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Article

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The Relationship between Immigration and the Success of Far-Right Political Parties in Germany



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INTRODUCTION

The success of the far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AFD) in recent national elections in Germany has once again highlighted the importance of attitudes towards immigration and its political consequences. Although the massive influx of refugees that Germany experienced mainly in 2015 had ceased by 2016, immigration and its consequences for German society turned out to be a dominant topic during the election campaign in 2017. Apparently, AFD's slogan "We will get our country back!" appealed to 13% of voters, instantly making the newcomer party AFD the third strongest and the first far-right party to enter German parliament (*Bundestag*).

While the link between the electoral success of far-right parties and immigration has been an underexplored topic for many years, a rich body of empirical literature has emerged recently. The existing studies on European countries indicate that immigration increases support for far-right parties. For example, Barone et al. (2016) conclude that immigration in Italy has increased votes for the centre-right coalition with political platforms less favourable to immigrants. In line with this, Halla et al. (2017) find that immigrant inflows into Austrian communities had a significant impact on the increase in the FPÖ vote share. Both studies make use of an IV estimator based on historical settlements to deal with endogenous location choice of immigrants. Dustmann et al. (2016) opt for a different identification strategy and exploit a policy conducted in Denmark that assigned refugee immigrants to municipalities on a quasi-random basis. The estimates imply that larger refugee shares increase the vote share not only for parties with an anti-immigration agenda, but also for centre-right parties. A similar result has been found by Harmon (2017) for Denmark who uses an IV identification strategy based on historical housing stock data and concludes that ethnic diversity increases support for nationalist parties. In a related paper, Facchini et al. (2017) exploit variations in immigrant concentrations in Sweden through a placement policy and do not find any support for immigration impacting the vote shares of New Democracy, a populist, anti-immigration party. In another recent paper, Becker and Fetzer (2017) exploit the 2004 EU enlargement to Eastern Europe as a

natural experiment and find that migration from EU accession countries contributed to the rise of UKIP, which heavily agitates against immigrants. A noteworthy exception is the work by Steinmayr (2016) on Austria, which uses pre-existing group accommodations as an instrumental variable, and is the only study which finds that hosting refugees reduces support for the far-right.

For Germany, evidence of the link between electoral support for the far-right and immigration is scarce. In section 3, we summarise the main findings of our study on Hamburg, the largest city in Western Germany (Otto and Steinhardt 2014). Before doing so, the following section provides a brief overview of the current situation in Germany.

MIGRATION AND VOTING BEHAVIOUR – CURRENT TRENDS AND SOME BASIC PATTERNS

The recent increase in net migration to Germany is not unprecedented. Germany experienced a huge influx of migrants in the early 1990s (see Figure 1) when the end of the cold war, as well as civil wars in former Yugoslavia and in African and Asian countries caused mass migrations. After net immigration peaked in 1992 at a level of almost 800 thousand people, immigration flows declined significantly until the end of the decade and in the first years of the new millennium Germany was confronted with rather moderate immigration flows. The recent wave of migration started in 2009/2010 in the aftermath of the global economic crisis and was characterised by an increasing number of migrants from South and East European countries. Then in 2014, the inflow of refugees mainly from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan boosted migration to Germany, which resulted in a net immigration of 1.1 million people in Germany in 2015.

An obvious way to approach the relationship between extreme voting and immigration is to look at how votes for extreme parties and immigrant concentration are interrelated at the regional level. This is done in Figure 2, which shows the correlation of votes for far-right parties in the federal election 2017 and the share of foreigners in electoral districts.¹ We see a significant negative relationship.² Electoral districts with relatively high foreigner shares are characterised by lower support for far-right parties, while those districts with larger support have a relatively low concentration of foreigners.³ This pattern is mainly driven by the eastern part of Germany, where the share of foreigners is comparatively low and AFD support is disproportionately high. However, that relationship is purely descriptive in

¹ The data is provided by the Federal Returning Officer (Bundeswahlleiter). The population data is from 2015. The data for 2016 will be not available before 2018 due to administrative reasons. Calculating changes in foreigner shares between electoral cycles is not straightforward due to electoral redistricting.

² The estimated slope is -0.443 and has a standard error of 0.047.

³ The share of far-right parties consist of votes for the following three parties: NPD: National Democratic Party of Germany (Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands), Republicans (Die Republikaner), AFD: Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland).

nature, as it is unconditional on the socio-economic characteristics of districts. Furthermore, it possibly just reflects that immigrants avoid regions where there is significant support for far-right parties and instead tend to settle in more tolerant regions (due to political or economic preferences).

When we ignore the regional dimension and simply look at the time dimension, the pattern changes. This is illustrated in Figure 3. The blue bars, labelled on the left vertical axis, show the monthly number of asylum applications between July 2013 and July 2017. The data is provided by the Federal Office for Migration

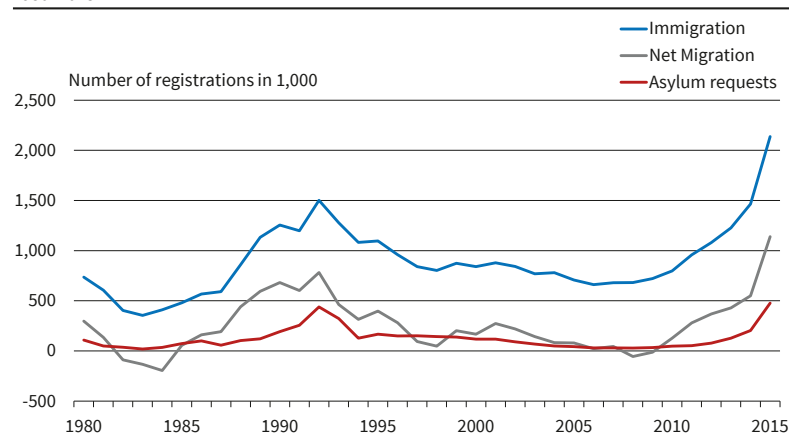
and Refugees (BAMF) and includes initial and follow-up applications. The graph shows that the number of monthly asylum applications has risen steadily since April 2014 and reached a peak of almost 91,000 applications in August 2016. By far the largest group among applicants were Syrians fleeing from war, followed by refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan. After August 2016, asylum applications decreased sharply to 17,000 in July 2017. The main reasons for this strong decline were the closure of the Balkan route and the refugee deal between the EU and Turkey in March 2016.

The red line shows the monthly support, measured by voting intentions, for the Alternative für Deutschland (AFD), a right-wing populist party, which heavily agitates against refugees and immigrants. The data is provided by infratest dimap, a renowned German polling institute that publishes nationwide, representative data on voting intentions on a regular basis.⁴ The similarities in the trends of monthly AFD support and asylum applications are striking. Parallel to the strong increase in asylum applications between the summers of 2015 and 2016, support for the AFD rose from 4% to 16% (right vertical axis). One month after the number of asylum applications dropped, the AFD started to lose political support, which dropped to 9% in July 2017. Of course, this pattern is once again purely descriptive in nature and we do not claim to have uncovered any kind of causal relationship. Nonetheless, the graph nicely illustrates the political situation and dilemma in Germany during the refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016. Moreover, the pattern highlights the importance to incorporate the time dimension in an empirical analysis of the link between immigration and extreme voting. In the following section, we will summarise the key findings

⁴ For each poll, also known as the “Sunday question”, 1,000 eligible voters are asked the question: „If there were a General Election next Sunday, which party would you vote for?“ For each month, we selected the latest poll results available.

Figure 1

Immigration to Germany 1980–2015



Source: Federal Statistical Office (2017); Federal Office for Migrants and Refugees (2017).

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of one of our recent studies that analysed the impact of immigration on the electoral success of far-right parties at the regional level in the longitudinal dimension.

EVIDENCE FROM THE CITY OF HAMBURG IN THE 1980S AND 1990S

To measure the impact of immigration on voting behaviour, we used a data set on city districts in Hamburg that covered the period from 1987 to 1998 (Otto and Steinhardt 2014). We focused on this period because a major citizenship reform in 2000 introduced *ius soli* and eased naturalisation procedures in Germany substantially. As a consequence, naturalisations increased significantly and, thereby, changed the ethnic composition of the constituency in subsequent years. Moreover, this was a period during which massive immigration – mainly driven by asylum seekers and refugees – gained importance in the political sphere. During those years far-right parties massively (and successfully) campaigned against permissive asylum procedures and integration of foreigners. Between 1987 and 1993 voter support for the far-right in federal state elections in Hamburg rose by 7.1 percentage points and peaked in 1993 at a vote share of 7.6%.

The political landscape of the late 1980s and 1990s in Hamburg was largely similar to today’s. Parties like the big-tent parties CDU and SPD, as well as smaller parties like the FDP, the Greens and the PDS (today called “Die Linke”) were up for election. What differed in the 1990s was the composition of the far-right that, according to the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Verfassungsschutz), during this period consisted of six parties: The (German) Conservatives (Die Konservativen), German People’s Union (DVU, Deutsche Volksunion), Hamburg’s List for Stopping Foreigners (HLA, Hamburger Liste für Ausländerstopp), National List (NL, Nationale Liste), National Democratic

Figure 2

Support for the Far-Right in the Federal Election 2017 and Share of Foreigners in 2015

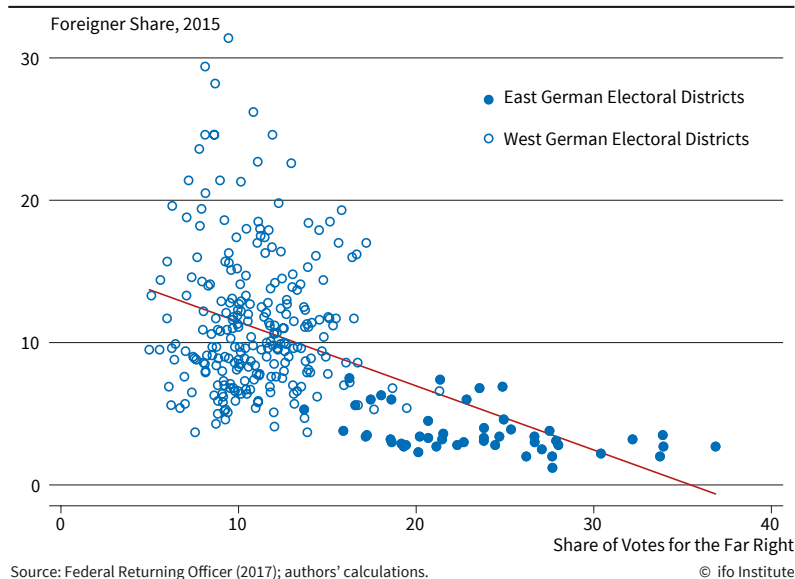
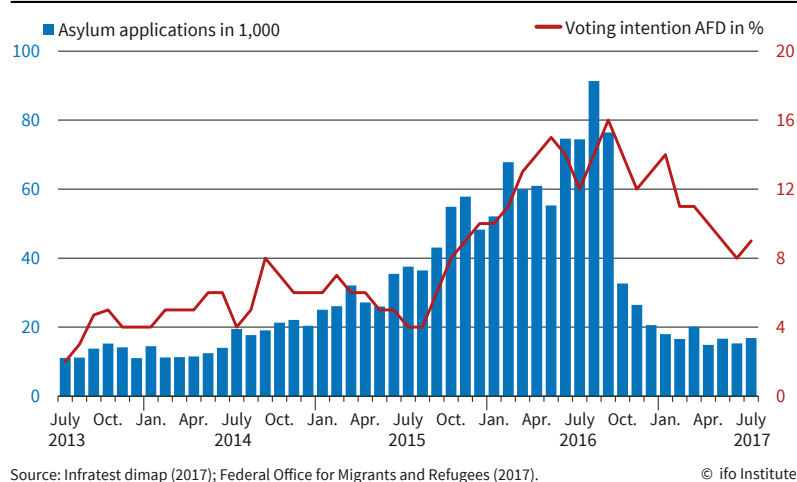


Figure 3

Asylum Seekers and Support for the Far-Right in Germany July 2013–July 2017



Party of Germany (NPD, Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands), Republicans (Die Republikaner). While the far-right parties solely campaigned against immigration, the Greens were the only party conceived by voters to actively campaign for easier immigration procedures and a multicultural society.

To measure the effect of a rising foreigner share on local election results, we employed a fixed effects model for 103 city districts and 7 elections (federal elections and state elections). Since foreigners from EU member countries were allowed to vote in borough and European Parliament elections, we focused on federal and state elections. In our estimations, we controlled for a couple of time-varying, local characteristics of the constituency (e.g. the district's age profile, population,

violent crime per inhabitant, voter turnout, income levels and unemployment levels), as well as for cyclical effects and time trends. To account for the possible biases caused by the endogenous location choice of immigrants and the native population (segregation effect), we employed an instrumental variable approach in which a district's foreigner share was instrumented by its foreigner share ten years before.

Our estimates from instrumental variable regressions suggest that an increase in a district's foreigner share led to a substantial increase in the vote share of the far-right. More explicitly, an increase in the local foreigner share of 1 percentage point increased far-right parties' vote share by 0.3 percentage points. Taken to the federal state (or city) level, this effect on average explained almost a quarter of the overall increase in the far-right's vote share. At the same time, a growing local concentration of foreigners reduced the support of the Greens who promoted liberal immigration policies. Our findings proved to be robust for a couple of alternative specifications.

The economic literature on immigration and voting behaviour names four important channels via which rising immigrant shares affect the voting shares of the far-right, namely the political channel (see

Ortega 2005), the labour market channel (see Mayda 2006), the welfare channel (Facchini and Mayda 2009) and non-economic channels (see Card et al. 2012). According to the political channel, a change in the composition of the constituency caused by an influx (and naturalisation) of immigrants leads to a change in voting outcomes if migrants' voting behaviour differs from that of the native population. Given our selection of elections (federal and state elections) and the period before the citizenship reform in 2000, we can rule out that this channel explains our results.

The labour market channel highlights the point that increased competition of workers in the labour market caused by the additional labour supply of migrants could motivate native workers to vote against

immigration to fend off competitors. However, in the 1980s and 1990s of the last century asylum seekers had to wait 1 to 5 years before they received a work permit. Furthermore, within cities workers largely live in different districts than they work in and, in addition, over a quarter of the employed commuted to Hamburg from outside the city in 1987. To sum up, on the district level we can almost rule out that the labour market channel played a substantial role in explaining election outcomes during this period.

We did, however, find some support for the welfare channel and the non-economic channel. The welfare channel describes anti-migration sentiments which are caused by voter concerns for (unwanted) redistribution caused by migration. The majority of migrants that came to Hamburg between 1987 and 1998 were relatively unskilled compared to native workers and, given the time they had to wait for work permits, highly dependent on social benefits.

As to the non-economic channel, we found some evidence that concerns regarding local compositional amenities, i.e. changes caused by migrants to neighbourhoods, kindergartens and schools or workplaces (see Card et al. 2012), also shaped voters' behaviour in local districts. However, we could not rule out that voters' support for far-right parties was also fuelled by xenophobic sentiments.

CONCLUSIONS

The federal German election in 2017 was characterised by controversial debates about immigration and Germany's role as a safe haven for refugees. The AfD heavily agitated against immigrants and liberal asylum laws and managed to enter the German Bundestag with nationwide support of 13%. This once again demonstrated that migration is a major concern in western societies and often becomes a decisive factor in political elections. Therefore, it is of crucial interest to improve our understanding of the relationship between support of far-right parties and immigration.

Our results for Hamburg in the mid-1990s document that growing shares of foreigners can promote the political success of far-right parties, while they can negatively affect support for distinctly pro-immigration parties. While labour market interests of natives were unlikely to drive the stated relationship in the 1990s, natives' concerns about negative implications for welfare and local amenities seem to have been a major driving force behind our estimates.

The current situation in Germany has many parallels to the 1990s. Like then, recent immigration to Germany was characterised by exceptionally strong inflows of refugees and triggered contentious public debates about asylum abuse. As in the 1990s, the increase in refugee numbers came rather unexpectedly and official authorities struggled to cope with the inflow, i.e. the registration of immigrants, the allocation of refugees to German regions and the provision of

accommodation. In addition, although the legal labour market access of refugees improved compared to the 1990s, most refugees are still largely dependent on social benefits and are perceived to be a net burden to the existing welfare system – at least in the short term. Moreover, as in the 1990s, the government finally reacted to the situation with legal changes in the asylum system, which significantly reduced the inflow of refugees. It would therefore be very instructive to analyse whether our findings for the 1990s hold in the present context as soon as appropriate data become available.

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