different from the CSU and left of the NPD. Furthermore, the party manifesto uses neither radical, nor populist language. However, the party takes on a soft Eurosceptic stance, in the sense that it does not propose to return to national currencies, but opposes the Eurozone in its current form (Arzheimer 2015, 546). By 2014, the party was anything but a grass-roots movement. Many of its founding members were university professors or managers.

After the European Elections in 2014, Bernd Lucke tried to extend his influence in the party. Power struggles intensified over the following month and in 2015, an inner party debate over links to the anti-Islam movement Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West (Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes, PEGIDA) mirrored the ideological core of this dispute. Frauke Petry, the AfD's co-spokesperson and head of the state party in Saxony, supported the movement and saw overlapping interests. Lucke initiated a vote for a principal spokesperson and lost to Frauke Petry at the 2015 party conference in Essen. His defeat can be interpreted as an ideological shift to the right. Jörg Meuthen, an economics Professor like Lucke, was elected as a co-speaker. After the party conference, Lucke left the party. He founded a new party, initially called Alliance for Progress and Renewal (Allianz für Fortschritt und Aufbruch, ALFA), which was shortly renamed to Liberal-Conservative Reformers (Liberal-Konservative Reformer, LKR), after a legal dispute about the abbreviation ALFA. Some of the AfD's officials that are more moderate followed Lucke and left the party, as did most of the AfD's repre-

Figure 1

Results for the AfD in the 2017 General Elections



Source: Authors' analysis using data from the Federal Returning Officer (2017).

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sentatives in the European Parliament. The LKR did not run for the 2017 general elections and therefore received little or no media attention.

Since the summer of 2015, the European refugee crisis has dominated the public agenda in Germany. The AfD leveraged the salience of the refugee issue and focused on immigrants and immigration in state election campaigns and public appearances. The party increasingly used a more radical tone and openly sympathised with other far-right parties in Western Europe. The AfD is now part of 14 state parliaments and only narrowly missed the 5% threshold in the 2013 state elections in Hesse.

In April, five months prior to the 2017 general elections, Petry attempted to call for a more moderate course at a party conference in Cologne. She argued that she wanted to cater to a conservative, less radical electorate and set the party on a path towards a coalition with the CDU/CSU in the long term. However, she failed to find any broad-based support for this policy within her party. Describing Petry as the moderate face of the party seems foolish and ironic. It was Petry, for example, who supported Wolfgang Gedeon, who got in trouble with his caucus in Baden-Wuerttemberg over his anti-Semitic publications. As described earlier, Petry was, in fact, the politician who led the AfD along the path from a Eurosceptic to a RRP party. Her attempt to change policies was about power and influence, not ideology.

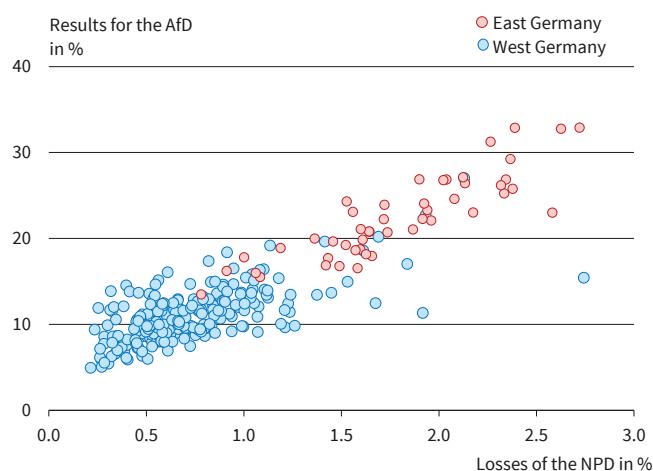
THE GENERAL ELECTIONS 2017

In the 2017 general elections, the AfD won 12.6% of the votes and is now the third largest group in the 19th Bundestag. The AfD did extremely well in eastern Germany, especially in Saxony where it won 27% of the votes and outpolled the CDU. The data presented is acquired from the *Federal Returning Officer (Bundeswahlleiter 2017)*¹. Figure 1 shows the regional distribution of AfD support across constituencies.

The regional divide in AfD support is more than obvious. The AfD's heartland is eastern Germany, while it also did very well in some areas of Bavaria and Baden-Wuerttemberg. The AfD performed so strongly in eastern Germany due to a combination of attitudinal resentments, socio-demographic composition and structural factors. One should be cautious with overly dense, mono-causal explanations. The AfD is not only a phenomenon of the East.

Figure 2

Correlation between Votes for the AfD in 2017 and NPD Losses between 2013 and 2017



Source: Authors' calculations.

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In some constituencies, the AfD received the plurality of votes, and in three Saxon districts it won direct mandates. Frauke Petry won one of these direct mandates. However, she announced immediately after the elections that she will not be part of the party's caucus. A day later, Petry left the party. This move came as a surprise to the party and its voters. A handful of AfD members followed her walkout. One of them was Marcus Pretzell, the head of the North Rhine-Westphalian AfD and Petry's husband. This shows that power struggles and splits within the AfD are still a major issue for the party's progression.

In the 2017 general elections, the AfD cannibalised the electorate of most other far-right parties in Germany. For example, the defeat of the NPD, although it did not enjoy any relevant success on a national level anyway, is highly correlated with the AfD's win. Figure 2 presents the correlation between the loss of NPD votes between the 2013 and 2017 general elections and support for the AfD in 2017. Votes for the AfD in 2017 correlate at the aggregate level with the loss of votes for the NPD by $r = 0.88$. This correlation is smaller in western Germany (blue circles in Figure 2, $r = 0.57$) and slightly stronger in eastern Germany (red circles in Figure 2, $r = 0.89$), but support for the NPD was stronger in eastern Germany to begin with. In other words, the NPD didn't have much to lose in western Germany.

Further aggregate level analyses show that the AfD benefitted from losses by the CDU and CSU. However, a closer look reveals that this is mostly the case in eastern Germany, Bavaria and Baden-Wuerttemberg. There are many areas, especially in North Rhine-Westphalia, where the AfD heavily mobilised former non-voters. While the AfD electorate consists predominantly of former CDU/CSU or non-voters, it managed to attract support from across the entire political spectrum.

The figures above show only the distribution across constituencies, but there is also a great deal of unnoticed variation within them. There are many areas

¹ <https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/>.

in western Germany, where the AfD received more than its national average of 12.6%. For example, the AfD got 17.0% of the votes in Gelsenkirchen, a traditional working-class city in North Rhine-Westphalia. Gelsenkirchen was seriously affected by the structural change of the economy in the Ruhr area and the consequences are still very real, as unemployment rates still remain high today.

Individual level analysis shows that the AfD does especially well among members of the working class. Its electorate is predominantly male, with medium to little formal education, and is concerned about immigration. This profile reflects the typical RRP voter observed in many Western European countries (Arzheimer and Berning, 2017).

CONCLUSION

The success and failure of RRP parties has received much scientific, public, and media attention in recent years. In this debate, Germany used to be a rare exception in the post war period, boasting only a few extreme right parties without any national success. As of the 2017 general elections, however, the AfD, a RRP party, is now part of the German Bundestag. While the party is new for Germany, there is a longstanding body of literature on determinants behind the success of RRP parties and scholars agree upon perceived ethnic threat as the most important attitudinal predictor (Berning and Schlueter, 2016; Ivarsflaten, 2008).

Entering the Bundestag will entitle the AfD to funding that will enable it to potentially stabilise its organisation on the ground. However, it remains unclear whether the party is here to stay or not. There are two important points to consider here: firstly, the AfD leveraged the salience of immigration as a political issue, which created a discourse opportunity in their favour. Secondly, the AfD is a heterogeneous party and power struggles challenge the party's appeal to a broader electorate. For now, the party is benefitting from (media) attention, so in-party fighting and deliberate provocation are working in its favour. Whether this is the case in the future remains to be seen.

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