

The Radicalization of the Far-Right in Germany and Regional Disparities in Support

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ABSTRACT: The radicalization of far-right political groups is becoming an increasingly dangerous problem in German politics. While Germany may be viewed as a fervent ally for liberal thought in Europe, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party is gaining substantial traction in national politics. Interestingly, the AfD has grown disproportionately by region, drawing more support from East Germany than West. The underpinnings of this trend hinge upon increased asylum being granted to Muslim immigrants and the long-held disdain by the East for the West's economic successes. An understanding of the AfD's popularity is integral to combating intolerance and radicalization within Germany as well as the threat of its spread throughout Europe.

Introduction

The radicalization and political success of Germany's far-right party, the Alternative for Germany or AfD, could pose a threat to Germany's role as the defender of a liberal and tolerant Europe. The AfD's negative attitudes towards immigration and Islam have fueled its most recent political advancements in the national parliament — the party won 12.6% of the national vote in the 2017 federal elections as well as making significant electoral gains in regional state governments (Arzheimer and Berning, 2019). In the state elections in the fall of 2019, Thuringia, Brandenburg and Saxony experienced large advances by the AfD — the party is currently the second largest party in these state governments, representing dramatic increases in the AfD's vote share since the party's establishment in 2013 (Chase and Goldenberg, 2019). It is also important to note that the AfD has veered sharply to the right since 2013. While it was founded as a conservative free-market protest party against the Greek bailout and the euro, it is now defined by its nationalist, anti-immigrant stance with elements of right-wing populism, racism, and neo-Nazism (Bennhold and Eddy, 2019). The AfD's support also varies significantly among Germany's states, as AfD support is much more prominent in the former East than in the former West (Goerres et al, 2018). In the elections to the European Parliament in 2019, the AfD received 11% of the vote — better than its 2014 outcome but worse than the 2017 elections — and managed to beat Angela Merkel's center-right CDU to first place in two east German states. Currently, the AfD still comprises the largest opposition party in the German government ahead of the 2021 federal election, with [polls](#) predicting the AfD to win about 10% of the vote.

This paper seeks to understand why the AfD has radicalized and grown in prominence in recent years and, especially, why the regional differences in far-right support between the East and West exist. I argue that the recent rise of the AfD is the result of the recent spike in Muslim migrants seeking asylum in Germany and the fervent feelings of nationalism and xenophobia which it sparked, notably in the East. Secondly, I will argue that the greater support for the AfD in

the East is the result of long-existing feelings of disillusionment and resentment with the economic successes of the West as well as the socio-cultural differences that prevail today as a result of Germany's divided history.

Germany is the symbolic leader of liberal democracy and tolerance in the E.U. and, as a result, the radicalization of the far-right in Germany poses a risk to liberal democracy everywhere. The analysis of the far-right also extends beyond Germany's borders — in the last 10 years, we've seen tremendous advancements made by populist radical-right leaders and parties all over the world, and especially in Europe. The trend of such rising radical right anti-immigrant nationalist parties poses a serious threat to the survival of liberal democracy. The fact that the radical far-right is succeeding in Germany, a country with a history of Nazism that experienced the worst of what the far-right is capable of, is shocking and alarming. This paper will initially seek to understand why the far-right is radicalizing and succeeding in Germany and will focus on exploring the root of the regional differences in the AfD's electoral base.

I have structured this paper in various sections for the purpose of clarity and organization. I will begin the paper with a literature review which will establish a scholarly foundation of what has already been said regarding the rise of populist radical right parties and regarding explanations for the regional split in AfD support. Next, I will present my hypotheses which provide the logic behind my argument, and then introduce my argument which aims to synthesize different strands of the academic literature. I argue that scholars have oversimplified the explanation for why the AfD is more successful in the former East than in the West and that a combination of political-cultural and social-economic factors as well as historical legacies have united in this specific context to facilitate the stark regional divide. The research design section establishes how I intend to go about gathering and analyzing the evidence I will use to answer the research question. Lastly, I include my findings and analysis which confirms that a confluence of variables has enabled the regional divide in support for the AfD to emerge.

Literature Review

What Sort of Party is the AfD?

The party was initially established in the context of the euro-crisis, and it stood for market-liberalism and Euroscepticism. The AfD advocated for the end of Germany's participation with the euro and for the reintroduction of the 'Deutsche Mark', Germany's former currency. While the AfD already had a nationalist element, it was restricted mainly to economics. Already in 2014, internal disputes within the party led to the emergence of two factions: one Eurosceptic market-liberal faction and one national-conservative faction that focused on immigration (Goerres et al, 2018). As the refugee crisis began severely impacting Germany in 2015, the AfD shifted in the radical-right direction in its adoption of an anti-immigrant, xenophobic and nationalist stance. One common element however remained present throughout the entire party's history: a distinctly populist theme, either pitting the common people against an undemocratic elite or pitting German nationals against immigrants and asylum seekers (Goerres et al, 2018).

This paper will use the description of a 'populist radical right party', or PRRP (Goerres et al, 2018) – to describe the nature of the AfD. The PRRP class of political parties includes aspects of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism, as defined by Mudde (2007). Other far-right parties in Europe include Hungary's Fidesz led by Viktor Orban and France's National Rally led by Marine Le Pen. According to Mudde, nationalism strives to achieve a monocultural state, driven by ideas of internal homogenization and external exclusiveness. Nativism, as a subtype of nationalism, is an ideology that finds that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of

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the native group, and that nonnative persons and ideas are fundamentally threatening to the homogeneous nation-state. Authoritarianism is defined as the belief in a strictly ordered society in which infringements of authority are severely punished; the third feature, populism, is understood as an ideology that pits society into two groups: the pure people and the corrupt elite. Given Mudde's categorization of a party's ideological stance, the AfD seems to fall well within the PRRPs, and has been accepted as such by multiple political scholars in recent years.

Demand-Side & Contextual Factors in the AfD's Recent Success

The demand-side explores the reasons behind electoral support: cultural, economic and political factors as well as the changing political context that influences people to vote AfD. The literature has mainly focused on the rise of the modern political radical right, but not so much on the specific upsurge in support for the AfD or on the disparities between former Eastern and Western Germany. A popular explanatory approach is the cultural backlash thesis: "People who feel left behind or those who stand in conflict with more liberal views on topics such as family, sexuality, or national identity mobilize as a form of cultural countermovement against liberal and cosmopolitan value orientations" (Richter and Quent, 2019: 44). In the case of the AfD, supporters tend to share some key cultural-political attitudes – namely their rejection of immigration and their authoritarian, anti-democratic and chauvinistic attitudes (Richter and Quent, 2019: 44). In terms of the historical East-West and its cultural-political implications today, Richter and Quent examined how the East German disappointment after German reunification, which stemmed from mass closures of East German businesses, high unemployment rates and the feeling of being second-class citizens, helped conjure an "East German identity" which relied on depreciating the 'other' and those perceived as 'weaker' (2019: 46). Scholars have coined the term "East Deprivation" to describe the perception of personal and collective discrimination felt in the former East and have connected this perception of frustration and victimization to far-right extremist support in former East Germany (Richter and Quent, 2019: 47).

Hansen and Olsen found that AfD voters in 2017 were driven solely by two factors: their attitudes towards refugees and anti-establishment sentiments with democracy (2019). Between 2015 and 2018 Germany accepted an unprecedented 1.4 million, primarily Muslim, refugees from the Middle East and Africa. This was by far the most of any country in Europe (Statista.com, 2018). Germany is a country with a large Christian population; thus, xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiments began to grow in parts of the country, especially in the East. The result of such a significant influx of migrants into a predominantly Christian country was the rise of xenophobia, racism, and ethno-pluralism – the belief that unique national cultures can only be preserved if they are kept separate - especially in the East (Goerres et al, 2018: 251). Such cultural sentiments seem to be a major motivation in Germany's support for the AfD.

The literature has also examined socioeconomic explanations for divergence in regional support for the AfD. Such explanations are typically referred to as "losers of modernization" theories: "real or feared economic deprivation leads to disappointment and anger, which manifests itself in a turning away from established parties and towards the alleged solutions offered by populist and extremist parties" (Richter and Quent, 2019: 43). Most scholars agree that economic motivation exercises only a slight role in gauging support for the far-right since nationalist ideology remains the primary motive of PRRPs. However, in the case of former East and West Germany, where an economic gap stemming from the post-war divide remains to this day, the economic factor is worth exploring. Economic disillusionment in the former East could be a potential factor causing higher support for the AfD compared to the more economically successful

former West. Goerres et al. find that economic motivations do indeed drive PRRP success — laissez-faire policies aimed at less economic redistribution, lower taxation, reduced welfare expenditure and welfare chauvinism are crucial elements of the typical PRRP platform (2018). Goerres et al. additionally find that PRRP supporters are driven by three economic motivations: welfare chauvinist attitudes, high criticism of programs they suspect to disproportionately benefit immigrants, and support for social insurance programs believed to benefit the more ‘deserving’ rather than the poor and unemployed. When considering the former East and West, the East lags behind the West on multiple fronts — the former East has a higher unemployment rate, less disposable income, a lower per capita GDP, and a lower quality of living (PewResearch.org, 2019). Since the AfD earns disproportionately higher support in the former East, the economic variable is not to be discounted.

Another aspect of the scholarly literature regarding the rise of far-right radical parties is the contact theory argument which argues that increased contact with members of diverse ethnic groups will reduce prejudice and xenophobia as first-hand information about the out-group becomes available (Goerres et al, 2018: 253). The fact that there are disproportionately fewer migrants in the former East might correlate with what the contact theory would predict. Since the East Germans have less contact with the immigrants, this theory predicts that they would hold more xenophobic and racist attitudes.

Lastly, scholars have discussed the political history of Germany with regards to regional support for previous far-right parties as an explanatory variable. Goerres et al. find a significant correlation between current support for the AfD and the electoral base of Die Republikaner, Germany’s radical-right party in the 1994 German Bundestag elections. Additionally, Richter and Quent find that 360 Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands or National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) elected officials are presently strongly rooted in Eastern communities. The NPD is Germany’s far-right and ultranationalist party founded in 1964 as a successor to the German Reich Party (2019: 44). Richter and Quent find that ...

In such areas, where far-right extremist issues supported by the NPD have found resonance in the social discourse for a long time, we may assume that processes of normalization and relativization go hand in hand with lowered resistance to far-right extremist positions within daily political discourse to a much greater degree (2019: 44).

Such results indicate that there may be specific local regions where extreme and radical-right voting is more common and more socially acceptable, and that these regions have historically been in the former East.

Supply-Side Factors in the AfD’s Recent Success

The characteristics and evolution of the AfD party presents another aspect in explaining the rise of the far-right in Germany. Much of why the AfD has become successful in recent years is because it began as a market-liberal Eurocentric party, not a radical-right extremist party based on nationalist ideology, because given Germany’s history with right-wing extremism, no overtly radical right party has entered the government since the end of the Second World War. As the party evolved with the influx of immigrants in 2015, the AfD channeled feelings of resentment or anger into a nationalistic, xenophobic and anti-immigrant platform. Betz and Johnson explore the nostalgic ideology of the contemporary radical populist right — the far-right draws on feelings of resentment, unfairness and injustice and channels it against mainstream politicians whom they frame as the ‘self-serving corrupt political elite’ which pursues its own agenda without concern for ordinary citizens (2004). Thus, the party created the issue of a ‘perceived’ ethnic threat to

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mobilize the electorate on a strong cause – that of restricting immigration in an effort to preserve the ‘pure, national and traditional’ culture. Ultimately, the AfD’s strategic shift to the far right with their anti-immigrant focus guaranteed the party the political support necessary to advance. The party justifies its racist and nativist rhetoric by claiming that exclusion of non-native groups is necessary to preserve the identity of the group, whose very ‘purity’ makes it sacred (Betz and Johnson, 2006).

Another supply-side aspect that might explain the rise of the AfD is the fact that the established parties were not satisfying the electorate on the key issue of immigration, providing a perfect opening for the far-right. Chou et al. refer to this as the ‘collective action dilemma’ — unless all established parties coordinate on proposing tougher immigration policies, the far right will remain a potent electoral force since they provide the sole channel of true representation for parts of the population (2018). Thus, support for the AfD remains stable and growing because other established parties fail to meet the people’s preferences on their most prioritized issue: immigration (Chou et al., 2018: 3). A key component of the AfD’s rhetoric is therefore anti-establishment, putting forth the argument that elites and political leadership have not been listening to the ‘real’ German people (Betz & Johnson, 2006). The AfD was able to gain voters who previously supported one of the five main established parties through the immigration issue. Hansen and Olsen characterize the AfD as a ‘protest party’ for those dissatisfied with the current state of politics in Germany, arguing that the success of the AfD might be a signal of the failure of the established parties in Germany’s current political system. Arzheimer and Berning see German Chancellor Angela Merkel’s decision to temporarily suspend the Dublin Regulation to allow hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers into Germany as the catalyst for the growth of the populist radical right in Germany (2019). The resulting ideological shift of the AfD in 2015, which framed migrants as a threat to German identity and success, induced German citizens to vote on the basis of their attitudes on immigration.

Hypotheses

H1. Why would the AfD be radicalizing now? It seems that the political contextual changes in the past few years have been paramount in shaping the electoral base of the AfD. The rapid influx of refugees from the Middle East and Africa – foreigners, ethnically and religiously, to Germans – seems to have sparked a xenophobic backlash. The AfD was able to shift its policy platform to reflect the sentiments of parts of the German population with extreme anti-immigrant attitudes. The AfD’s success is contingent upon feelings that the German national identity is being threatened and that immigrants from countries like Syria and Afghanistan are the cause of this threat because of the perceived danger associated with Muslim migrants. It is interesting that when Turkish immigrants arrived in Germany in the 1970s, there was no extreme backlash in the form of a nationalist anti-immigrant political party as there is today with the AfD’s explicit anti-immigrant agenda. The reason might be that Germany officially invited Turkish people to emigrate to help with their labor crisis: thus, they were labeled “Gastarbeiter”, or ‘guest workers’, and provided cheap labor for German benefit (Prevezanos, 2011). The Turkish migrants were not seen as threatening since they were initially expected to stay only for a few years, and their place in society was clearly subordinate to any German citizen. While opposition to Turkish immigrants did gradually take hold in the 1970s and 80s, it never amounted to the formation of a strong far-right anti-immigrant party.

Now, the situation is quite different. The migrants entering Germany are flocking in larger numbers and are not providing cheap labor, but are becoming recipients of Germany’s generous

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social welfare system. In the eyes of the AfD and their supporters, the Muslim migrants are coming to Germany in the hopes of benefitting economically and therefore do not positively contribute to society. The large number of migrants from the Muslim world sparks more of a racist nationalistic backlash today because of these various factors. Thus, I propose that the root of the radicalization of the far-right party in Germany is the spike in Muslim immigration in 2015 which induced a threat to German national identity and wellbeing.

H2. The second question this paper will attempt to answer is why there is such a strong regional discrepancy in support for the AfD between the former East and West of Germany. In the 2017 German Federal Election, the AfD received 20.5% of the vote in former Eastern Germany, while in the former West, the AfD received 10.7% – about half (Hansen & Olson, 2019: 12). While many factors might be contributing to the larger far-right sentiment in the East, I propose the hypothesis that the regional discrepancies are due to the cultural and economic differences that prevail today as a result of the post-war period in which Germany was divided. Eastern Germans remain more culturally traditional and are thus more susceptible to xenophobic and nationalist sentiment, while the West is more culturally progressive and modern as well as more economically advanced than the East.

The logic here has to do with the continuing implications of the geographic and ideological split of East and West Germany after World War II. After the war, the goal of West Germany was to become a modern liberal democracy. Therefore, West German interests subjugated to the larger interest of ensuring the success of a post-war Europe. East Germany, on the other hand, was led by Soviet communists, cut off from the modern liberal world — nationalist sentiments were able to flourish as emphasis was put only on the success of communism in East Germany. There was little movement in or out of East Germany, thus ensuring the homogeneity of the East German population. On the economic front, the East still lags behind the West considerably, fueling feelings of resentment and frustration with both the West and the political establishment. In recent years, this resentment has grown to target Muslim migrants who they claim are threatening their economic and cultural livelihood. In an interview done by the New York Times, a retired hairdresser in former East Germany who voted for the AfD said she was fed up with how had not ensured her a good pension or enough teachers for schools but had somehow found money to integrate migrants: “I can barely pay for basics, while the newcomers are given so much. That isn’t right. It makes people really angry” (Bennhold and Eddy, 2019).

Therefore, nationalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric thrives much more in the East. The AfD taps into such feelings of resentment and redirects them towards foreigners whom the AfD claims are threats to Germans and the German national identity. The combination of the cultural and economic disparities that exist between the East and West of Germany today help explain why the AfD has disproportionately higher support in the East than in the West.

Argument

Part 1: Why did Germany’s far-right party radicalize in recent years, and what explains their success?

The radicalization of the AfD in Germany stems from the spike in immigration from the Arab world in 2015 and the evolving implications of the mass migration of Muslims into Germany. Coinciding with the global right-wing populist wave – as seen in the United States, Great Britain and France as well as many other countries – the rise in migration threatened German wellbeing and national identity. The AfD shifted to become a more radical right-wing, nationalist,

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xenophobic party as the influx of Muslim migrants began in around 2015. As this is not such a contested phenomenon, I plan to focus my research and discussion on the second part of the argument.

Part 2: Why is the AfD so much more successful in the former East Germany than in the former West?

While much of the scholarship has focused on separating politico-cultural and socio-economic factors, I will argue that it is the confluence of all of these factors that have converged in this particular time and context. Many political scientists have advantaged one unidimensional explanation at the expense of others, and I believe that this is not the right approach because the current specific context of Germany has allowed all of these factors to unite in a way that has brought about the success of the AfD particularly in the former East. All dimensions overlap and interact with one another. Nationalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric thrive much more in the East because of cultural and economic differences that stem from the West-East divide which lasted from 1945 until 1989. The legacy of separation stemming from the post-war time has resulted in cultural and economic differences that prevail today, and these differences have allowed the AfD's rhetoric to resound more in the East than in the West. In the former East, the AfD is able to tap into feelings of resentment towards the West and towards the political establishment and redirect such anger toward Muslim migrants and foreigners whom the AfD claim are threats to Germany and to the German national identity.

The AfD is successfully using East Germans' feelings of resentment and disillusionment to form a nationalist coalition that stands against globalization and immigration. Some of the factors I will explore are the legacy of communism and authoritarianism in the East today and how this historical legacy has engendered stronger feelings of nationalism and xenophobia in the East. Additionally, economic disparities that stem from the East-West divide have allowed the West to economically succeed at higher rates and achieve higher levels of education. I intend to analyze how the combination of the cultural and economic disparities that exist between the East and West today as a result of Germany's history of separation help explain why the AfD has disproportionately higher support in the East than in the West.

Research Design

To test my two hypotheses, I use a two-part research design. The first part addresses the question of why the AfD is radicalizing now. I will do a qualitative analysis to develop a thorough explanation for why the AfD has become more successful in recent years. I identify a link between increased immigration from Muslim countries and higher support for the AfD and therefore propose that the spike in immigration caused a right-wing nationalist populist backlash because of the perceived threat to German national identity the migrants caused. I will explain the correlation between increased migration and increased support for the AfD through a qualitative analysis: why did people begin harboring such extreme anti-immigrant feelings, and how did the AfD's platform evolve to explicitly adopt an anti-immigrant program? The qualitative nature of my research will seek to determine what exactly the causal mechanism is behind increased immigration and higher support for the AfD. I will analyze national and local news sources, the evolution of party platforms, and already-existing interviews with both members and supporters of the AfD. The mechanism I am trying to isolate is changing opinion toward immigration (essentially a measure of changing xenophobic and nationalist sentiment) as well as the changing character and policy platform of the AfD from a free-market party to an anti-immigrant right-wing populist party.

The second part of the research design will address the regional split in support for the AfD – in essence, why former East Germany has significantly higher support for the AfD than the former West. I will determine what factors are motivating support for the AfD and look at differences between West and East Germany as well as overall trends in the former West compared to the East. In order to identify the mechanism for why political-cultural and social-economic factors influence whether individuals hold anti-immigrant or radical right beliefs, I will do qualitative analysis through analyzing news sources, available online interviews, and various AfD official online platforms. This will reveal why former East Germans feel more inclined than former West Germans to vote for the AfD. I expect to find higher perceptions of threat as a result of Muslim migrants in the East, for which I will present evidence of political-cultural, social-economic and historical factors in influencing such anti-immigrant feelings. While the economic factor might be prevalent, I foresee that the social-cultural and historical variables will be more significant in influencing higher AfD support in the former East.

Through analyzing news sources, interviews and AfD online platforms, I draw the connection between stronger negative feelings and racism towards Muslim migrants in the East because of the threat they pose to East German economic advancement as well as the perceived ethnic threat as a result of stronger feelings of racism in the East. I find evidence that resentment towards the West already exists in the East, as I explore deeper through qualitative analysis of local newspapers and existing online interviews. The qualitative analysis will reveal that the AfD redirects already existing resentments in the East – economic, social and cultural – and frames the migrants as dangerous intruders that will keep East Germans behind and threaten the traditional German identity to which East Germans cling.

In an effort to get at the root of the AfD's recent success and regional disparities within Germany, I have considered multiple avenues to come up with qualitative data. First, I analyze AfD online discourse in the form of Facebook and Twitter posts, AfD campaign posters, and comments made by AfD party members and leaders found from interviews conducted by reputable German news and media organizations. Second, I consider what AfD supporters are saying through analyzing interviews conducted by news and media organizations. Third, I delve into Germany's divided history to provide insight into why West and East Germans still think and act so differently after thirty years of reunification.

Findings & Analysis

I have structured this section in three categories. I begin with my findings about the AfD as a party, analyzing the party's public image and rhetoric, then move onto what is motivating AfD supporters to vote for the party, and lastly consider how Germany's divided history has affected the regional split in far-right support. My findings reveal that the essence of the AfD as a party is their vehement anti-Islam and anti-refugee stance, and that this resonates well with East Germans because of their fear of 'Islamization' and of being left behind, culturally and economically which stems from the East's unique historical legacy.

The AfD's Public Image

The online social media content of the AfD centers around anti-immigration rhetoric. Serrano et al. analyzed the AfD's social media platforms to find that the AfD was limiting their online content related to the economy while focusing on delivering provocative content related to immigration topics (2019: 222). Serrano et al. analyzed 12,912 Facebook posts and 30,437,991 tweets, using topic modelling to compare the AfD's official party platform manifesto with their

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social media content. Due to a lack of time and data analysis capabilities, I rely on their data and subsequent conclusions to support my analysis of the AfD's social media discourse. While the AfD's actual manifesto discusses the economy in 21% of the documents and immigration in 19.2%, on Facebook the economy is mentioned 4.5% of the time and immigration 16.1% and Twitter, posts regarding the economy make up 4.7% of the total while immigration make up 21.8% (Serrano et al., 2019: 222). The AfD is utilizing the power of social media to spread its more provocative anti-migration agenda, playing to those who hold xenophobic attitudes and who rely on social media as their news source. In fact, multiple studies have confirmed the fact that AfD supporters prefer to obtain information from social media platforms, stemming from their disenchantment with already established communication channels (Serrano et al., 2019: 215). Additionally, the AfD is the most active political party on Facebook with far more comments, likes and shares than any other German political party (Serrano et al., 2019: 2018). The AfD appears to be using social media as a direct means with which to get their more confrontational and inflammatory anti-immigrant messages across to their pool of frustrated voters.

The AfD's campaign posters carry an obvious and garish tone of anti-Islamist and anti-Muslim rhetoric, suggesting that the Muslim religion does not belong in Germany. A simple Google search allowed me to find a selection of Islamophobic slogans on AfD posters: "Stop Islamization", "Islam-Free Schools!", "New Germans? – We'll do it ourselves.", "End asylum fraud! Vote AfD", and "'Burkas?' We like bikinis.". While the 'Stop Islamization' is an image of three Muslim women wearing burkas, the rest of the posters mainly depict pretty, white and young women. The rhetoric is clearly anti-Muslim – explicitly and negatively targeting an entire religious group – insinuating that asylum-seekers from the Arab world have no place in Germany and, contrary to Merkel's open refugee policy, are not welcome.

Many AfD posters have been defaced, vandalized, or torn down. Therefore, campaign posters are mainly hung at night to avoid the public eye, and high enough to be out of reach to those without a ladder. Such an approach to campaigning reveals that the AfD are aware that their rhetoric is incendiary and thus use tactics to prevent outright opposition and public confrontation. Hanging the poster so high that it is out of reach allows the poster to exist in a higher dimension – the people have no say or right to oppose what the poster is suggesting, and such a tactic might even be accused as being undemocratic for this reason. The AfD's decision to focus on such imagery and derogatory slogans in their campaign posters reflects the kind of image they want to disseminate to the German public, and by doing so, shifts the frame of acceptable public discourse to the right.

AfD Party Member Rhetoric

In analyzing interviews with AfD party members and speeches given, it becomes clear that some of their words and phrases are "confusingly similar to those used by the Nazis" (Hänel, 2020). Björn Höcke – the leader of the AfD's far-right faction in Thuringia has been notoriously designated as a fascist by the courts, partly because he wrote a book so extreme that AfD lawmakers were not able to distinguish between Hitler's "Mein Kampf" and Höcke when presented with excerpts which were all from Höcke's book (Huetlin, 2020). Giving a speech in Dresden in January 2017, Höcke referred to Germans as being the "only people in the world to plant a monument of shame in the heart of its capital", referring to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin, and went on to call for a "180 degree change" in their commemoration policy (Taub and Fisher, 2017). Höcke's inflammatory language does not end with belittling the Holocaust — he also utilizes racial stereotypes, making comments such as "thousands of German

youths experience school as a fearful place, because African thugs mob, terrorize and beat them there” (Hänel, 2020). While Höcke represents the more extremist members of the AfD, it is estimated that around 40% of AfD party members identify themselves with the Höcke-led extremist wing. Additionally, the more radical far-right contingency dominates in the Eastern states such as Thuringia while in the West, support is substantially lower and much more moderate (Hänel, 2020).

AfD leaders have been known for their offensive remarks, inciting public response and sparking debates around their racist, fascist and highly offensive rhetoric. Alexander Gauland, co-chairman of the AfD, spoke about German national soccer team's defender Jerome Boateng, a Ghanaian German – asserting that despite his skills on the field, people would not want “someone like Boateng as a neighbor.” Gauland continued to say that “Germany should close its borders” and, referring to an image showing a drowned refugee child, claimed “We can't be blackmailed by children's eyes” (Hänel, 2020). In 2016, former co-chair of the AfD Frauke Petry condoned shooting at refugees attempting to enter Germany illegally, marking herself as the first German politician to condone shooting at the border since Communist East German leader Erich Honecker (Hänel, 2020). Further incendiary remarks came from Andrew Wendt, member of Parliament in the Eastern state of Saxony, who inquired into how far the state covers the cost of sterilizing unaccompanied refugee minors (Hänel, 2020). Andre Poggenburg, head of the AfD in Saxony, urged lawmakers in the state parliament to “get rid of, once and for all, this rank growth on the German racial corpus” – using phrases clearly reminiscent of Nazi terminology (Hänel, 2020). Lastly, Andreas Kalbitz, AfD chief of the Eastern state of Brandenburg, admitted to attending a 2007 rally in Greece at which a swastika flag was raised, releasing a statement in 2019 that claimed he took part “out of curiosity” (Hänel, 2020). AfD leaders, especially those in power in the East, have proven to be capable of truly remarkable horrid discourse. Most of these offensive comments are extremely racist, ultranationalist and highly aggressive at their essence.

What motivates all of these comments, though, is a nostalgia for a white and traditional Germany – a vision which is being threatened by western values of multiculturalism and globalization and the political establishment’s failure to acknowledge the fears and the anger of those in the East. Angela Merkel’s ‘Willkommenspolitik’, or ‘Welcome Politics’, that resulted in the mass migration of around one million asylum-seekers from the Middle East in 2015 and 2016 is portrayed as the catalyst for the breakdown of German society and culture. Central to the AfD’s narrative is that “the east is where Germany is still Germany and where men are still men”, evoking a narrative reminiscent of “gallic villages in the eastern countryside” (Bennhold and Eddy, 2019). The AfD thus promises to fight for the Germany that the East yearns for – giving them the attention that was lacking from the mainstream political establishment.

Voting AfD in Protest

Having analyzed the supply-side, the AfD’s public image and rhetoric, I will now go on to analyze the demand-side: how are AfD supporters receiving the AfD and what do they think about the party? In interviews with AfD party supporters found on Der Spiegel TV, findings seem to indicate that they view the party as a protest party. Der Spiegel TV reveals that many supporters are not familiar with the party platform but claimed they would vote for the AfD anyway, as a protest vote (Der Spiegel, 2016). Others referred to a time when they were ‘robbed by foreigners’ and conveyed that they understood the AfD to be a party for the older generation and those who hold resentments (Der Spiegel, 2016). Another claims that he views the party as a real alternative that has the capacity to deliver on promises of security and freedom (Der Spiegel, 2016). East

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Germans seem to vote for the AfD as a protest against the current establishment, Merkel's open refugee policy, the perceived lack of understanding and attention given to them, and the fact that East Germans are being forced to accept asylum-seekers whom they view as intruding on and threatening the traditional German way of life.

'Der Spiegel TV' also includes various images distributed by the AfD – all of which portray Angela Merkel and refugees in a negative light. One image portrays Angela Merkel smiling in front of a decimated bleak scene of a destroyed city, with the slogan "Terror, Bombs, Migration: Mommy says, 'You will make it!'" (Der Spiegel, 2016). An image disseminated by a young offshoot of the AfD – the 'Young Alternatives' – shows a wooden box containing an ax and a sledgehammer with the slogan, "Refugee-Starter kit" (Der Spiegel, 2016). In the interview, Young Alternative member David Eckert, a 24-year old right-wing thinker, says that "it is clear that a youth organization will be more provocative than the mother organization", and when prompted to speak about the "Refugee-Starter kit" image, he replied that it can of course be interpreted as the fact that Germany is giving refugees the tools with which to start a new life in Germany. The interviewer responds by saying that it also is a very obvious reference to refugee ax-terrorism, to which Eckert remarks "but it is you that made that connection" (Der Spiegel, 2016). Eckert continues to say that the Young Alternatives seek to get rid of German citizenship for the many Turkish people living in Germany, claiming that there are problems with their loyalty to Germany, that the term 'Turkish guest worker' is a myth, and that they should all leave and move back to Turkey. Additionally, the youth organization's platform contains the fact that Germany needs more children – essentially that it isn't the answer to accept people from outside of Germany to constitute the new generation. Eckert finds that 'Germany needs to move to the right' and that he wants to see 'eventual assimilation' (Der Spiegel, 2016). Weronika Zimnik, a 15-year old member of the Young Alternatives, looks up to Björn Höcke – the leader of the AfD's far-right faction – and says, "We don't want to have the refugees. We don't want the Western values here in East Germany" (Der Spiegel, 2016). Such findings indicate that the AfD focuses on portraying xenophobic narratives aimed at Germans who feel frustrated with Merkel and her refugee policy and who are nostalgic for and yearn for a culturally homogenous, traditional and white Germany.

Voting AfD Out of Fear and Resentment

AfD supporters also tend to be fearful about 'Islamization and terrorism' and saddened by their perceived 'erosion of traditional family values' (Hill, 2017). A cheerful blonde woman in her 60s who supports the AfD interviewed by the BBC said: "The old people don't dare leave the house after six o'clock ... I live in such a beautiful place but when I open the door, the first thing I see is headscarves and then I go to the tram and I see the groups of young men" (Hill, 2017). Such voters are angry with Angela Merkel for having opened Germany's doors to a million Muslim migrants, which they perceive as threatening local populations and the German national identity. Another interviewee voiced opinion: "The refugees come here but they don't plan to ever go back to their countries when the war is over. All along they planned to stay and replace the local population. More and more people are realizing that" (Hill, 2017). BBC journalist Jenny Hill finds that the East Germans are disappointed and resentful about feeling left behind:

They're saddened by what they see as the erosion of traditional family values. And they're angry. Their fury is directed at the mainstream political parties which, they feel, don't care about them. But the main force of their ire is directed at Angela Merkel and her decision to open Germany's doors to a million migrants (Hill, 2017).

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What is clear after examining the AfD's public discourse is that the main factor attracting support is their utter insistence that Islam does not belong in Germany and that Merkel's welcoming refugee policy has threatened the wellbeing of the German nation and identity. There are manifold reasons why people in the East sympathize with the AfD, but a key component is that they feel ignored and left behind by the modernizing forces of the West which are making decisions that they perceive to be harmful to Germany. What remains interesting is that far fewer asylum-seekers arrive in the East; the majority of refugees actually reside in the West. This fact substantiates the contact-theory argument mentioned in the literature review – namely that increased contact with a certain outgroup softens opposition to that outgroup. With minimal contact with asylum-seekers in the East, unsubstantiated myths and awful stereotypes flourish much quicker, leading to much more ardent negative attitudes towards that outgroup. It is clear that AfD supporters are attracted to the party because of its outright insistence that Islam does not belong in Germany. The AfD prides itself on being the right party to challenge the mainstream parties like the CDU and SPD which they perceive have led Germany astray.

A Divided History

Since the end of World War II, the East and West of Germany have had drastically different histories — from 1945 until 1989, East Germany or the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was under communist rule while West Germany was a federal republic – a democratic form of government. While reunification occurred over thirty years ago and was a positive event in Germany's history, it had serious ramifications for the East, some of which are still being felt to this day. On the economic front, East Germany has remained about 30% lower than West Germany in regard to all important macroeconomic indicators since 1996 (Land, 2013:109). Additionally, East German unemployment has recently been up to twice as high as in the West, hitting a high point of more than 20% in 2005 (Land, 2013: 109). Further, in 2009, GDP per capita in the East was almost a third below that in the West (Ibid: 109). Such a persevering economic divide may have contributed to an increased sense of economic discontent, frustration with the West and of being 'left behind' for East Germans in an increasingly global and multicultural world.

In addition to the economic aspect, the legacy of an authoritarian communist regime also cannot be discounted in evaluating why the AfD's radical platform is received more positively in the East than the West. Up until the end, the East German Communist Party "saw 'the people' as a homogeneous mass that shared the party's views" (Bösch and Gieseke, 2018: 47). During this time, East Germans lived in a homogenous society that prided itself on social equality and order. Perhaps this history of racial and cultural homogeneity has engendered an ideal vision of a purely white and traditional German society with 'law and order' that subconsciously influences how East Germans perceive asylum-seekers from the Arab world seeking refuge in Germany. The West was opened to the idea of democracy decades before the East, where ideas of cultural, societal and political heterogeneity were allowed to flourish much earlier.

This article seeks to understand why the AfD is so much more successful in the East than in the West. I argue that Germany's split history has resulted in legacies that undeniably influence how Germans perceive themselves today and how they perceive the recent rise in immigration. While not only economically frustrated and resentful of the West, East Germans also have a dramatically different history that has influenced who they are and how they think. The AfD has managed to become a party that voices the concerns that matter most to East Germans in today's world: immigration, globalization and the corrupt political establishment run by 'Western' values.

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The majority of the AfD's rhetoric is focused on refugees and asylum-seekers, clearly playing on German xenophobic sentiments. However, the AfD utilizes the economic grievances and frustration of those in the East who feel 'left behind' not only economically but also socially and culturally. The AfD gives attention to such grievances and blames their current frustrations and anger on the mainstream political establishment who have facilitated the arrival of Muslim foreigners from the Middle East. Thus, the AfD's rhetoric center on outright xenophobia while using economic and cultural grievances to mobilize voters and to convince them that the recent spike in Muslim migrants is the cause of their discontent.

Conclusion

I have argued that the existing literature has oversimplified the question of why the AfD is more successful in the former East than in the West. Scholars often name one factor as the cause of regional divides in political attitudes, but I have synthesized the various arguments to come up with a more nuanced and holistic understanding of the complex issue of populist radical far-right support. Through my analysis of the AfD as a party, of the attitudes of AfD supporters in the East, and of Germany's historical legacies, the paper has developed the argument that a combination of political-cultural, social-economic and historical factors have united in this specific context to facilitate the stark regional divide in AfD support.

This article adds to the existing literature on the radical far-right in a few ways. First, it is an examination of the rise of the far-right in Germany specifically. Most existing scholarly literature is focused on Western Europe or even the world more generally, but this research project delves into explaining, specifically, the success of Germany's far-right party, Alternative for Germany, or the AfD. Additionally, while there has been literature dedicated to the rise of the far-right in Germany, this paper hopes to shed light on the reasons for the strong regional divide in support for the AfD in the former East and West of Germany, for which little literature currently exists. This information might provide crucial information for those interested or involved in German politics, as comprehending the reasons an electorate votes and thinks the way it does is especially significant in the field of politics.

One limitation of this paper is that public sentiment and opinion regarding the AfD is rapidly evolving, and the success of the AfD varies in every election and in every German state. Thus, it is difficult to test a hypothesis about regional differences if the data changes when the next election cycle occurs. An additional limitation is that it would have been extremely helpful to actually talk to AfD voters in Germany to find out what's truly behind their decision, both in the West and the East. Since conducting interviews was not feasible for me, this presents a limitation to the project. However, while the results might change slightly, I do not think they would discount my central argument. The decades of resentment and discontent felt in the East would not disappear, nor would their strongly felt attitudes of xenophobia and anti-Islamist fears that have facilitated the AfD's success.

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