

Schroeder, Wolfgang; Ziblatt, Daniel; Bochert, Florian

Working Paper

Brandmauer - Still alive! Empirical findings on support for the AfD by established parties in Eastern Germany (2019-2024)

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Wolfgang Schroeder
Daniel Ziblatt
Florian Bochart

Brandmauer – Still Alive!

Empirical Findings on Support for the AfD by
Established Parties in Eastern Germany (2019-
2024)*

Discussion Paper

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Research Area

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WZB Berlin Social Science Center
Reichpietschufer 50
10785 Berlin
Germany
www.wzb.eu

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Wolfgang Schroeder, Daniel Ziblatt, Florian Bocher

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SP V 2024-503en

Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (2025)

Affiliation of the authors:

Wolfgang Schroeder

Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin (WZB)

Daniel Ziblatt

Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin (WZB)

Florian Bocher

Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin (WZB)

Abstract

Brandmauer – Still Alive!

Empirical Findings on Support for the AfD by Established Parties in Eastern Germany (2019–2024)

For years, federal politicians from all established parties have categorically ruled out any cooperation with the Alternative for Germany (AfD), erecting a so-called "firewall" ("Brandmauer") against the party. Nevertheless, reports increasingly document instances where this firewall is eroding, with established parties cooperating with the AfD at the municipal level. Against this backdrop, our study analyzes the meetings of municipal councils at the district level in all eastern German states from mid-2019 to mid-2024. The analysis of 2,452 meetings, during which the AfD submitted a total of 2,348 proposals, reveals that content-related cooperation occurred in 484 cases. This corresponds to approximately 20.6% of the AfD's proposals. In slightly more than half of these cases (244), at least five non-AfD representatives supported an AfD proposal or candidate. This represents roughly 10.2% of all proposals.

Significant regional variations are evident, but the areas with the strongest AfD presence are not necessarily those with the highest levels of cooperation. Content-wise, the AfD secures cooperation from established parties less often on controversial national topics, such as asylum or security, and more frequently on infrastructure-related tasks within the immediate jurisdiction of the respective councils, such as transportation issues. Overall, our study demonstrates that the contentious firewall, often assumed to have completely collapsed at the municipal level, has indeed developed cracks over the past five years but remains considerably more robust than widely believed. At the end of this paper, we discuss four conceivable strategic options for the future handling of the firewall.

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WZB Discussion Paper

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Summary

For years, federal politicians from all established parties have categorically ruled out any cooperation with the Alternative for Germany (AfD), erecting a so-called "firewall" ("Brandmauer") against the party. Nevertheless, reports increasingly document instances where this firewall is eroding, with established parties cooperating with the AfD at the municipal level. Against this backdrop, our study analyzes the meetings of municipal councils at the district level in all eastern German states from mid-2019 to mid-2024. The analysis of 2,452 meetings, during which the AfD submitted a total of 2,348 proposals, reveals that content-related cooperation occurred in 484 cases. This corresponds to approximately 20.6% of the AfD's proposals. In slightly more than half of these cases (244), at least five non-AfD representatives supported an AfD proposal or candidate. This represents roughly 10.2% of all proposals.

Significant regional variations are evident, but the areas with the strongest AfD presence are not necessarily those with the highest levels of cooperation. Content-wise, the AfD secures cooperation from established parties less often on controversial national topics, such as asylum or security, and more frequently on infrastructure-related tasks within the immediate jurisdiction of the respective councils, such as transportation issues. Overall, our study demonstrates that the contentious firewall, often assumed to have completely collapsed at the municipal level, has indeed developed cracks over the past five years but remains considerably more robust than widely believed. At the end of this paper, we discuss four conceivable strategic options for the future handling of the firewall.

The Concept of the „Brandmauer“

The Alternative for Germany (AfD) has achieved a “remarkable electoral track record” (Schroeder and Weßels 2023, p. 5) in its more than ten years of existence. In the 2021 federal election, nearly five million voters—approximately 63% of them male—were drawn to the party's right-wing populist platform. The AfD is now represented in 14 of Germany's 16 state parliaments, the Bundestag, and the European Parliament. Since its founding in 2013, the party has become increasingly radicalized and was classified in 2022 as “suspected right-wing extremist” by Germany's domestic intelligence agency (BfV 2023, p. 88). The party is also characterized by numerous ideological contradictions, abrupt leadership changes, and a shifting voter base. Nonetheless, with its “bipolarity between parliament and street, between populism and extremism,” the AfD may continue to attract voters by filling a perceived gap in representation on the far-right of the political spectrum (Schroeder and Weßels 2023, p. 6). This electoral success poses a challenge for all established parties, from the Left Party (Die Linke) to the CDU. For these parties, the political question has long been:

“How should a political actor be dealt with who presents itself in a bipolar manner between parliamentary and movement-oriented activities, does not shy away from extreme positions, provocations, and breaking taboos, and repeatedly challenges established political forces publicly? Its protagonists sometimes openly act as right-wing extremists but still, or perhaps precisely because of this, bind such a large voter base. This question is central but difficult to answer for our democracy and the future of party competition” (Schroeder and Weßels 2023, p. 7).

Established parties invoke a “firewall” against the AfD. This metaphor is used to proclaim the incompatibility of the AfD with all other established parties as a matter of principle. The purpose of this demarcation line is twofold: to prevent the AfD from establishing itself as a normal competitor in the party system and to promote the stability of German democracy (Linz 1978; Bermeo 2003; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). This approach aligns with the historical insight enshrined in Germany's Basic Law under the concept of “militant democracy.” The principle acknowledges that extremist parties do not seize power through violent coups but rather via the liberal mechanisms of democracy—and that democracy must actively counteract this risk. Another historical insight is that the enemies of liberal parliamentary democracy have not come to power from above, through central government, but from below, via their work in local governments.

Examples from Germany and Italy in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as Venezuela in the 1990s, demonstrate how cooperation between established parties and radical parties can jeopardize democracy (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Politicians in established parties are often tempted to collaborate with radical parties to stabilize their own power and benefit from their popularity. Conservative parties are particularly susceptible to this temptation, as they are often ideologically closer to radical right-wing parties (Ziblatt 2017). While it may seem easy to control radical parties in a coalition and co-opt their positions, such cooperation often leads to the normalization and legitimization of these forces, enabling them to gain power through democratic elections (Linz 1978).

The idea is that if established parties maintain the firewall successfully, these risks can be avoided. This requires a stable, democracy-oriented coalition of parties that prioritize democratic principles over short-term advantages in party competition (Capoccia 2005). Such a coalition can even reduce support for radical parties by addressing new issues or engaging with the campaign topics of radical forces without aligning with them (Van Spanje and De Graaf 2018). In the 1920s and 1930s, this firewall strategy helped prevent the further rise of radical forces in Belgium and Finland (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

However, contemporary examples from Northern Europe and other countries show that radical parties can increasingly be politically integrated or at least tolerated (Heinze 2018). Even without a firewall, these countries are often regarded as having high democratic quality (Nord et al. 2024). Nevertheless, Germany's historical and political context differs significantly. The simple integration or tolerance of radical parties is difficult to reconcile with Germany's constitutional mandate of militant democracy, as expressed in Articles 18 and 21 of the Basic Law.

For these reasons, all established parties represented in the Bundestag have committed themselves to rejecting political cooperation with the AfD and have invoked the firewall. These commitments are typically formalized in party resolutions. The CDU, for example, clearly articulated its position in a December 2018 resolution rejecting any cooperation with the AfD (CDU 2020). This stance was reaffirmed by then-party leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer and in a subsequent resolution in spring 2020 (CDU 2020; Zeit Online 2019). According to the CDU resolution, cooperation with the AfD “would not only attack our identity but also betray

our Christian Democratic values” (CDU 2020, p. 2).² Similarly, in early 2024, the German Bishops’ Conference condemned the AfD, asserting that “ethno-nationalism and Christianity are incompatible” (Deutsche Bischofskonferenz 2024). The FDP’s federal executive board also resolved in spring 2020 to categorically reject cooperation with the AfD at all political levels and to avoid dependency on the AfD in decision-making (FDP 2020). The Left Party’s federal committee ruled out cooperation with the AfD at all political levels as recently as March 2024 (Die Linke 2024). While the SPD and the Greens had not previously issued explicit written resolutions at the federal level, any breaches of the firewall were swiftly condemned by party leadership (Tagesspiegel 2023). Ahead of the 2024 European elections, all democratic parties in the Bundestag issued a joint declaration ruling out any cooperation with the AfD (Tagesschau 2024).

Since Thomas Kemmerich’s (FDP) election as Minister President of Thuringia in February 2020—with votes from both the AfD and CDU—the firewall in Germany has begun to show cracks. While the CDU and FDP reaffirmed their non-cooperation stance in resolutions passed in spring 2020, subsequent instances of collaboration between established parties and the AfD—particularly at the municipal level—have been documented (Hummel and Taschke 2023). Criticism of the firewall has also grown. Some local politicians have argued that they are bound by their conscience rather than by party-mandated prohibitions on cooperation (Matthes and Rohmann 2023). Saxony’s Minister President Michael Kretschmer (CDU) has emphasized: “The Basic Law does not mention firewalls, and Germany’s municipal codes generally state that a municipal council or district council is not a parliament but part of local administration” (Kretschmer, quoted in FAZ 2024).

Indeed, pragmatism, a willingness to cooperate, and a consensus-driven culture are hallmarks of local politics. Political scientist Theodor Eschenburg noted this peculiarity: “At the local level, there are no ‘Christian Democratic streetlights’ or ‘Social Democratic public restrooms’” (Eschenburg 1967, p. 137). However, municipal politicians are elected representatives whose mandates are owed to the parties that nominated them. Furthermore, local infrastructure issues—such as housing and transportation—are not merely functional matters but often highly

² A renewed and clear distancing resolution passed by the CDU Presidium in 2019, following the initial party resolution from December 2018, received a divided response in East Germany. While 68% of respondents in West Germany supported the resolution, only 46% did so in Eastern Germany. Nearly half (49%) in Eastern Germany were in favor of abandoning the cooperation ban (Tagesschau 2019). After the CDU reaffirmed this resolution following the election of Thomas Kemmerich in February 2020, the distancing was met with broad approval, garnering 76% support. Among CDU supporters, more than four out of five (83%) considered it the right decision (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen 2020).

political questions involving competing visions of societal organization and quality of life. Ignoring the role of local politics in stabilizing democracy would imply that the approximately 200,000 of Germany's 205,000 elected representatives bear no special responsibility for safeguarding democracy. Even CDU chairman Friedrich Merz acknowledged the importance of local politics in the summer of 2023.

In an interview with ZDF in 2023, Merz limited the AfD cooperation ban to "legislative bodies," such as those at the European, federal, or state levels (ZDF 2023). However, this exclusion of local politics from the cooperation ban overlooks the significance of municipal politics in normalizing authoritarian movements and parties (Heinze 2021).³ However, the concept of the firewall is increasingly contested in political science, as systematically excluding a particular party risks leaving some citizens' interests unrepresented in parliament (Schmid 2024).

Against this backdrop, the question arises as to what forms of municipal cooperation between the AfD and established parties already exist, how frequently such cooperation occurs, and to what extent the firewall is breached.

Current State of Research

While there have been several studies examining right-wing actors, their networks, and infrastructures within the municipal context, there is only a limited number of works that systematically investigate cooperation between the AfD and other parties (e.g. Hummel and Taschke 2024; Wurthmann 2023). Nevertheless, regional and national media outlets reported on instances of cooperation between the AfD and other factions long ago. For example, in 2020, a Der Spiegel research team documented 40 cases of municipal cooperation, most of them involving the CDU (Spiegel 2020).

What constitutes cooperation? Does it exist only when formal collaboration is visible? Cooperation can encompass both formal collaboration (e.g., forming a joint parliamentary group) and informal arrangements or shared voting behavior. Hummel (2022) identified various municipal instances of cooperation between far-right and democratic parties in Saxony

³ Municipal politics played a central role in the rise of the NSDAP (see Pätzold and Weissbecker 1998). Edward L. Gibson (2005, p. 104) referred to this as "subnational authoritarianism." Developments at the local level carry significant national relevance: first, in terms of the establishment and normalization of far-right parties and positions; and second, as "schools of democracy" from which a national understanding of democracy can be derived. As Benjamin Höhne has aptly noted—referring to East Germany—the takeover of state governments could be preceded by municipal experimental spaces (Höhne 2020, p. 166).

at the district and municipal levels. He categorized five forms of cooperation: (1) informal agreements (e.g., preparations for joint action), (2) general cooperation (e.g., ongoing collaboration on substantive issues), (3) shared voting behavior, (4) joint nominations (e.g., distribution of offices), and (5) the formation of joint parliamentary groups (Hummel, p. 104f).

Gorshik et al. (2016) were the first to systematically study the parliamentary practices of the AfD in Saxon municipal councils. They analyzed the AfD's municipal political activities in two district councils and two municipal councils, focusing on their working methods, priority issues, faction stability, political biographies, and interactions with other factions. The latter point is particularly noteworthy. The AfD demonstrated ambivalence, engaging in shared voting behavior on one hand while maintaining rhetorical distance from other representatives on the other. Overall, there were varying levels of contact and voting coalitions, with other factions not consistently distancing themselves from the AfD (Gorshik et al., p. 11f).

Hummel (2022), who conducted a qualitative study of how established parties dealt with the AfD in Saxon municipalities between 2019 and 2022, arrived at the following findings: first, cases of municipal cooperation with the AfD (e.g., parliamentary group formations, distribution of offices and committee appointments) were identified in nearly all municipalities studied;⁴ second, no regional patterns were discernible, as cooperation occurred across nearly all regions; third, cooperation most frequently took place between the AfD and the CDU; and fourth, the primary form of cooperation was shared voting behavior (Hummel, pp. 105f). However, these findings were based on only 20 documented cases of cooperation.

The most comprehensive and systematic study to date on municipal cooperation between the AfD and other parties is by Hummel and Taschke (2024). However, their research focuses exclusively on eastern Germany. Covering the period from summer 2019 to the end of 2023, they documented 121 instances of cooperation between the AfD and other parties, primarily between the AfD and CDU. Shared voting behavior was most common, but other forms of

⁴ Between 2019 and 2022, Hummel (2022) analyzed the cases of Chemnitz, Döbeln, and Limbach-Oberfrohna in greater detail. In Döbeln, there was a joint substantive and voting-based collaboration between the AfD and CDU to oversee the operations of an organization reliant on municipal funding and to intervene in its strategic direction (Hummel, pp. 107ff). In the case of Limbach-Oberfrohna, the AfD, CDU, and Free Voters Limbach-Oberfrohna partially voted against an initiative by the Green city councilor to lay Stolpersteine (stumbling stones) in memory of the victims of National Socialism. Two of the five Stolpersteine were intended to commemorate communists, and the AfD and CDU justified their opposition by claiming that these individuals held anti-democratic ideologies (Hummel, pp. 109f). In the final case, representatives from the CDU, FDP, AfD, and Pro Chemnitz elected their own candidates to the Youth Welfare Committee, contrary to the recommendations of welfare organizations. This resulted in a sharp decline in the representation of welfare organizations in the committee (from 51% to 7%) and in the city's youth welfare projects (from 67% to 13%) (Hummel, pp. 111f).

cooperation, such as forming joint parliamentary groups, submitting joint proposals, nominating joint candidates, and informal agreements, were also observed. However, the study does not claim to be exhaustive, acknowledging that many additional cases of cooperation likely went undocumented. Moreover, it does not specify how many municipalities were examined in total or the percentage of potential cooperation opportunities that did not materialize.

Hafeneger et al. (2018) analyzed the parliamentary activities and the responses of established parties to the AfD in municipal councils in Rhineland-Palatinate, Hesse, and Lower Saxony. The authors identified varying approaches, ranging from “ignoring” to “distancing” or “rejecting” the AfD. Occasionally, tactical alliances were formed against the AfD, but partial agreements and collaboration were also observed in some cases.

Despite these isolated studies, there has been no comprehensive analysis of patterns of cooperation and interaction at the district level, comparing cases within and between federal states. Our study is the first to systematically analyze cooperation between established parties and the AfD at the district level across all counties and independent cities in eastern Germany.

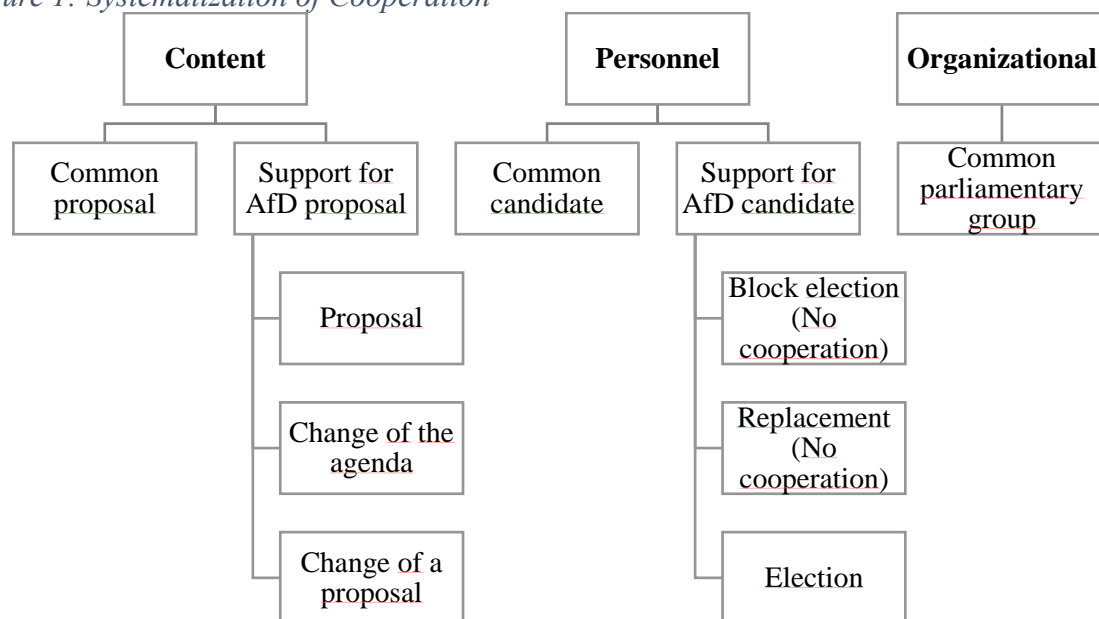
Our Approach

In light of current socio-political discussions and the existing state of research, we decided to examine cooperation between established parties and the AfD at the district level in eastern German states. Although a later part of our study will explore municipal cooperation across Germany, we initially focused on eastern German districts for two reasons: The AfD’s political presence at the municipal level is stronger in eastern German districts than in western German ones, making cooperation between established parties and the AfD more likely. Conducting a comprehensive analysis of all German districts would require an immense workload, while a preliminary focus on eastern German districts reduces this burden.

Our study examined municipal political activities in the 75 eastern German districts (58 rural districts and 17 independent cities). The decentralized and fragmented structure of municipal governance posed significant challenges in accessing data, particularly at smaller territorial levels. Consequently, we concentrated our analysis on the district level, excluding municipalities. We analyzed meeting records from the highest political bodies (district councils or city councils) in these 75 districts from July 2019 to June 2024. Exceptions were made for districts where the AfD had no political presence for more than half of the study period, as was the case for one district (city of Rostock). Ultimately, our study focused on 74 districts.

The meeting records of district or city councils formed the empirical basis of our analysis. Regarding cooperation, we distinguished three types: content-related, personnel-related, and organizational cooperation. Content-related cooperation occurs when the AfD submits a proposal (e.g., a resolution, an amendment to a resolution, or a motion to amend the agenda) and at least one non-AfD representative votes in favor, or when a faction submits a joint proposal with the AfD.⁵ Personnel-related cooperation occurs when the AfD nominates a candidate and at least one non-AfD representative votes for the candidate, or when a faction nominates a joint candidate with the AfD. Our analysis deliberately excludes block elections or substitute nominations, as these are often passed by consensus at the local level. Organizational cooperation occurs when another party forms a joint parliamentary group with the AfD. Procedural motions were consciously excluded, as these are often adopted by consensus at the local level.

Figure 1: Systematization of Cooperation



Source: Own Illustration

Cooperation was identified by comparing the number of votes in favor of an AfD proposal or candidate with the number of AfD representatives present at a session. Cooperation was deemed to exist if there were more approvals than AfD representatives present. Voting at the municipal level is typically conducted by acclamation, and “party discipline” is not uniformly enforced. As a result, most meeting records do not specify which individuals or factions

⁵ Only proposals that were actually put to a vote in district or city council meetings were considered relevant. For example, if an AfD motion was referred by majority vote to a committee, our study does not count this as cooperation. Referring a motion to a committee does not, by itself, reflect any substantive decision about the motion but merely confirms that another body will consider it.

supported or opposed a proposal but merely indicate whether it passed. Roll-call votes are rare at the district level. Consequently, cooperation could be inferred in cases where, for example, a single independent or fringe representative supported an AfD proposal, though the precise affiliations of those voting cannot always be determined. To identify more structured forms of cooperation, our study introduced the concept of strong cooperation, defined as cases where at least five non-AfD representatives voted for an AfD proposal or candidate.⁶

Our analysis excluded cases where established parties relied on AfD votes for a majority. Some parties, like the FDP, have explicitly rejected such dependencies in their resolutions (FDP 2020, p. 1). An established party may knowingly accept AfD support to achieve a majority, or it may be surprised by the AfD's support. Without additional context, it is often impossible to determine which scenario applies based on meeting records. To avoid unfairly attributing responsibility to parties for unintended AfD support, our study focused solely on explicit endorsements of AfD proposals or candidates, which represent conscious breaches of the firewall.

Our study manually analyzed 2,452 meetings across 69 districts, with meeting minutes averaging 10–50 pages each. In five districts, no analysis was possible due to a complete lack of documentation. These districts, predominantly rural and sparsely populated, lacked any record of AfD proposals, making assessments of potential cooperation impossible. Nonetheless, partial records in 11 other districts provided sufficient data to conduct an analysis.

Results

A total of 521 cases of cooperation were identified, with almost all of them (484) involving content-related collaboration. Joint proposals by an established party with the AfD were relatively rare—occurring only 11 times, which corresponds to 2.3%. Personnel-related cooperation was documented in just 36 instances (none of which involved agreement on a joint candidate), and there was only one case of organizational cooperation. The latter took place in Vogtlandkreis, where, in early 2023, the Deutsche Soziale Union (DSU) formed a joint parliamentary group with parts of the AfD. In slightly less than half of all cases (244), strong cooperation was observed, meaning at least five non-AfD representatives voted in favor of the

⁶ The average size of district or city councils across the 69 districts analyzed was approximately 55.9 members, with a median of 50. Therefore, a threshold of five representatives—roughly 10% of a district or city council—was set as the minimum for identifying strong cooperation. This number was deliberately set higher than the three-member minimum required for forming a parliamentary group under the rules of many district councils.

AfD. Table 1 provides an overview of the various types of cooperation, broken down by federal states.

Table 1: Overview of the Different Types of Cooperation by State

State	Cooperation	Content	Personnel	Organizational	Strong Coop	% Coop ⁷	% strong Coop ⁸
Brandenburg (18 counties)	99	91	8	0	43	18,3	8,5
Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (7 counties)	102	101	1	0	43	19,4	8,3
Sachsen (11 counties)	123	113	9	1	64	22,4	12,5
Sachsen-Anhalt (14 counties)	129	115	14	0	64	27,0	14,5
Thüringen (19 counties)	68	64	4	0	30	16,0	7,4
Total (69 counties)	521	484	36	1	244	20,6	10,2

Source: Online Protocols of District Council and City Council Meetings; 2019-2024 / Own Illustration

Looking at Table 1, it becomes clear that Saxony-Anhalt has the highest number of collaborations—both content-related and personnel-related—closely followed by Saxony. However, the absolute number of collaborations can be influenced by the number of proposals the AfD submits in a district. Over the entire observation period, the AfD submitted a total of 2,348 content-related proposals across all the districts analyzed. It is evident that cooperation is more likely in districts where the AfD submits many proposals compared to those where it submits few or no proposals. To relate the number of collaborations to the number of proposals submitted by the AfD, Table 1's last two columns show the relative number of collaborations⁹ and strong collaborations¹⁰ by federal state. Once again, Saxony-Anhalt stands out with a

⁷ To calculate the percentage of cooperation, the number of substantive cooperations was divided by the number of proposals that were put forward by the AfD throughout the observation period.

⁸ To calculate the percentage of strong cooperation, the number of strong cooperations was divided by the sum of AfD proposals and personal cooperations.

⁹ See footnote 7.

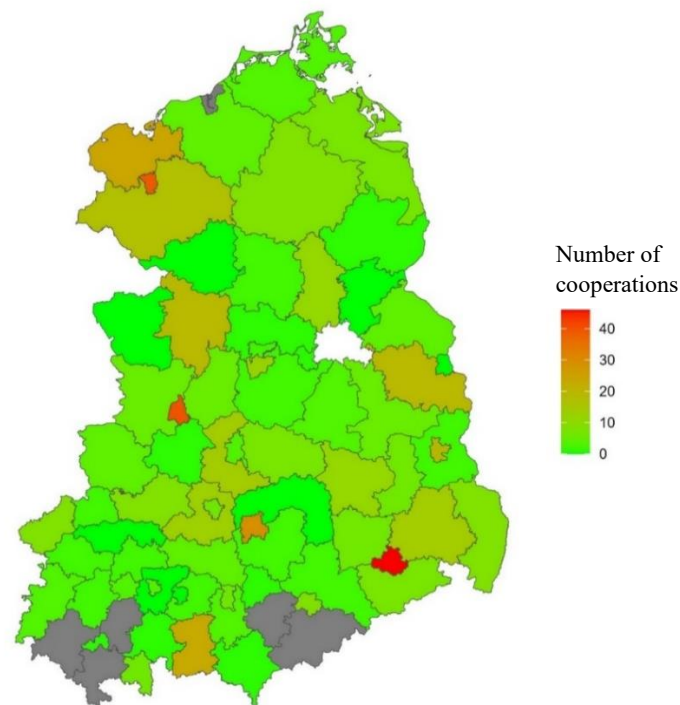
¹⁰ See footnote 8.

relatively high percentage of collaborations. In 27% of AfD motions in Saxony-Anhalt, other parties agreed, and in 14.5% of proposals, at least five votes were cast in favor. Compared to other eastern German states, both figures represent clear peaks.¹¹ Saxony also has a relative collaboration rate exceeding 20% and a strong collaboration rate exceeding 10%, whereas all other eastern German states have rates below these levels.

The absolute and relative number of collaborations can also be examined in more detail at the district level. Figure 2 shows the absolute number of collaborations, with districts shaded in gray excluded from the analysis either due to lack of data or because the AfD was politically inactive at the district level for more than half of the observation period. A striking feature of the figure is that nearly all districts experienced cooperation with the AfD. Only 8 out of the 69 districts analyzed showed no instances of cooperation with the AfD, meaning the firewall successfully held for five years in just 8 districts (approximately 12%). Simultaneously, urban districts such as Dresden, Leipzig, and Magdeburg stand out with over 40 collaborations in some cases. However, it should be noted that urban districts generally hold significantly more meetings per year than rural districts. Additionally, the volume of proposals submitted in urban districts is often much higher than in rural districts. The higher number of meetings and proposals in urban districts like Dresden, Leipzig, or Magdeburg thus resulted in more collaborations compared to other districts. For this reason, the relative number of collaborations and strong collaborations is once again a more meaningful variable.

¹¹ This aligns with the fact that in Saxony-Anhalt, the cooperation debate within the CDU began relatively early (Spiegel 2019).

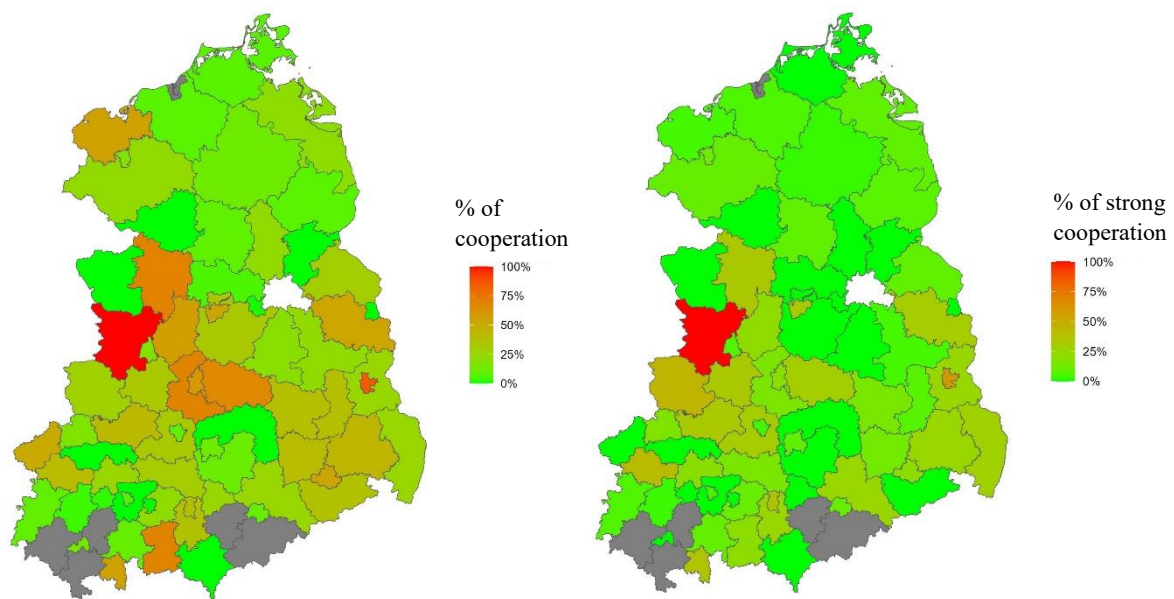
Figure 2: Absolute Number of Cooperation per County



Source: Online Protocols of District Council and City Council Meetings; 2019-2024 / Own Illustration

Figure 3 shows the relative number of collaborations and strong collaborations by district. The figure reveals no specific region with multiple districts that stands out for a high level of cooperation. Areas where the AfD is particularly strong are relatively inconspicuous in Figure 3. One explanation could be that the political atmosphere in these districts is more polarized due to the AfD's strong presence, prompting a stronger commitment to maintaining the firewall. In districts where the AfD has a greater presence, it may be perceived more as a political rival, which other parties are less inclined to strengthen through cooperation. Conversely, in districts where the AfD has a weaker presence, it may seem less threatening, leading to greater support for its motions. Overall, only a few districts, such as Börde (with three cases of strong content-related cooperation out of three AfD proposals and two additional cases of strong personnel-related cooperation) and the urban district of Cottbus (with 17 instances of content-related cooperation out of 20 AfD proposals, including 13 cases of strong cooperation), stand out.

Figure 3: Relative Number of Cooperation and Strong Cooperation by County



Source: Online Protocols of District Council and City Council Meetings; 2019-2024 / Own Illustration

Comparing rural districts to urban districts, it becomes evident that rural regions exhibit significantly more collaborations and slightly more strong collaborations than urban areas. In rural districts, collaboration occurs in 26.5% of AfD motions, while in urban districts, this figure is only 16.0%—a difference of more than 10%. Comparing the relative frequency of strong collaborations, the difference is smaller but still present, with values of 11.7% for rural districts and 9.1% for urban districts.

Of particular interest is the question of which parties cooperate most frequently with the AfD. Hummel (2022) and Hummel and Taschke (2024) found that cooperation primarily occurs between the CDU and the AfD. In our study, it must first be noted that in most cases, it is not possible to determine exactly who cooperated with the AfD. This is due to the voting method. At the district level, voting is typically conducted by acclamation, with the minutes recording the number of approvals, rejections, and abstentions numerically but not by party. Exact voting behavior can often only be identified in roll-call votes, for instance, during deputy elections or procedural motions. Only in 42 of the 521 cases of cooperation (approximately 8%) was our study able to determine precisely which representatives and parties collaborated with the AfD.

In these 42 cases, it becomes apparent that independent representatives and representatives of regional parties, such as the Free Voters (Freie Wähler), most frequently cooperated with the AfD. As shown in Table 2, this accounts for approximately 83% of the collaborations. Among the established democratic parties, CDU representatives were the most likely to vote in favor

of AfD motions or submit joint proposals with the AfD. The CDU was closely followed by the FDP, which supported the AfD in 50% of cases. Other Bundestag-represented parties cooperated with the AfD less frequently but still showed collaboration rates exceeding 20%. Thus, no established party managed to uphold the firewall consistently across all eastern German districts without exceptions. It is worth noting that an AfD proposal or candidate could be supported by multiple parties, and multiple parties could submit a joint motion with the AfD. Consequently, the percentages for different parties in Table 2 add up to more than 100%.

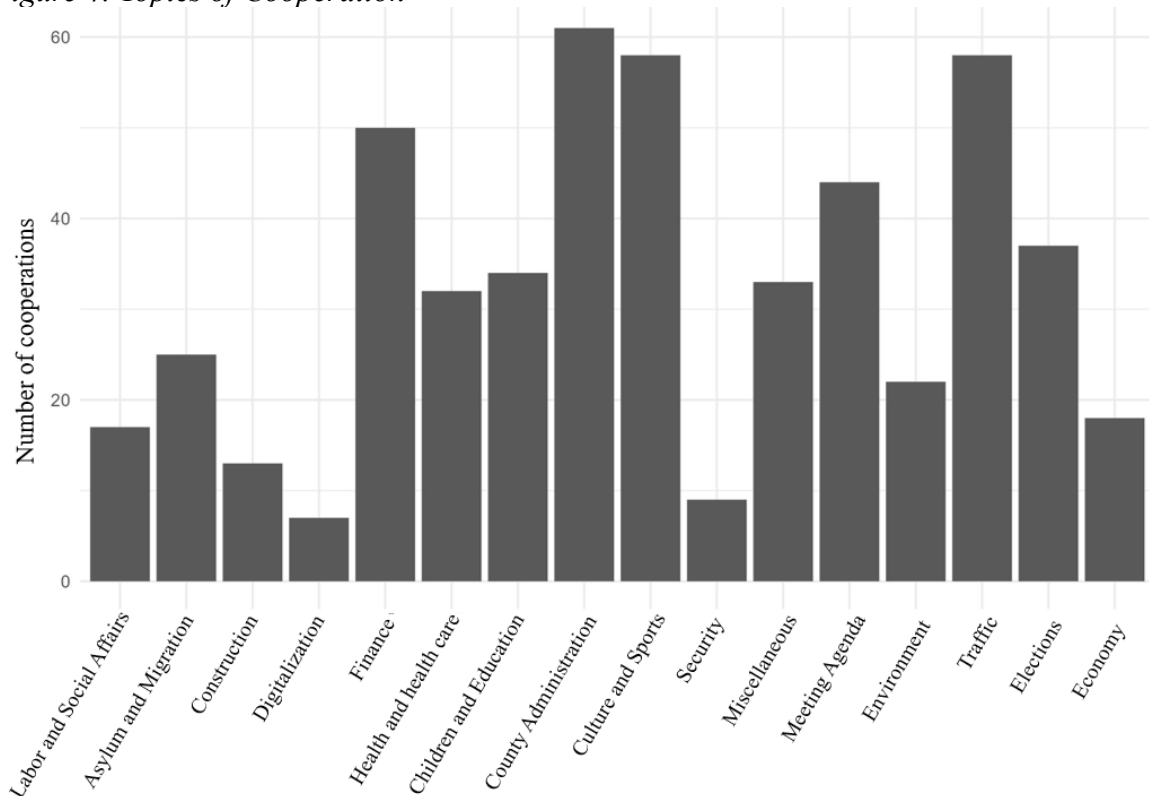
Table 2: Percentage of Cooperation by Party

Party	% of Cooperation
Other	83,3
CDU	61,9
FDP	50,0
SPD	38,1
Grüne	26,2
Linke	23,8

Source: Online Protocols of District Council and City Council Meetings; 2019-2024 / Own Illustration

Finally, the question naturally arises as to which topics most often lead to cooperation. Our study categorized each of the 521 cases of cooperation based on the proposal title or agenda item into one of 16 categories. Two of these categories are specific: changes to the agenda ("Agenda") and personnel cooperation ("Elections"). The remaining 14 categories aim to reflect the thematic diversity of district council or city council meetings. Figure 4 provides an overview of the topics with the highest frequency of cooperation. It is notable that cooperation is particularly frequent in the "County Administration" category, which includes organizational issues related to the council as an institution. This finding can be explained by the fact that matters such as council rules of procedure and the district's main statutes are often heavily debated topics. Additionally, frequent cooperation can be observed in the areas of culture and sports, as well as transportation. A closer look at the specific topics of cooperation reveals that the cultural and sports category frequently involves debates about gender issues. In transportation, the proposals are more diverse, often relating to independent municipal tasks such as traffic lights, parking spaces, and crosswalks. In most cases, cooperation does not revolve around controversial, national-level issues such as asylum and migration or security. Instead, it is primarily on infrastructure-related matters where cooperation occurs.

Figure 4: Topics of Cooperation



Source: *Online Protocols of District Council and City Council Meetings; 2019-2024 / Own Illustration*

Discussion

These findings show that the firewall is not only maintained on the federal and state levels but also largely upheld at the municipal level in eastern German districts. Over five years, in the 69 eastern German districts analyzed, 521 cases were identified where other parties supported the AfD, including more than 240 instances of strong cooperation, where at least five non-AfD representatives voted for an AfD proposal or candidate. This corresponds to about 21% of AfD proposals where cooperation occurred, and approximately 10% of proposals where strong cooperation was identified. This means that in around 80% of instances where cooperation with the AfD could have taken place, it did not occur.

Our estimation of cooperation is, in many ways, conservative: in some districts, the data was too limited to analyze amendment proposals. Additionally, our study only includes personnel-related cooperation in individual elections. Block elections (where multiple individuals are elected in a single vote, such as committee appointments) and substitute nominations (e.g., due to the departure of a council or committee member) were not considered. Furthermore, procedural motions were excluded. Expanding the definition of cooperation to include procedural motions, for example, could likely identify additional cases of cooperation.

This study, with its theoretical grounding in democracy and comprehensive, systematic analysis, significantly advances the existing body of research. It is the first to systematically capture the number and types of cooperation between established parties and the AfD across all eastern German districts. By breaking down the topics most likely to result in cooperation, the study also contributes to a deeper reflection on the concept of a “militant democracy.”

One central empirical finding of our study is that in at least 80% of cases, the firewall in eastern German districts remains intact and is enforced even at the municipal level. However, it cannot be ignored that in about 10–20% of cases, districts did not fully adhere to the self-imposed commitment of maintaining the firewall. Notably, the CDU and FDP—both of which have party resolutions explicitly prohibiting cooperation with the AfD—were comparatively more likely to engage in cooperation. This raises questions about how the concept of the firewall should be handled in the future.

From a political science perspective, four possible scenarios emerge:

Option 1 – Muddling Through: In this scenario, things continue as they are. Cooperation between established parties and the AfD at the district level continues to occur in some cases, despite party leadership rejecting such actions. The firewall, while overwhelmingly functional, is occasionally breached at the district level, despite clear resolutions and numerous public warnings. This approach is plausible and operational, given that the firewall has worked in the vast majority of cases. However, this scenario risks further normalizing the AfD through day-to-day interactions on practical municipal issues. This normalization could eventually lead to larger cracks, potentially paving the way for cooperation at the state and federal levels. Even without such erosion, the AfD’s influence at the municipal and state levels could grow significantly due to its strong parliamentary presence, as highlighted in the Thüringen Project (Steinbeis 2024).

Option 2 – Adapting Practice: Here, the practice of cooperation is further aligned with the firewall’s programmatic guidelines, leading to stricter enforcement. This scenario seems unlikely, given the existing party resolutions and the occasional breaches of the firewall. However, strong societal mobilization—such as that observed in early 2024—could increase pressure on municipal politicians to implement the firewall more consistently. This would require established parties to submit their own proposals whenever an AfD proposal is deemed substantively valid. While this approach avoids directly endorsing AfD motions, it still ensures

that substantively valid positions are implemented through motions submitted by democratic parties. However, this scenario may not prevent political actors from finding less visible ways to cooperate with the AfD.

Option 3 – Adjusting Goals: In this scenario, party leadership modifies its political stance on the firewall to align with current practices where breaches occur. This would mean politically dismantling the firewall and recognizing the AfD as an established party with which cooperation is possible.

This scenario is concerning, given that the AfD has been classified by domestic intelligence as a “suspected right-wing extremist case” (BfV 2023, p. 88). Normalizing cooperation with this party could pose a threat to the survival of German democracy. Local politics offers significant opportunities for political influence while also serving as a “school of democracy” from which a national democratic ethos is derived.

Option 4 – Recalibration: Under this approach, party leadership and municipal politicians rethink the firewall concept. The firewall could be partially lifted in specific policy areas while being strictly enforced in others. This approach would make the firewall more flexible and adaptable. Municipal politicians would no longer feel overwhelmed by the absolute implementation of the concept, reducing the scope for excuses. This scenario assumes that the AfD does not pose a threat to German democracy in all policy areas and, therefore, cooperation should not be categorically excluded in every area.

Regarding Scenario 4, our study offers insights into which areas are most likely to see a “flexible” implementation of the firewall. Cooperation with the AfD is already common in less controversial infrastructure topics, such as installing traffic lights or crosswalks. In such areas, the practical demands of governance make the firewall harder to maintain. Allowing cooperation on these basic issues could help reinforce adherence to the firewall in more contentious topics like asylum and migration.

However, several risks remain. First, differentiating between basic and contentious topics can be challenging in practice. Second, cooperation in one area could spill over into others, including politically sensitive areas like asylum and migration. The risk of a slippery slope is tangible. Furthermore, the partial lifting of the firewall in local governance could be used as an excuse to mask insufficient strategic direction by established parties at the district level.

The options outlined here involve strategic decisions that parties must confront. Given the multitude of societal crises and forms of dissatisfaction, it will remain challenging for democratic parties to uphold the firewall. Both party leadership and municipal politicians face difficult times ahead, exacerbated by the AfD's recent electoral successes in eastern German state elections.

For the firewall to be effective, it must be accompanied by a convincing strategic approach, which in certain policy fields (particularly migration, finance, and security) may require significant course corrections. Without such a strategic framework—one that avoids mere moralizing—it will be difficult to continue the successful implementation of the firewall, as shown by this study. Although the fight against the AfD has yet to reduce its electoral resonance, the empirical evidence presented here demonstrates that the firewall can work. To sustain it, committed democrats and strategically organized parties must embrace the local political arena as the foundation of their operational capacity.

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