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The Impact of Welfare Chauvinism on the Results of Right-Wing Populist Voting in Germany after the Refugee Crisis

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The Impact of Welfare Chauvinism on the Results of Right-Wing Populist Voting in Germany after the Refugee Crisis

Abstract

Based on an extended welfare chauvinism concept that more systematically integrates the labor market and public finance aspects, this paper examines the impact of the refugee crisis – which culminated in the EU in 2015/16 – on changes in voting behavior in Germany (revealed in the two German federal elections in 2013 and 2017), explaining the attitudinal preference for ethnic boundaries around national welfare systems and the emergence of the right-wing populist party AfD. For this dynamic approach, an OLS analysis is conducted based on county-level data. The variables are selected taking into account existing theoretical and empirical findings in the international context, combined with Germany-specific facts and experiences, local demographic and economic differences, and party-specific voter characteristics. Among the key empirical findings are sufficiently reliable indications of the occurrence of welfare-chauvinistic effects that led to the success of the AfD in the 2017 election.

JEL-Codes: D720, F220, J150, P160.

Keywords: welfare chauvinism, immigration, right-wing populist party, refugee crisis, German federal elections.

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INTRODUCTION

In September 2015, the German Chancellor introduced an “open-door” policy, accepted 890,000 refugees, and received more than 476,000 formal applications for political asylum. In 2016, however, after more than 1 million people had sought refuge in Germany, most other European countries were either criticizing or, at the very least, not embracing the German policy. This, in turn, led many in Germany to question the political optimism expressed by chancellor Angela Merkel, epitomized in her now famous statement “*Wir schaffen das*”¹ (Sola 2018; Jäckle and König 2017). As a result of this growing public sentiment, the German government reintroduced border controls. The agreement signed between the EU and Turkey in March 2016 allowed Greece to send “irregular migrants” back to Turkey, which led to a significant ebbing of refugee movements from the Middle East to Western Europe. As a result, the total number of refugees who arrived in Germany in 2016 fell to 280,000 (Sola 2018). All in all, such an influx of refugees within a short period of time has led to an increase in the German population of more than one percent, driven mainly by the inflow of young men, especially from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan (Trinen 2017).² Refugees have settled disproportionately in large German municipalities and cities,³ and these entities have faced major challenges in accommodating and integrating new arrivals from different cultures and with varied education levels (Katz et al. 2016; Nam and Steinhoff 2019).

The period climax of the refugee crisis coincided with an unprecedented rise in power of populist political movements across Europe. Never, since the end of WWII, have populist political movements across Europe gathered so many votes and held so many political offices at national, regional or municipal level. In combination with the slow eurozone economic growth and less favorable labor market development since

¹ We can do/manage it.

² About 65 percent of all asylum seekers in Germany between 2015 and 2017 were male, about 50 percent were younger than 24 years and about a quarter of all refugees were children under 15 years of age (Trinen 2017).

³ The distribution of asylum seekers to the individual federal states (*Länder*) is based on the *Königsteiner* quotas, the annual calculation of which is based on the tax revenue (valued at two-thirds) and the population (valued at one-third) of the states. The difference in surface area between the federal states is thereby neglected - this is why refugee accommodation is particularly difficult in the city states of Berlin and Hamburg. There is also a separate distribution mechanism within the respective federal states. In Bavaria, for example, the geographical distribution of refugees is based on the relation to the population of Bavaria, first to the administrative districts (*Regierungsbezirke*), then to the counties (*Landkreise*), and municipalities and cities (Nam and Steinhoff 2019).

the 2008/9 financial crisis, such political developments bring the themes of approaching the welfare state, immigration, national identity and racism in Europe together (Häusler and Roeser 2015; Keskinen et al. 2016). In other words, the hypotheses related to the voters' pro-populistic behavior and their political preference for the far-right wing parties can be examined in the context of "welfare chauvinism" (Andersen and Bjørklund 1990; Freeman 2009; Mewes and Mau 2013). According to this idea, native citizens are not willing "to grant social rights to foreigners" (Mewes and Mau 2013, p. 228), and consequently consider the welfare state as a "system of social protection for those who belong to the ethnically defined community and who have contributed to it" (Kitschelt 1997, p. 22), while denying the "inclusionary" welfare policies (Andersen and Bjørklund 1990; Banting and Kymlicka 2006). This welfare chauvinism has often been represented by the ethno-nationalist and racializing political agenda of right-wing populist parties (Georgiadou et al. 2018). The phenomenon has been particularly striking in Germany, where the populist *AfD* party,⁴ created in 2013, was the first far-right party to ever reach any significant electoral results, becoming the third, and temporarily even the second strongest political force at state or federal level within 6 years,⁵ up to and including the latest series of regional state elections in 2019.⁶

Initially created as a conservative movement of euro-sceptics during the height of the Greek and Euro crisis, the *AfD* has been riding on the anti-refugee wave since the crisis went broad in the media (Bebnowski 2015; Hensel et al. 2017; Hafenegger 2018). The

⁴ *AfD* is short for "*Alternative für Deutschland*", i.e. alternative for Germany, to indicate that the party wants to distance itself from the established party system (Decker 2016).

⁵ In the 2017 election, despite enormous losses, the Christian-democratic and liberal-conservative *CDU/CSU* Union remained the strongest force in the *Bundestag* with 33%, while the social-democratic *SPD* ended up at 20.5%. The *AfD* received 12.6% of the votes (compared to 4.7% in the 2013 election), making it the third strongest force to enter the *Bundestag* for the first time, followed by the liberal *FDP* (10.7%), socialist *Die Linke* (9.2%) and the *Greens* (8.9%).

⁶ While this study focuses on Germany, the authors would like to emphasize that this is not a German phenomenon. Many, if not all, EU countries have experienced similar developments in the wake of the refugee crisis, or even prior to it. A striking example of this is the remarkable performance of the *Front National* party in France, which gained considerable momentum during the refugee crisis and would most likely have won several presidencies in the regional elections in France in December 2015, if the traditional center-left *Socialist Party* had not withdrawn all its candidates in the runoff election in an unprecedented action in those regions where it had only finished third in the first round. These retractions were made to ensure conservative party candidates of the *Republicans* and the *Union of Democrats and Independents* would be elected through a transfer of center-left votes in the second round (Shields 2018; Siraud 2015; The Economist 2015). In the national elections of 2017, the *Front National* was again runner-up, beating the traditional center-right and center-left parties in the first round of elections, losing only to the newly formed liberal party *La République en Marche* of Emmanuel Macron (Mayer 2018).

political dimension of the refugee crisis climaxed in Germany in late August 2015, and the issue has been in the news and the political debate ever since. Just in 2019, the *AfD* was twice on the verge of becoming the strongest political force in two federal state elections in East Germany. The main focus of the *AfD*'s political discourse lies on what it deems to be national social and economic problems, including public welfare, perceived insecurity, and housing issues, all of which it interprets to be the result of the liberal policy of the German federal government towards refugees in the last years. At the other end of the political spectrum, the populist leftist party *Die Linke* – which is closest to what could be considered a socialist movement in Germany and has, to a certain extent, emerged from the *SED*, the state party of the former GDR – does not seem to be capitalizing on the erosion of the traditional political heavyweights, *SPD* (social democrats) and *CDU* (conservative party). Remarkably, and thus supporting our assumptions, with a few exceptions, *Die Linke* is supporting pro-refugee politics. Given this evidence, we consider that there is a justified case to warrant an analysis of the behavior of German voters with respect to refugee-related issues.

Based on an extended welfare chauvinism concept that more systematically integrates the labor market and public finance aspects, this paper examines the impact of the refugee crisis – which culminated in the EU in 2015/16 – on changes in voting behavior in Germany (revealed in the two German federal elections in 2013 and 2017), explaining the attitudinal preference for ethnic boundaries around national welfare systems and the emergence of the right-wing populist party *AfD*. For this dynamic approach, an OLS analysis is conducted based on county-level data (*Landkreise*). The variables are selected taking into account existing theoretical and empirical findings in the international context, combined with Germany-specific facts and experiences, local demographic and economic differences, and party-specific voter characteristics. Among the key empirical findings are sufficiently reliable indications of the occurrence of welfare-chauvinistic effects that led to the success of the *AfD* in the 2017 election.

BASIC THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

Immigration affects the economic welfare of natives via labor markets and public finances (Otto and Steinhardt 2012; Edo et al. 2019). Apart from the native labor market challenges caused by the immigrants, the welfare chauvinism concept (also combined

with increased public finance burden) can be adopted for explaining the attitudinal preference for ethnic boundaries around national welfare systems (Banting and Kymlicka 2006; Crepaz, 2008; Van Oorschot 2006), as well as the emergence of nationalist and/or right-wing populist parties in the framework of the transformation of the Western European party system. Many of such (far-right-wing) parties support the welfare state but are strictly against the inclusion of immigrants into the welfare system (Andersen and Bjørklund 1990; Kitschelt 1997).⁷ To a large extent, this idea is also backed by the social identity theory which “asserts that members of a national group [in particular old-age, conservative natives] will seek to differentiate themselves positively from out-groups. Higher levels of national identification are correlated with higher levels of feeling distinct from out-groups — such as immigrants” (Ariely 2016, p. 379). In this context this theory suggests the possibility of emerging group conflicts between the natives and the immigrants, whereby the increasing share of immigrants is perceived to be a threat to the culture and identity of the native population (Dustmann and Preston 2007; Otto and Steinhardt 2012).

In general, it is acknowledged that immigration increases support for far-right candidates and those regions in Europe with larger shares of immigrants record more far-right voting (Lubbers and Scheepers 2001; Coffé et al. 2007; Otto and Steinhardt 2012; Edo et al. 2019). Otto and Steinhardt (2012, p. 4) find in line with the aforementioned group conflict hypothesis that “an increasing concentration of foreigners within a [city] district [in Hamburg] reduces support of natives for parties that campaign for liberal immigration policies and minority rights”. Gerdes and Wadensjö (2010) also come to comparable research findings when investigating local elections in Denmark, while Barone et al. (2016) – using Italian municipality-level data – also demonstrate the significant effect of a larger immigrant-share on center-right votes (see also Edo et al. (2019)). According to Card et al. (2012) the “compositional amenities”, which comprise the cultural compositions of natives’ neighborhood, schools and workplaces, play a significant role for shaping negative attitudes toward immigration. Consequently, a number of studies including Adida et al. (2010), Becker and Fetzer (2016), Brunner and Kuhn (2018), Edo et al. (2017), Hainmueller and Hangartner (2013), Halla

⁷ “In many [European] countries the electorate has increasingly supported antiimmigration parties. For example, in Denmark the Danish People Party came into political power advocating restrictive immigration policies and campaigning against multiculturalism. Similar developments took place in the Netherlands and Hungary, where antiimmigrant parties have gained strong political support” (Otto and Steinhardt 2012, p. 2).

et al. (2017), Mendez and Cutillas (2014), and Rydgren (2008) argue that the effects of immigration on far-right voting of natives tend to very much depend on the ethnic origin of immigrants as well as cultural and religious differences (see also Edo et al. 2019). On the contrary, it could also be possible that an increase in the number of immigrants within a community can contribute to the creation of positive external effects for the natives and the reduction of the social identity gap towards foreigners via increased intercultural exchange and interethnic communication – the “contact hypothesis” (Allport 1954; Dustmann and Preston 2007). The empirical validity and evidence of such a hypothesis are also demonstrated in various European countries including Austria, Denmark, and France (Dustmann et al. 2019; Schindler and Westcott 2017; Vertier and Viskanic 2018).

The immigrants’ effects on the labor market participation of natives are rather controversial (Edo 2019), yet it can be postulated that the skills and qualifications of both natives and immigrants as well as the extent to which domestic labor demand can adjust to the increased labor supply triggered by the immigration⁸ do primarily matter, and these aspects can shape the voting behavior of natives. In general, immigration appears to have little or negligible impact on average employment (or unemployment) of existing native workers, although “the immediate wage and employment responses to immigration can be detrimental if the labor supply shock induced by migration is massive and unexpected” (Edo 2019, p. 924). In cases in which an empirical impact is observed, then a negative effect for those with lower education and a positive effect for those with higher levels of education prevail (Migration Advisory Committee 2018). In other words, a “skill substitution” is expected particularly for low-skilled native workers, leading to a fiercer competition for jobs from migrants and wage reductions in the short run, since such skills are easier to acquire and less specialized (Borjas 2005; Ottaviano and Peri 2012).⁹ Due to this reason, the inflow of low-educated immigrants is likely to stimulate the electoral supports of low-skilled natives

⁸ Immigration is also likely to increase the demand for labor, as migrants expand consumer demand for certain goods and services.

⁹ Yet the extent to which declining wages increase unemployment of native workers depends on their willingness to accept the new lower wages. Furthermore, “wages can be downwardly rigid due to the prevalence of generous welfare state benefits, high levels of minimum wage, employment protections and dominant collective bargaining institutions [...], studies by Edo (2015 [and] 2016) for France, and by Glitz (2012) for Germany [...] show that immigration does not affect the wages of similarly skilled natives but does lower their employment levels” (Edo 2019, p. 945).

for populist right candidates (Edo et al. 2019). On the other hand, if the skills of migrants are “complementary” to those of existing native workers, all workers appear to benefit from increased productivity, leading to a rise in the wages of native workers (Peri 2016). Moreover, the immigration of high-skilled workers may trigger R&D, innovation and the adoption of more skill intensive technologies which would again affect labor demand toward high-skilled native workers (Dustman et al. 2008). Consequently, Edo. et al. (2019, p. 102) expect, “even though low-skilled natives would be concerned about negative labor market effects of low-skilled immigrants, high-skilled natives might not be similarly concerned about high-skilled immigration”.¹⁰ Furthermore, Edo and Toubal (2017) and Mitaritonna et al. (2017) additionally argue that recent (registered) immigrants to France are better educated than the native population on average – the fact which implies positive labor market effects combined with productivity growth leading to reduced supports of natives for far-right-wing parties in this country.

According to the welfare chauvinism mentioned above, native citizens tend to oppose the inclusion of foreign migrants as the beneficiaries of the host country’s welfare and redistribution policies, because such social benefits should primarily be provided to the ones who have made regular contributions to this system. In other words, “immigrants’ low level of perceived deservingness does not necessarily mean that the general public is against granting any welfare rights to immigrants. Welfare chauvinism in the *soft sense*, referring to lower deservingness of immigrants compared to natives [...] does not equal welfare chauvinism in the *strict sense*, referring to a desire to exclude immigrants from any welfare provision [...]. Studies [including Mewes and Mau (2012)] showed that [in Europe] only a minority would prefer not to grant any social rights to immigrants at all, while a majority would agree to giving immigrants equal access to welfare provisions only after they have acquired formal citizenship and/or have worked and paid taxes” (Reeskens and van Oorschot 2012, p. 121). In line with this idea, Facchini and Mayda (2009) suggest that natives are mainly concerned about the public finance burden of migration, i.e. the “distributional effect” of immigration through transfers and taxes (see also Otto and Steinhardt 2012). More precisely, the extent to which immigrants financially affect the welfare state appears to largely depend on “whether immigrants are net recipients or net contributors” (Edo et al. 2019,

¹⁰ Those high-skilled immigrants are more strongly concentrated in the large, economically better-off cities and municipalities.

p. 102). Studies such as Alesina et al. (2019) and Dahlberg et al. (2012) demonstrate that increased immigration and the resulting ethnic heterogeneity have negative effects on natives' attitudes toward redistribution. Additionally, under the consideration of the skill differences, Facchini and Mayda (2009) argue that immigrants with a low level of education are more likely to be net recipients, while those with a high level of education appear to be net contributors. Consequently, those natives who are concerned about the increased public financial burden associated with low-skilled immigrants would advocate restricting their influx and support the populist right-wing parties.¹¹

DATA AND EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

The purpose of our empirical study is to closely examine how and in what measure the refugee crisis of 2015/16 as an “event” has affected the German voting behavior, particularly the preference for the far-right wing, populist party *AfD*, based on statistical evidence of the federal parliament elections results of 2013 and 2017. The analysis is based on data from the *Regionaldatenbank Deutschland* collected by the Statistics Offices of the Länder: all data are available at the county level (*Landkreise*). We use extensive data sets for both federal elections, the one before and the one directly after the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015/16.

The far-right populist party *AfD*, founded in February 2013, won 4.7% of total votes in their first participation in nationwide elections in the same year. The party's popularity grew remarkably over the following years, and it gathered 12.6% of votes nationwide in the 2017 federal parliament election. In the latter election, 16.3% of total male voters and 9.2% of female ones supported the *AfD*. Around two-thirds of *AfD* voters are male in both the eastern and western parts of Germany. In addition, the *AfD* enjoyed the highest popularity among voters aged between 35 and 59 years: it reached around

¹¹ According to Senik et al. (2009), a fundamental characteristic of far-left parties is their strong stance toward increasing redistribution. If immigration leads to less support for redistribution, then an increased share of immigrants in the population tends to result in a reduction in far-left voting, while the natives' stronger demand towards insurance against the potential negative labor market effects, which are caused by the increased immigrant-population shares, could benefit far-left politicians (see also Edo et al. 2019).

15% of total votes in this group, followed by approximately 8% in both the youngest (18 to 24) and the oldest group (over 70 years) – see Decker (2018).

According to Decker (2018), neither a high unemployment rate nor a higher proportion of foreigners per se lead to a greater willingness to vote for the *AfD*. In the western part of Germany, the *AfD* appears to be most successful in areas characterized by below-average household income and/or a high percentage of labor working in the manufacturing sector. In eastern Germany, the party enjoys a strong position in rural areas which suffer from economic and demographic shrinkage. Blue collar workers and the unemployed make up a quarter of all *AfD* voters, while the remaining three quarters are white collar workers, civil servants and the self-employed. Most voters have mid-level education (Niedermayer and Hofrichter 2016). Furthermore, *AfD* voters display a higher level of social dissatisfaction¹² and a greater propensity to support ideas and concepts usually associated with far-right body of thought. The clearest differences between this self-proclaimed “anti-establishment party” and other political parties in Germany centers around the discussion on migration and refugee policy, where its rigorous rejection coalesced with the opinions shared by its voters (Hambauer and Mays 2018).

Main Features of Selected Variables

Table 1 reports some descriptive statistics of the considered variables which will be discussed below. In addition to the quality and availability of data, the selection of variables is made under the adequate consideration of a large number of existing theoretical and empirical findings in the international context, combined with Germany-specific facts and experiences as well as “local” demographic and economic differences. All data reported represent the percentage change from 2013 to 2017.

The following reasons justify our “dynamic” approach. First, as already mentioned above, we are particularly interested in the “change” of the approval of the populist right-wing party *AfD* from 2013 to 2017. A purely static view does not seem appropriate, as it cannot provide a precise picture of preferential and structural changes of

¹² Using data from the German Socioeconomic Panel (SOEP), Poutvaara and Steinhardt (2018) suggest that those who feel that they have not received what they deserve in life worry more about immigration and are also likely to support the populist far-right party.

German voters between the elections. Second, in order not only to achieve a better comparability of the different data, but also to allow for a better interpretation of the empirical results, percentage changes of the variables seem to be more suitable for a dynamic approach than absolute values. This also helps to illustrate how extremely some factors at the regional (and local) level have changed between the two investigated election years.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the Data

Percentage change from 2013 to '17 in...	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
Far-right-wing party share	404	+44.64%	+479.08%	184.59%	87.96%
Foreigner ratio	404	+10.18%	+224.89%	58.02%	36.58%
Far-left-wing party share	404	-38.31%	+98.91%	25.92%	30.70%
Old-age ratio	404	-6.76%	+13.27%	3.30%	3.06%
Youth ratio	404	-5.96%	+13.48%	0.78%	4.17%
Unemployment rate	400	-39.33%	+15.38%	-15.85%	8.76%
Real GVA	403	-4.48%	+36.83%	12.01%	5.39%
Population	404	-3.65%	+9.48%	2.06%	2.18%
Foreign social benefit receivers	392	-82.59%	+800.00%	67.13%	114.45%
Total social benefit receivers	404	-47.64%	+974.80%	17.01%	88.11%
Asylum receivers	403	-95.45%	+3,036.59%	145.57%	192.02%

Source: Authors' own calculations based on the data from the *Regionaldatenbank Deutschland*.

The first variable “Far-right-wing party share” displays the change in the share of *AfD*-votes from 2013 to 2017. There was no county in Germany where the *AfD* lost votes. In 2017, in all but a single county (Münster with 4.94%), it gathered at least 5% of all votes, reaching its highest results in the East German county of Saxon Switzerland Osterzgebirge, where it won approximately 35% of votes. Comparing East and West Germany, the highest percentage increases took place in West Germany. The reason is that in West Germany the numbers grew from a much lower absolute level than in East Germany. In absolute shares, the *AfD* won an average of 22% of all votes in East Germany in 2017, compared to about 11% in West Germany.

The second variable, “Foreigner ratio”, shows the change in the share of foreigners in the total population of each county. Obviously, there was no county in Germany where this number decreased. Similarly, the total population of each county also rose in

most cases during the period. This suggests that foreign immigration largely accounted for the fact that total population is growing or at least not shrinking significantly over that period. For instance, the lowest absolute increase in the number of foreigners from 2013 to 2017 was 740, reported for the Lüchow-Dannenberg county (in Lower Saxony), which experienced an overall decrease in population of 313 during the same period. It must be noted that the available datasets made no distinction between EU and non-EU native migrants, hence all non-German migrants are included in the foreigner category.

The “Far-left-wing party share” represents the change in voting share of *Die Linke*, the major German far-left-wing party. *Die Linke* was not able to capitalize on public discontentment with established parties to the extent of the *AfD*. While in 2017, it did better overall than in 2013, it did not manage to increase its voting share in every county. On average, the increase was also less pronounced compared to the *AfD*. In the 2017 election the highest local voting share of *Die Linke* amounted to 23% (Suhl in Thuringia), while it was particularly unsuccessful in Bavaria, where the party was hardly able to win more than 5% of votes in any county.

The “Old-age ratio” shows the change in the proportion of people aged 65 and older in the total population. Like most European countries, Germany, has suffered from an endemic ageing of its population for decades, with the national “aged” share rising by 2.5% to around 21% between 2013 and 2017. However, some counties such as Goslar (Lower Saxony) or Wunsiedel (Bavaria) – interestingly also most Bavarian counties – have managed to overcome this trend and have experienced a rejuvenation of their population between 2013 and 2017, probably due to intra-German migration, especially from the less affluent regions of the former East German states. In East Germany, Leipzig is the only county in which the old-age dependency ratio has also fallen.

The fifth variable “Youth ratio”, an additional demographic variable, reveals the change in the share of people aged 18 and younger in the total population. For Germany in total this figure increased by about 1% (from 2013 to 2017), and reached approximately 16% in 2017, which is lower than the corresponding figure of the old-age ratio – the fact which in turn suggests the on-going demographic changes in Germany. Yet, the regional comparisons demonstrate strong disparities between the youth ratio

and the old-age ratio: Goslar (Lower Saxony) also managed to increase the youth ratio. In fact, there is no East German county which has experienced a decrease in the youth ratio.

The “Unemployment rate” variable shows the change in the share of the unemployment rate in the different counties. While the compound figures for Germany reveal a positive development as unemployment recedes by about 16%, there exist large regional disparities in the absolute unemployment rates at county level, ranging from 1.5% (Eichstätt in Bavaria) to 14% (Gelsenkirchen in North Rhine-Westphalia) in 2017.

The seventh variable, “Real GVA”, indicates the change in the real gross value added, i.e. the real growth between 2013 and 2017, generating in general positive effects on employment and income development. The national figure for Germany shows a real GVA growth of 12% over the four-year period. While some counties experienced an economic decline (e.g. Spree-Neisse in Brandenburg or Oberhausen in North Rhine-Westphalia), others (e.g. Forchheim and Pfaffenhofen in Bavaria or Berlin) grew far more rapidly than the national average. The comparison of the average real GVA growth between East and West Germany reveals no significant difference between 2013 and 2017 (12.2% for West and 12.0% for East). However, the fact that the West's real GVA hardly grows faster than the East in the period under study implies that the absolute change in real GVA was actually stronger in the West than in the East, considering that growth in the West started from a higher base. In this context, the expected rapid economic catch-up process between the West and the East has not been visible in these years, and such a process seems to take longer. In particular, the less-qualified workforce and the unemployed benefit comparably less from this economic development in the East, since their income is also to a large extent dependent on social welfare payment, the adjustment of which has not been immediately linked to the real GVA growth. In addition, there is an above-average number of inactive people in the East, i.e. young and old people, and they also seem to benefit less directly from real GVA growth - this was also the case for the age groups 18 to 24 and 70 or older, who voted strongly for the *AfD* in 2017 (see Decker 2018).

The eighth variable, “Population”, reveals the change in total population between 2013 and 2017. The total population in Germany grew by 2.5% in this period: a growth that was mainly driven by West Germany, which experienced a growth equivalent to

the national growth rate, while the East German population remained almost constant. This total population growth is also the result of the 38% increase in non-native population. Without foreign migration the country's population would have shrunk by almost 1%.

The variable "Foreign social benefit receivers" represents the change in receivers of social benefits with non-German nationality. As demonstrated in Table 1, there is a huge spread. The compound data for the number of foreign social benefit receivers for Germany from our data resource shows a 21% increase from 2013 to 2017. Set in relation to the mean figure for 392 counties from Table 1 (67.1%), it can be implied that rural counties with smaller total population have had a much stronger percentage increase of foreign social benefit receivers than large urban counties, which is supported by the range between the mean and max value (-82.6% to 800%), and the high standard deviation (115.5%).¹³ In relation with the change in the population composition (i.e. overall increase in foreigners by 38%), the narrative that "foreigners migrate into the German social security system" does not appear to be absolutely supported.

The tenth variable, "Total social benefit receivers", displays the change in the number of all receivers of social benefits. Again, this number has increased, but not as much as the figure for foreigners. This implies that the increase is mainly driven by foreign receivers, while German "native" receivers slightly decreased by 0.2%. However, as already mentioned above, the population of German citizen (non-foreigners) decreased by nearly 1% – that suggests that, while there are more foreign social benefit receivers in absolute terms, that does not apply in relative terms.

The eleventh variable, "Asylum receivers", shows the change in the number of recipients of asylum benefits by county between 2013 and 2017. This number is particularly driven by the refugee crisis in 2015/16 and thus shows the highest maximum value (the *Eichstätt* county in Bavaria experienced an increase from 41 to 1,286) but not the highest mean value. Regarding the geographic distribution of this variable, there were not

¹³ There is a significantly negative correlation between population density and the change in the number of foreign welfare recipients (Pearson's $r = -0.191$). The correlation between the East German region and the increase in the number of foreign welfare recipients is significantly positive (Pearson's $r = 0.314$) - of course, this should also be seen against the background of the fact that there is also a lower population density in the East (significant negative correlation, Pearson's $r = -0.139$). In other words, there are places in the eastern Germany with low population density and a high increase in foreign welfare recipients. The highest such increase was by 800% in Jena, Thuringia.

only high disparities between the West (148%) and the East (122%), and also among the individual counties (Saale-Holzland in Thuringia with -95.4% compared to Eichstätt in Bayern with + 3,037%, followed by other Bavarian counties such as Neu-markt (+1,531%) and Bamberg (+670%). A total of 468,608 people was receiving asylum benefits in Germany in 2017.

Empirical Results

The goal of our empirical analyses is to explain the recent, quite remarkable performance of the populist right-wing party *AfD* in Germany or, more precisely, in the various German counties (*Landkreise*) as we consider the voting results on the local level. To this end, we focus on the changes in voting behavior between the 2013 and the 2017 federal parliament elections – i.e. the ones that took place just prior and right after the climax of the refugee crisis. For this purpose, several OLS-models were estimated, with the change in the voters' support (i.e. share in votes) for the *AfD* being the dependent variable. Since the computed regression results of the “asylum receivers” (Table 1) were insignificant when using it as the only explanatory factor, this variable was not considered in the baseline models. On the other hand, the change in “foreigner ratio” was highly significant in all model specifications. The reasoning and interpretation of the model specifications as well as their empirical findings are commented on in the following paragraphs.

Model specification **B** is the baseline case, taking only the “foreigner ratio” as an independent variable into consideration. As widely acknowledged by many references shown above, an increase in the share of foreigners also increases the support of the far-right-wing party. In all model specifications integrating this variable, a positive correlation indicates the existence of a consistent effect.

Model specifications **P** checks for the political extremes by looking at the German voters' preference for the far-left-wing party, *Die Linke*. As specification **P.1** shows the expectations – based on ideological differences and concerns about the negative impact on redistribution caused by the refugee inflow – are confirmed, as a higher popularity for the far-left candidates goes hand in hand with lower popularity for those of the far-right-wing party *AfD*. **P.2** also includes the change in the number of asylum receivers

and finds, as expected, the positive relation: an increase in the number of asylum receivers also increases the support of the *AfD*. Furthermore, the negative impact of the change in votes for *Die Linke* increased slightly (this also holds when considering for the standardized beta values). **P.2** has a higher explanatory power compared to the baseline case and **P.1**.

The **D** category model specifications include demographic characteristics of the counties and examine whether these may have a significant impact on the *AfD*'s achievement. Specification **D.1** considers the impact of the change in the "old-age ratio" and in the "youth ratio". Both demographic figures indicate positive impacts on the popularity of *AfD*: namely that it was quite successful in attracting voters who belong to both the youngest (18 to 24) and the oldest age groups (over 70 years), as also shown by Decker (2018). Specification **D.2** adds population development on top. The old-age ratio is not included in this specification due to its insignificance. As demonstrated in Table 2, in those counties which experienced a population growth, the support for the *AfD* has not been so strong. This coincides with the observation described above that the recent population growth in Germany is a result of foreign immigration. It is thus possible to infer that more intensive contacts with foreigners might have mitigated the negative sentiment of natives towards refugees.

Table 2: Results of OLS Regression

Model	B	P.1	P.2	D.1	D.2	L	S.1	S.2	S.3	E.1	E.2	Total	East	West
Constant	1.025** (0.067)	1.258** (0.107)	1.220** (0.107)	1.090** (0.070)	1.360** (0.101)	0.859** (0.086)	0.929** (0.081)	1.717** (0.050)	1.716** (0.049)	1.271** (0.097)	1.148** (0.115)	1.213** (0.121)	3.099** (0.341)	0.929** (0.127)
Foreigner ratio	1.414** (0.097)	1.197** (0.124)	1.171** (0.124)	0.960** (0.138)	1.036** (0.127)	1.287** (0.111)	1.275** (0.119)			1.218** (0.112)	1.190** (0.112)	0.962** (0.137)		1.077** (0.202)
Far-left-wing party share		-0.411** (0.148)	-0.479** (0.149)										-2.789* (1.136)	
Old-age ratio				5.110** (1.410)										-11.518** (3.376)
Youth ratio				3.938** (1.039)	2.946** (0.979)							3.451** (1.017)		
Unemployment rate						-1.150* (0.465)	-1.102* (0.477)							
Real GVA											1.355* (0.678)	1.801* (0.697)		1.550* (0.696)
Population					-6.707** (1.855)					-6.289** (1.870)	-7.402** (1.945)	-8.138** (1.979)	-21.837** (3.997)	
Foreign social benefit receivers								0.141** (0.038)	0.185** (0.040)					-0.078* (0.039)
Total social benefit receivers									-0.157** (0.051)					
Asylum receivers			0.050** (0.019)			0.043* (0.019)								
N	403	403	402	403	403	398	387	391	391	401	401	387	65	321
R ²	0.346	0.358	0.371	0.378	0.378	0.362	0.323	0.035	0.058	0.362	0.368	0.358	0.596	0.096
R ² adj.	0.344	0.355	0.366	0.373	0.373	0.357	0.320	0.033	0.053	0.359	0.364	0.351	0.570	0.091

Note: * p<0.01, ** p<0.05
Source: Authors' own calculation.

Model specifications **S** consider indicators associated with the social welfare system. **S.1** accounts for the unemployment rate. Interestingly, a higher unemployment rate change coincides with a lower success of the *AfD*. At the first glance, this finding appears to be quite counterintuitive, as a populist right-wing party would be expected to have more support in counties in which it could blame foreigners for taking the jobs from the natives. Inspection of the correlation between “unemployment rate” and “foreigner ratio” reveals a significant negative correlation (Pearson correlation is -0.486 – see Table A1 in Appendix), i.e. the counties with an increase in the share of foreigners have witnessed a decrease in their unemployment rate. This is also in line with the reasoning given with regards to **D.2** on the negative effect of the population, given that population growth in the period was essentially due to the inflow of foreigners. A further examination of the role of unemployment in the change of voting behavior reveals that the *AfD* was more successful in 2017 in counties that displayed a high unemployment rate in 2013 (see Table A2 in Appendix). This supports the argument that the party benefited from adopting a strong antiimmigration position in its discourse between the two elections, fueling latent welfare-chauvinist tendencies that were more pronounced in counties where a higher proportion of voters are dependent on welfare benefits. In addition, supplementary findings indicate that a higher unemployment rate in 2013 is significantly correlated with a lower change in the unemployment rate, i.e. counties with a higher unemployment rate experienced lower growth or even a decrease in unemployment rates between the two years. Statistical evidence reveals, at a significant level, that those counties with a high unemployment rate in 2013 had almost unchanged rates in 2017 (see Table A2 in Appendix).

As it turned out to be insignificant, the “foreigner ratio” is no longer considered in further specifications (S.2 and S.3). **S.2** integrates the impact of change in “foreign social benefit receivers”. The positive effects are in line with the perception of people who see only the absolute increase, which is not proportional to the increase in the total number of foreigners. However, despite its significance, the explanatory power of this specification is rather limited. The same applies when also accounting for the development of the overall number of social benefits recipients under “total social benefit receivers” (**S.3**) -- again a further inspection of the correlation between overall social benefit receivers and the “foreigner ratio” reveals a significant negative correlation (Pearson correlation is -0.139 – see Table A1 in Appendix).

Model specifications **E** consider (economic) growth factors again including the “foreigner ratio” in all specifications. First **E.1** shows the impact of the “population” growth, revealing the negative impact on the support of the *AfD*, as already discussed above. Specification **E.2** finds, just like the previous reasoning related to the effect of unemployment rate change, a counterintuitive positive impact of “real GVA” growth on the support of the far-right-wing party, although the GVA growth is widely assumed to generate positive labor market effects and income development. Aside from the fears of natives that the new jobs (particularly the less-skilled ones) will be filled by foreign immigrants, one possible but partial explanation could be that GVA growth not only increases interregional inequality between rural and urban areas, but also widens the income gap between rich and poor within a county, leaving the latter group even worse off. For this reason, lower-income households seemed to be more strongly encouraged to support *AfD* (see also Decker 2018). On the other hand, a typically welfare-chauvinistic behavior of German voters may have played a role here: increases in income would automatically lead to the increasing contributions of the natives to the welfare system and its financing, from which foreigners also benefit. In this line of thought Lubbers et al. (2002, p. 371) found statistical evidence that “in more prosperous countries people are more likely to support extreme rightwing parties”. In line with this, Mols and Jetten (2016, p. 278) point out that “there is just as much evidence that PRWPs [populist right-wing parties] suffer losses in times of economic downturn or increased immigration and that PRWPs can thrive in times of economic prosperity and reduced immigration”. One reason they explicitly state is based on relative gratification – as analyzed by Grofman and Muller (1973) – which means that a group that is in a favorable position compared to others may also tend to take extreme positions because it fears losing its earlier achievements. Inspection of the Pearson correlation shows that there is no significant (linear or non-linear) correlation between “foreigner ratio” and “real GVA” (see Table A1 in Appendix).

Model specification **L** takes into account indicators for the labor market and shows the effects of changes in the unemployment rate and the number of asylum receivers. While a higher number of asylum receivers increases the popularity of the *AfD*, a higher unemployment rate reduces it. However, all these results have already been discussed in the previous specifications, which underline their robustness.

We also examined the impact of the change in industry shares (in % of total GVA) on *AfD* support. Although we found significant correlations for manufacturing (Pearson correlation of 0.211)¹⁴ and construction (Pearson correlation of -0.229), an OLS regression yielded insignificant results that denies a causal relationship, i.e. changes in the economic importance of the sectors have no impact on the election success of *AfD*. We have not considered the industry structure in a particular year, as this is not consistent with our model specification. Nevertheless, the industrial structure was very dynamic and showed on average a shift from the construction and manufacturing sector to the public and financial sector. We have also taken into account the change in the level of education. Since no data other than the snapshot of the census is available, we used data on the change in the proportion of secondary school graduates. Again, the Pearson correlations were promising and significant (“Mittlere Reife”: -0.162, “Abitur”: 0.195), but the regression showed no significant causations.

The specifications “**Total**”, “**East**”, and “**West**” represent somehow “best” specifications for explaining the success of the *AfD* in the 2017 election. These model specifications are based on a stepwise OLS regression which aims at identifying the best model given our specified variables. “Total” shows the result for Germany as a whole. As we expected, “foreigner ratio” was chosen by the algorithm implying that it has a high explanatory power. Moreover, the following variables are also included in this category: “youth ratio”, “real GVA” and “population”. The signs remained the same as in the previous specifications. Therefore, the *AfD* is most popular in counties where the foreigner ratio increases, the population rejuvenates, real GVA is growing but population is shrinking. Specification “East” applies the same procedure to the eastern part of Germany: surprisingly, the foreigner ratio was not significant enough to be included. Consequently, the *AfD* appears to be more successful in east German counties where there is less support for the “far-left-wing party”, the population is not overaging but shrinking, and less foreign people receive social benefits. In West Germany (specification “West”) the *AfD* has more support in counties where the “foreign ratio” increases and the “real GVA” is growing. The other indicators turned out to be less significant.

¹⁴ In a study on the electoral success of the right-wing party “Die Republikaner”, Lubbers and Scheepers (2000) found evidence that such parties are successful among manual workers, which is in line with our findings.

CONCLUSION

With some novel features, this paper makes important contributions to the academic and political discussions in the joint fields of the welfare state, migration and racism, the refugee crisis as well as the political preference of voters for populist right-wing parties. First, the concept of welfare chauvinism, which explains the attitudinal preference for ethnic boundaries around national welfare systems and the emergence of the right-wing populist party, is expanded by a more thorough integration of the conventional labor market and public finance aspects. Second, this study examines, for the first time in Germany, the impact of the refugee crisis – which reached its peak in the EU in 2015/16 – on the “changes” in electoral behavior in this country and the rapid emergence of the *AfD*, which was evident in the two German federal elections in 2013 and 2017. A purely static view, as widely held in previous international studies, does not seem appropriate for such a dynamic approach, since it can hardly provide an accurate picture of the preference and structural changes of German voters between the two elections. In the empirical part, an OLS analysis is performed based on publicly available data at county level (*Landkreise*). The selection of variables is based on existing theoretical and empirical findings in an international context, combined with Germany-specific facts and experiences, local demographic and economic differences, and *AfD*-specific voter characteristics. Among the key empirical findings are sufficiently reliable indications of the occurrence of welfare-chauvinistic effects that led to the success of the *AfD* in the 2017 election.

In general, the *AfD* was most successful in counties which display a growing foreigner ratio, youth ratio, and real GVA, as well as a shrinking population. Whereas in West Germany the party appears to be particularly profiting in counties with growing foreigner ratio and real GVA, its success in East German counties appears to be more closely coincided with a shrinking population and a smaller proportion of foreigners receiving social benefits. Furthermore, in East Germany, there is strong evidence that the *AfD* was able to draw votes from the far-left-wing party *die Linke* – the party which was traditionally strong in East German states and lost significantly there.

Taking into account the characteristics of *AfD* voters, one can postulate that our finding of a positive influence of real GVA growth on the support of the extreme right-wing

party points to a certain welfare-chauvinistic behavior of German voters, which was evident in the federal elections studied. These include (1) the natives' worries that the newly created jobs (particularly the less-skilled ones) associated with GVA growth will be taken by foreign immigrants; (2) GVA growth increases inequality between rural and urban areas, and widens the income gap between rich and poor within a district, so that lower-income households are worse off; and (3) income increases generated by real GVA growth would automatically lead to the increasing contributions of the natives to the welfare system and public finances, from which foreigners also benefit.

In the context of welfare chauvinism, a change in unemployment rates (between 2013 and 2017) may have no significant impacts on the party's election results in 2017, but the absolute level of unemployment in 2013 appears to have played a crucial role. This can be interpreted as follows: in 2013 there was no significant influx of immigrants, so the populist *AfD* did not significantly benefit from its chauvinist stance among those voters who were dependent on welfare benefits. This had changed significantly in 2017 due to the refugee crisis in 2015/16. The argument of welfare chauvinism becomes even more important when one considers that the general unemployment rate in Germany has fallen significantly, both in percentage and absolute terms, from 6.9% (3 million) in 2013 to 5.7% (2.5 million) in 2017, so that welfare issues would have been generally relevant to a smaller proportion of voters in 2017.

Last but not least, it should be emphasized that the findings herein are likely mirrored by similar forms of welfare chauvinism that have led to a resurgence of far-right populist political voting across nearly all EU countries, including France and Italy. Welfare chauvinism may also help to explain, at least in part, the results of the Brexit referendum in the UK. This, in the authors' view, calls for further similar studies to be conducted across the EU.

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APPENDIX

Table A1: Pearson Correlation between Considered Variables

	Far-right-wing party share	Foreigner ratio	Far-left-wing party share	Old-age ratio	Youth ratio	Unemployment rate	Real GVA	Population	Foreign social benefit receivers	Total social benefit receivers
Foreigner ratio	.588**									
Far-left-wing party share	-.458**	-.632**								
Old-age ratio	.387**	.516**	-.451**							
Youth ratio	.398**	.521**	-.671**	.017						
Unemployment rate	-.364**	-.486**	.498**	-.413**	-.402**					
Real GVA	.02	-.031	.225**	-.03	-.124*	-.017				
Population	-.414**	-.509**	.545**	-.683**	-.202**	.365**	.262**			
Foreign social benefit receivers	.187**	.276**	-.247**	.235**	.165**	-.165**	.051	-.111*		
Total social benefit receivers	-.083	-.139**	.053	-.042	-.182**	.118*	-.002	.143**	.356**	
Asylum receivers	.062	-.038	.168**	-.104*	-.081	.110*	.220**	.210**	.043	-.022

Note: * p<0.01, ** p<0.05

Source: Authors' own calculation.

Table A2: Pearson Correlation between AfD Shares and Unemployment Rate, 2013 and 2017

	Share of AfD in 2013	Unemployment rate in 2013	Share of AfD in 2017	Unemployment rate in 2017
Unemployment rate in 2013	.185**			
Share of AfD in 2017	.618**	.370**		
Unemployment rate in 2017	.078	.962**	.206**	
Change in unemployment rate '13 to '17	-.372**	-.275**	-.554**	-.025

Note: * p<0.01, ** p<0.05

Source: Authors' own calculation.