

## **Regional Factionalism as an Enabling Structure: The Case of the AfD**

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### **Abstract:**

Much has been written in the literature about party factions and their potential consequences. For parties of the far-right they have been particularly dangerous, often leading to severe intra-party conflicts and eventually splits. Through analysing the case of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) Party, we argue that having factions of varying extremism in different regions may actually serve to benefit the party. Theoretically, we argue that the AfD resembles a populist radical right party (PRR) in West Germany yet is much closer to being an extreme right-wing party (ERW) in East Germany. Drawing on (a) Candidates and (b) Voters' data, we also find empirically that AfD candidates and voters tend to hold more right-wing political attitudes in East Germany, compared to West Germany. Our analysis makes an original theoretical contribution to the literature in illustrating differences in two key dimensions, namely personnel and electorate that relate to 'regional factionalism' in contemporary European politics through this single case study analysis.

**Keywords:** Far-Right; Populist Radical Right; Extreme Right; Regionalism; German Party Politics

## INTRODUCTION

The far-right party family has experienced high levels of electoral success in continental Europe, in both recent national parliamentary elections covering the 2015–2018 refugee crisis alongside the recent 2019 European Parliament elections (see Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Downes, 2019). A number of far-right parties have also entered into coalition governments, most notably in countries such as Italy (Lega) and Austria (Freedom Party of Austria). The electoral success of these parties is also no longer confined to Western Europe, with a number of far-right parties experiencing high levels of electoral success in Central-Eastern Europe, such as in Poland and Hungary most recently. Furthermore, in Western Europe, far-right parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) have prospered electorally in a short space of time. This party family has shaken up ‘mainstream’ political parties (on both the centre left and right) alongside the overall political landscape of (a) domestic level politics and (b) supranational-level politics (i.e. the European Union).

A considerable amount of scholarship in the political science literature has researched the ‘demand’, i.e. the types of voters that vote for far-right parties (see Lubbers et al., 2002; Givens, 2005; Rydgren, 2008; Arzheimer, 2009; Ford & Goodwin, 2014; Goodwin and Milazzo, 2015). The ‘supply’ side-level of support (i.e. parties and party competition) has also been researched extensively (see Kitschelt and McGann, 1995; de Lange, 2007; Pardos-Prado, 2015; Downes & Loveless, 2018). However, there has been considerably less research on the divergent ideological make-up of the far-right party family, particularly over regional ideological (intra-party heterogeneity) differences (see Arzheimer, 2019) and the implications that this diversity can have on the electoral success for far-right parties. The case of the AfD is an important case study to explore as it allows us to investigate (a) their regional level/state differences over party ideology and (b) their divergent electorate.

Particularly, key differences over (a) personnel and (b) the electorate provide us with a crucial case study of a far-right party that has a ‘dual’ ideology that co-exists at the national-level but varies considerably across the regional level (i.e. East to West). In addition, the historical context of Communism has left German politics with clear differences between its Western and Eastern regions, up to the present day. This therefore offers an important case study to analyse and further understand the wide-reaching implications of regional diversity and its effects on overall party strategies and electoral successes for the AfD.

Therefore, the central research question in this paper seeks to examine the divergent party factions within the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), especially between the Western and Eastern branches of the party and the electoral implications that this poses for the future of the AfD in German politics. The primary theoretical argument offered in this paper is that the AfD has divergent candidates as well as electorates that vary across (a) Western and (b) Eastern Germany. This regional variation is important as it implies that the party strategy of AfD varies considerably.

In West Germany, the AfD bears more resemblance to a ‘classic’ populist radical right party (PRR) family. In contrast, in East Germany, the AfD closely resembles that of an extreme right-wing party (ERW). Existing political science literature implies that ideological variations tend to hurt the far-right party family, largely due to internal party disputes opening up over policy and strategy between the PRR and ERW ideological wings (see Carter, 2005). This has led to a number of far-right parties ‘self-sabotaging’, and in some cases, leading to their electoral downfall (see the recent cases of the United Kingdom Independence Party in 2017 in particular and the Freedom Party of Austria in 2019).

This paper argues that having different regional factions within a far-right party (i.e. the single case study of AfD in Germany) can actually serve as an enabling structure and lead to an electoral advantage, in contrast to the existing party competition literature. This is primarily because both disparate ideological wings of the AfD can formulate different strategies between East and West. At the same time, and from a regional perspective, the AfD can speak to their differentiated electorates, without suffering severe electoral consequences.

## **THE FAR-RIGHT PARTY FAMILY**

### **The Populist Radical Right v. Extreme Right-Wing Party Factions**

Contemporary far-right parties in Europe are often grouped into two distinct ideological wings. It is first important to differentiate between populist radical right parties (PRR) and extreme right-wing parties (ERW). Drawing on key scholars such as Cas Mudde (2007), there are three key features that characterise PRR parties. PRR parties have a nativist, authoritarian and largely populist ideology. ‘Populism’ for PRR parties tends to mean that they portray themselves as the ‘outsiders’ in society and seek to overturn the existing political elite in society, through widespread anti-political establishment messages.

Importantly, PRR parties seek to work under the basic confines of democracy and do not seek to overturn democracy. They do however reject the ‘liberal’ component of democracy (i.e. general opposition and intolerance towards immigrants/ethnic out groups such as Muslims). In contrast, ERW parties tend to reject being democratically elected and many of these parties’ historical roots can be traced back to post-world war II neo-fascism. Golden Dawn in Greece is one such example of an ERW party in contemporary European politics alongside Jobbik in Hungary. Alongside ERW parties’ anti-democratic outlook, scholars such as Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou (2014) and Halikiopoulou and Vlandas (2015) also make important distinctions between ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’ nationalism for ERW and PRR parties in their overall party strategies.

PRR parties by and large all tend to have the same ideological policies and strategies on immigration, in seeking to (a) protect the white ethnic-in group and (b) reduce the number of immigrants coming in. In recent years, reducing immigration has been changed, to focusing more on reducing Muslim immigrants, alongside asylum seekers and refugees. This has been a key strategy of parties such as the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) in the Netherlands and the Freedom Party in Austria (FPÖ).

PRR parties have also adopted neo-liberal economic policies (i.e. laissez-faire economic policies) in seeking to leave the economy alone and not become involved in this economic sphere in society (see Rovny, 2013). PRR parties are generally becoming more accepted now in the political domain, with some mainstream centre right parties such as Fidesz in Hungary even shifting more right-wing on the key issues of immigration and nationalism, effectively transforming from a traditional Conservative party towards a fully-fledged PRR party in the 2018 Hungarian national parliamentary election.

It is important to note that PRR parties are now more tolerated and accepted by mainstream political parties, in part because they now have a much larger percentage vote share than they used to and must now be taken seriously by mainstream parties. In contrast, ERW parties such as Golden Dawn in Greece and Jobbik in Hungary tend not to be tolerated and accepted, as they do not seek to hide their racist policies towards ethnic-out groups (i.e. immigrants and

refugees) and at the same time they have tended to hold violent street movements and protests (see Mudde, 2007; Halikiopoulou and Vlandas, 2015).

In this paper, we draw on the scholarship of Cas Mudde (2007) in defining the far-right party family as a ‘large’ umbrella term, that is then subsumed under two different ideological wings of (a) PRR and (b) ERW factions. Recent work in the literature (see Arzheimer & Berning, 2019) now classifies the AfD as a ‘fully-fledged’ far-right party and we adopt the same classification in this paper for consistency. The next section details this more comprehensively and charts the electoral rise of the AfD in recent years.

## **The AfD**

Ever since the party’s founding in 2013, scholars have been paying attention to the AfD, interested in whether the party would end the absence of a successful populist radical right party that let Germany stand out in comparison to its European neighbours (e.g. Arzheimer, 2015). While having narrowly missed entering the federal parliament (‘Bundestag’) in 2013, the party nevertheless successfully established itself as a political force to the right of the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) throughout the years. This development is well illustrated in the continuous electoral gains on federal and state levels since 2013. By 2018 the party had entered all 16 state parliaments and is now also the biggest opposition party in the Bundestag. In the most recent elections for the European Parliament in 2019, the party gained 11 per cent overall, which illustrates a loss of 1.6. percentage points compared to 2017 federal elections, yet an electoral gain relative to the previous elections for the European Parliament in 2014 (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019). Given the party’s electoral success story, scholars have analysed the party mainly from two different angles.

First, they have scrutinised the party’s character in order to be able to classify it appropriately. Starting off as a ‘soft Eurosceptic’ party (e.g. Berbuir et al., 2014; Arzheimer, 2015; Grimm, 2015) or as “conservative challenger to the CDU/CSU” (Dilling, 2018:86), scholars initially were reluctant to group the AfD with other European populist radical right parties such as the Front National in France or the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ). However, this assessment quickly changed because of the party’s shift from Eurosceptic messages to a more pronounced emphasis on nativism and anti-immigration positions (e.g. Ceyhan, 2016; Schmitt-Beck, 2017; Hansen and Olsen, 2019). The radicalisation of the party accelerated in particular with the first split of the party in 2015 following the retreat of party leader and founder Bernd Lucke and the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in the same year.

On the other hand, similar to studies in other European countries, research has also paid attention to the party’s electorate. Schmitt-Beck (2017) for instance illustrates that a majority of AfD voters were late-decidors mainly convinced by the anti-immigration stance compared to a minority that relatively early decided to vote for the party due to its Eurosceptic position. The thesis that ‘modernisation losers’ are traditionally more susceptible to vote for the AfD has aroused particular interest. Bergmann et al. (2017) find that this thesis does not hold on the individual level, yet the party is particularly successful in weak economic regions with high unemployment rates.

While Lengfeld (2017) finds some support that people with lower socioeconomic status are more likely to vote for the AfD, Lux (2018) does not support this argument. Generally speaking though, the party’s electorate now appears to be conforming to the findings of voter bases of other populist radical right parties in Europe with shared “right-wing political attitudes concerning immigration, political distrust, fears of personal economic decline, as well as gender and socialisation effects” (Goerres, Spies, and Kumlin, 2018:246). However,

with a few exceptions (e.g. Arzheimer and Berning, 2019), studies on the party's voters have largely been confined to a single point in time and have not been able to follow the development of a (rapidly) changing electorate throughout the years. Arzheimer and Berning (2019) illustrate that with the party's progressing radicalisation, its voter base has likewise also undergone a similar development.

One of the most striking features of the party, however, is its different regional scale of support. Ever since its founding the AfD has consistently scored better electoral results in the eastern part of Germany culminating in its gain of three constituency seats in the federal election in 2017 in the state of Saxony and emerging as biggest force there in the elections for the European Parliament in 2019. The party also gained considerably in the most recent state elections in three East German states posing considerable challenges to the formation of governing coalitions in all of them given the expressed 'cordon sanitaire'. In all five East German states (excluding Berlin) they have achieved results well over 20 per cent of the popular vote, with the state of Thuringia being the most recent example.

Although this regional imbalance in success has been evident from the outset of the party's development, it has barely found its way into the broader academic debate. This is surprising insofar as scholars analysing the party as early as 2014 have found significant differences between the AfD's chapters in East and West Germany with the former located to the right of the latter (e.g. Ceyhan, 2016). Linhart (2017) similarly also finds differences between the party's chapters in East and West Germany based on data from a popular voting advice application.

Although some had identified the AfD as a whole as 'conservative challenger' (Dilling, 2018) or 'soft Eurosceptic' (e.g. Grimm, 2015), regional divides have been noted by other scholars early on, such as Jankowski, Schneider, and Tepe who hold that "a deeper ideological divide between the mostly West German ordoliberal and the East German national conservatives...was already apparent in the 2013 Federal Election" (2017:705). In their findings of AfD candidates' attitudes they can also illustrate that East German representatives tend to be significantly more authoritarian than their West German colleagues. However, most scholars have treated the party as a unitary actor and simply noted some incidental findings related to the regional divide.

Previous research was primarily interested in defining the party on a 'federal' level (e.g. conservative vs. populist radical right), while we draw more explicitly attention to the regional level. Thus, this paper seeks to add a comprehensive regional perspective to the 'rise' of the AfD. An analysis of the party's personnel and electorate in particular illustrates that the AfD is much closer to be classified as ERW party there which has been one factor of the party's success in the states of the former GDR. Thus, we argue that this goes against the conventional wisdom on party factions as the next section illustrates.

### **Party Factions: The Far-Right Party Family**

As outlined previously in this paper, the far-right party family can be subsumed under a large 'umbrella' term, with the more 'moderate' wing of the PRR and the more 'extreme wing', that of the ERW. The most electorally successful insurgent far-right party family has been the PRR, performing considerably better electorally than ERW parties (see Carter, 2005; Mudde, 2007.). Primarily, this is because they have 'mainstreamed' their parties and toned down their ideological rhetoric to become more ideologically palatable to broader electorate across the EU and Europe more broadly generally (Carter, 2005; Ivarsflaten, 2005). A key case and

example of this is Marine Le Pen's National Rally Party (FN) in France, where the party has arguably become 'mainstream' and more attractive to a much wider section of the French electorate, in recent years. Marine Le Pen has also sought to distance her policies from her father Jean-Marie Le Pen who represented a much more radical stance.

However, party factions and disputes have often existed within the far-right party family. This has often hampered a number of far-right parties, particularly when they have been in elected office (i.e. 'incumbents') and are no longer 'insurgent' parties in opposition (see Heinisch, 2003; Akkerman & de Lange, 2012). The FPÖ's involvement in the coalition government in Austria (2000-2005) was often marred by ideological tensions between the different wings (PRR v. ERW) of the party (see Luther, 2011). Although having different party factions or wings is common for political parties in general, they deserve particular attention for radical (right) parties.

While the factional conflict in mainstream parties is policy-focused (e.g. more business-oriented factions vs. conservative factions in European Christian Democratic parties), far-right parties factional struggle can determine the outlook of the party as a whole. Often, factional conflicts in far-right parties (or far-left parties for that matter) touch upon their fundamental nature, i.e. democratic vs. anti-democratic, fundamental opposition vs. potential partner for conservative-right governing coalitions. Thus, conflict between such opposing factions can easily lead to the demise or split of far-right parties. (Pardos-Prado, 2015; Odmalm & Bale, 2012).

Furthermore, some scholars note how party factions and disputes have often erupted over weak performance and internal party conflict over ideology, on policy areas such as the management of the economy (Akkerman & de Lange, 2012). More recently, in coalition government, far-right parties in Austria (FPÖ), Finland (The Finns/PS) and Italy (Lega) have faced both scandals and party faction based disputes (Downes et al., 2020). Most recently, the FPÖ was embroiled in a corruption scandal which their leader was filmed to solicit illegal money from a Russian oligarch by offering an industrial contract in return. This caused the centre right ÖVP to terminate the coalition agreement prematurely and call for a General Election.

In Finland, the PS suffered from a serious internal rift in 2017 which effectively divided the party into two. The then leader Timo Soini and his aides attempted to moderate their radical party ideology and hence infuriated the radical faction (i.e. extreme right-wing) within the party. It resulted in a split, in which the radical faction quit the coalition government. The moderate faction remained in the government in the name of Blue Reform. Yet, they failed to win a single seat while the radical PS maintained their electoral vote share at the subsequent election (Arter, 2020).

As discussed, but not made explicit by the existing literature, the lack of a proper mechanism to resolve intra-party disputes might potentially become a liability for radical right parties. Given their relatively small stature compared to mainstream parties, they might lack the mechanism to ease internal disputes or effectively monitor their party members. Such structural weakness might reasonably explain why they are prone to party feuds or scandals. In short, the party politics literature on the far-right party family has often demonstrated how internal party disputes and conflicts between the PRR and ERW elements of the party family have resulted in electoral failure. Building on this literature (see Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Arzheimer, 2018; Akkerman & de Lange, 2012; Carter, 2005) our paper seeks to challenge these empirical findings in arguing that the case of AfD is more complex, largely due to

historical differences (i.e. the legacy of post-communism) within the German political system. Simply put, we argue that in contrast to the existing literature, having different regional factions in Germany may lead to the party achieving electoral success. This may seem counterintuitive given parties' desire to appear united (Greene and Haber 2015; Steenbergen and Scott 2004), but differences among electorate and candidates in East and West Germany as presented here illustrate this.

### **Case Study Selection**

In order to assess our claim that having two regionally separate factions varying in their extremism may actually become part of an electorally successful strategy for a PRR party, we would like to draw attention to the case of the AfD in Germany. Germany provides an exceptional case study for our paper due to its history as a divided country until the reunification in 1990. Ever since 1945, the two regions have experienced fundamentally different political regimes that have had a lasting impact on their political cultures. While the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) has quickly become a part of the Western liberal world after the war, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) was transformed into one of Soviet satellite states in the Eastern bloc. This also meant that while citizens in West have enjoyed democracy for decades now, East Germans only became citizens rather than subjects in 1990. Differences between the two parts are still profound in economic, political and social dimensions.

For instance, the per capita income (PCI) of East Germans is still significantly lower than that of West Germans, on average accounting for only 75% of the latter's PCI, with the difference only marginally fading every year. The unemployment rate has similarly been consistently higher in the East than in the West since the reunification. Politically, East Germany has also shown a lack of engagement with politics, best captured by higher abstention rates for elections on all levels compared to their West German counterparts. The difference in support for parties is best illustrated by the continued high support for the left-wing party Die Linke that has struggled to even enter state parliaments in West Germany. Due to all these persisting differences in regard to economic situation and political participation, Germany is a crucial case in which political parties may opt for diverging political strategies in different regions.

The regions of the former GDR also play a special role in the rhetoric of the AfD which is why it is important to analyse the party in the region more substantively. With the party's constant criticism of an alleged erosion in freedom of speech, the former GDR provides a welcome reference point, as Thuringia leader Höcke (quoted in Thorwart, 2019) for instance states: "We in the East still have the personal experience with a totalitarian society...It feels like back then in the GDR again." Similarly, the party has tapped on East Germans' personal experience by calling its campaign "Wende 2.0", a term employed to describe the transformation of the East German communist state culminating in the German reunification and predominantly used by East Germans. Other terms stemming from that time that AfD and the anti-Islamicisation movement Pegida have successfully re-used and furnished with new meanings are "Bürger" (citizen), "Widerstand" (resistance), "Volk" (people), "friedliche Revolution" (peaceful revolution) and even the revolutionary slogan "Wir sind das Volk" (We are the people). In other words, the AfD attempts to attract East German voters by employing vocabulary and language that resonates with their past and thus, taking advantage of the widespread feeling that the other parties have not taken their role in a unified Germany seriously.

It was also in East Germany where the party was quicker to cooperate with extra-parliamentary groups. Other far-right groups including Pegida appeared to be a “natural ally” (Gauland quoted in Withnall, 2014) for some of the AfD leaders due to shared positions. It was also under the pressure of the East German party branches, where Pegida itself had been more popular as well, that a non-cooperation stipulation was finally relaxed in 2016 and leaders of organisations attended and spoke in their positions on each other’s events (Nimz, 2018). However, Pegida did not remain the only extreme right group that cooperated with the AfD. The Identitarian Movement for example also participated in joint protests while members of the NPD had also been frequent attendants. The most obvious illustration of the links to extremist groups were the joint demonstrations and following riots in the city of Chemnitz, Saxony in 2018 leading to the loss of public order in the city (Arzheimer, 2019).

The marches were organised and attended by a variety of extremist groups such as “Der III. Weg” (The Third Way), Pro Chemnitz, the Identitarian Movement and Pegida with many of the protesters having been mobilised from different parts of (East) Germany. Furthermore, with prominent figures of the wider neo-Nazi scene present in Chemnitz, leaders as well as rank-and-file members had no reservations to march alongside them (Der Spiegel, 2018). The events in Chemnitz illustrated how the different extremist groups have come to form a wide network, including the AfD, with many of them willing to use violent force (Deutsche Welle, 2018).

These examples show that East Germany takes on a special role in the wider strategies and development of the AfD and it is therefore worth analysing the region more comprehensively. In the following sections, this paper will evaluate the AfD’s competing factions from a regional perspective. The two primary areas examined in this paper relate to (a) ‘personnel’ and the (b) ‘electorate.’ This allows us to illustrate how Eastern and Western branches of the party diverge from each other, from a multi-level perspective, at both the ‘macro’ (candidate) and ‘micro’ (voter) levels of analysis. Most significantly, drawing on ‘personnel’ allows us to examine the different political attitudes on the left-right political spectrum that AfD party candidates hold between the East and West. Secondly, the ‘electorate’ focus enables the study to investigate differences in political attitudes amongst German voters between East and West regionally. Furthermore, examining both the ‘personnel’ and ‘electorate’ levels, allows the paper to shed further light on the key ideological differences of the AfD party between East and West Germany.

### **(1) Personnel**

Initially, the AfD was described as a ‘Professor’s party’ (Arzheimer and Berning, 2019) in its founding days due to its prominence amongst academics such as the founder Bernd Lucke, who is a Professor in macroeconomics. In addition, the party also proved to be attractive for businessmen and former members of CDU and FDP in particular (e.g. Stier et al., 2017) and thus, was quite elitist in terms of party leadership. Yet this conventional wisdom is primarily concerned with the founders of the party and the leadership of the federal party. While the label ‘professors’ party’ is inaccurate for East Germany, the party branches there have attracted conservatives disenfranchised with Chancellor Angela Merkel’s re-positioning of the CDU alongside members from PRR or ERW circles.

The Saxony branch for instance very quickly made headlines due to some of its members and MPs’ past involvement in extremist groups (Welt 2014). The picture appears similar in Saxony-Anhalt just as in the Thuringia branch. They faced pressure from the beginning to explain the extremist past of some of its members and leaders. Notably, André Poggenburg



and Björn Höcke, leading figures in what used to be the most extreme party faction, have also been members in the party since 2013 with at least the latter one having been linked to the neo-Nazi scene in East Germany before joining the AfD (Kartheuser and Middelhoff 2017; Märkische Allgemeine Zeitung 2016). Brandenburg party leader Andreas Kalbitz, also a member of the party since its founding days, has also been linked to various extremist groups (Spiegel 2019). These individuals, with some of them extremely influential in radicalising the party as a whole illustrate that the AfD in East Germany has attracted extremists from 2013 onwards.<sup>1</sup>

Whilst these names are just illustrative of the leadership positions in the East German branches, there have also been numerous reports linking the rank-and-file members of the party with previous membership in ERW parties such as NPD and DVU, despite these parties being labelled as intolerable according to the AfD party constitution (e.g. Korfmacher 2019). From the beginning, the AfD in East Germany seems to have attracted a variety of people ranging from conservatives disappointed with the government's handling of the European debt crisis to those who have an extreme right worldview. However, the central argument here is that the latter faction seems to have been much more willing to join the party in the states of Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia, Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern than in West Germany.

Most prominently, previous party leader Frauke Petry, once a driving force in steering the party to the right herself, could not keep up with the pace of the radicalisation and also had to concede to the growing influence of the more extreme right factions within the party. Among them, “Der Flügel” (the “Wing” or “Tendency”) arguably became an influential veto-power within the party until its dissolution in the spring of 2020. The loosely structured group was the most radical faction within the AfD and has been deemed extremist by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution in 2020, largely due to its anti-constitutional character. While that decision heightened the pressure to dissolve the network formally, commentators have no doubt that the group will continue to shape intra-party politics (e.g. Schuetze 2020). Arguably, their continued influence already became obvious when party leader Meuthen suggested a party split and was forced to admit a “grave mistake” and emphasise the unity of the party (e.g. Fiedler 2020). Although it seemed that the “wing” attracted a growing number of supporters in West Germany as well<sup>2</sup>, the origins of the group are to be found in the East.

The faction's founding document, the ‘Erfurt Resolution’ (Erfurt is the capital of Thuringia), was signed predominantly by East German AfD politicians and specifically denotes the region as ‘disappointed’ with the plan to mould the party into a potential coalition partner with the CDU. In the document, members of the ‘wing’ complained that the AfD may turn into a ‘technocratic’ party and thus, fail to provide a fundamental electoral alternative for voters. The AfD needs to become “the political representation of a broad coalition of right-wing anti-establishment forces, including the Islamophobic ‘Pegida’ (‘Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamicisation of the West’) and similar groups” (Arzheimer, 2019:4) according to the resolution. In other words, the ‘Wing’ was primarily seeking an alliance with groups and

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<sup>1</sup> While these individuals, such as Björn Höcke and Andreas Kalbitz may have been born in West Germany and have spent a lot of their lives in West Germany we do not focus on their origin. Instead, we are only interested in their careers as politicians that have begun in the East. In some sense the phenomenon of extreme right-wing figures such as these two, born in West Germany but starting their careers as politicians in East Germany supports our argument.

<sup>2</sup>The faction seems to have become more prominent in other regional chapters in West Germany as well, most notably in Schleswig-Holstein and North Rhine-Westphalia in which serious leadership struggles have been fought in 2019.

organisations outside of parliamentary activities in order to turn the party into a “resistance movement against the further erosion of sovereignty and identity in Germany” (Der Flügel, 2015). By now, a number of German scholars have, to varying degrees, called factions of the party ‘extreme right’ or even using ‘fascist agitation methods’ (e.g. Funke, 2015; Niedermeyer, 2016), similar to the concerns raised by the authorities.

Thus, the most extreme faction the party had was largely an East German faction in terms of leadership and orientation. Not surprisingly then, the slogan of their annual meeting in Kyffhausen in Thuringia in 2019 was “The East rises/stands up” (“Der Osten steht auf”). In his speech at the meeting, leader Björn Höcke describes the AfD as the “only authentic native party” (“Heimatpartei” which denotes a party standing up for local interests, yet the term “Heimat” is politically loaded and usually associated with the right-wing of the political spectrum) in the recent state elections in Thuringia. The leader of the Brandenburg faction, at the same meeting, held that the ‘Wing’ will “let the sun rise in the East, so that it will finally shine over all of Germany”<sup>3</sup>. However, references to the GDR have generally become a popular rhetorical device across the party leadership.

More recently, and especially also due to the BFV’s assessment that the group is working against the Constitution, the Identitarian Movement has also entered the spotlight and with it its links with the AfD. Media reports have found that a number of AfD representatives have employed staff with links to extremist groups including the Identitarian Movement (e.g. Biermann et al., 2018). This is by no means a phenomenon that is only prominent among East German MPs, yet overall it seems to be the case that they show less reservation to employ staff members with such past links, including Alexander Gauland (Merker, 2019).

### **Hypotheses:**

Two main hypotheses are outlined in this paper. These hypotheses allow us to test the ‘macro-level’ (i.e. candidates) and at the same time complement it with the ‘micro-level’ analysis (i.e. voters). Most importantly, this allows us to systematically test our two key areas central to this study, namely ‘personnel’ (candidates) and the ‘electorate’ (voters). At the same time, testing these hypotheses with a quantitative approach enables us to enhance the overall external validity of the paper and shed further light on the key regional variations (intra-party heterogeneity) within the AfD between East and West Germany. These hypotheses are tested empirically with the use of the 2017 German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) Candidate Survey (H1) alongside the 2017 German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) Pre-Election Survey (H2). The hypotheses are as follows:

**H1:** AfD Candidates (‘Personnel’ Hypothesis) in East Germany will tend to hold more right-wing political attitudes (i.e. ‘Authoritarianism Index’) than in West Germany.

**H2:** Voters (‘Electorate’ Hypothesis) in East Germany will tend to hold more right-wing political attitudes (i.e. ‘Authoritarianism Index’) than in West Germany.

### **Empirical Analysis**

In order to test our empirical claim that the AfD resembles more of an extreme right-wing party in Eastern Germany (H1), we have assessed the party’s candidates for the 2017 Federal Elections. Our empirical analysis is based on the 2017 GLES Candidate Survey and is

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<sup>3</sup> „Wir werden im Osten die Sonne aufgehen lassen, damit sie am Schluss über ganz Deutschland scheint.“

particularly interested in candidates' attitudes that highlight their position on a libertarian-authoritarian dimension. In accordance with our argument we expect to see differences between East and West German AfD candidates. We argue that issues on the socio-cultural dimension are more helpful in illustrating significant differences between candidates to support our argument that the East German AfD resembles more of an ERW party. In contrast, issues pertaining to the traditional left-right dimension that focuses on the economy, in particular the state's involvement in the economy, does not necessarily illustrate differences on a libertarian-authoritarian spectrum. Specifically, we have utilized a number of attitudinal candidate survey questions in order to construct an authoritarianism index dimension. These include the following questions:

1. Immigrants should be obligated to assimilate to German culture
2. Delinquents should be punished more harshly than to date
3. Women should decide on abortion on their own
4. Immigrants are good for the German economy
5. Germany needs to cap the intake of refugees

Candidates for the general elections in 2017 had to respond to these questions with options ranging from "Fully agree" to "Fully disagree". With five potential responses to each question, the highest score a candidate could achieve is 25. These questions highlight the candidates' positions on issues such as immigration, abortion, alongside 'law and order' and are thus, useful to construct an index on a libertarian-authoritarian dimension. We have recoded some of the questions in order to streamline their direction on this index so that a higher value corresponds to a more authoritarian attitude. All questions on the index are weighted equally. In order to assess the index' reliability we have first of all compared the mean values of the index. As Table 1 illustrates, these mean values largely correspond to our expectations based on the party profiles, with AfD scoring the highest values and Left and Greens scoring the lowest ones.

Table 1: Mean Values of Candidates' Score on the Authoritarianism Index by Party Membership

Party	Mean Score on Index
CDU	16.80
CSU	18.14
SPD	13.49
Greens	12.46
Left	12.41
FDP	14.92
AfD	20.59

In the next step we have conducted an OLS regression model to validate our hypothesis that there are significant differences between AfD candidates from East and West Germany (H1). Further control variables in our model include candidates' Gender, Age, and Education. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: OLS Multivariate Regression on AfD Candidates

	Authoritarianism Index
East	1.21* (0.62)
Gender	-0.20 (0.85)
Age	0.05* (0.02)
University Degree	0.00 (0.56)
No Vocational Training	-0.47 (1.39)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.08
N	92

**Note:** Standard Errors are presented in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

Table 2 shows that East German AfD candidates tend to have higher scores on our authoritarianism index than their West German counterparts. The regional differences are more important in explaining the candidates' differences than for instance their gender or education. In order to check the small sample size (East German AfD candidates  $N = 23$ ) we have also conducted bootstrapping for both statistical models and obtained similar empirical results. We adopted bootstrapping as a key methodological approach in order to check the reliability of our data, due to the fairly small sample size (i.e. weak external validity) for AfD Candidates in the database. The empirical results thus confirm the overall reliability of our empirical findings for AfD Candidates in Eastern Germany (H1). These results also remain robust when we add two more survey questions into our index, namely attitudes on (a) same-sex marriage and (b) whether they should be a female quota on supervisory boards in large companies.

Whilst these statistical findings demonstrate important empirical findings for AfD Candidates in Eastern Germany compared to Western Germany, these findings are preliminary and only offer a single cross-sectional snapshot in German Politics (i.e. the 2017 German Federal Election). Therefore, it is important to place some 'caveats' around these empirical findings, as it would be important for future empirical research to build on these findings, with more comprehensive candidate data, across a larger longitudinal timeframe. This would enhance the overall external validity of such findings at the aggregate level unit of analysis. We argue, however, that these empirical findings are still important, as they provide preliminary empirical evidence and patterns, in demonstrating that the political attitudes of AfD Candidates differ considerably across Eastern and Western Germany. This also has important implications for regional ideological variations within the far-right AfD, the divergent political attitudes that AfD candidates hold and for contemporary party politics in Germany.

## **(2) Electorate**

Nonetheless, a party's ideological positioning is never an isolated development. Instead, it results from the constant interaction with the electorate's preferences. In this section we argue that the more extreme lines of the AfD in East Germany are not only imposed by the more radical figures in the local party leadership but also respond to the demand side of voters there. Arguably, the more radical strategy was adopted and proves to be more successful because there is simply more of a market for this ideology in the region.

The history of the extreme right in Germany after 1989 has predominantly been an East German one. With a few exceptions (e.g. Die Republikaner in Baden-Württemberg and Deutsche Volksunion in Bremen and Schleswig-Holstein), the extreme right parties have generally been more successful in East Germany following the reunification. While the Deutsche Volksunion (DVU) entered the state parliaments in Saxony-Anhalt and Brandenburg, the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD) focused on Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Saxony where the party gained up to 9.2 percent of the votes. Without doubt, these parties belong to the ERW group, openly associating themselves with neo-Nazi subcultures and thus, prove to be too extreme to form a serious electoral alternative for moderate voters, especially in West Germany.

However, “in the eastern states of the unified Germany the extreme right subculture profits from a fertile social, economic and cultural breeding ground. The abrupt transformations of the political and economic systems left large parts of the population in a deep identity crisis” as Backes and Mudde (2000:468) note. In other words, these right parties have illustrated, years before the AfD was founded, that East Germany may provide favourable conditions and political opportunity structures for any party located on the right of CDU, even those associated with the neo-Nazi and skinhead scene.

In addition, NPD and DVU have by now degenerated into insignificance largely due to two reasons. This can be primarily attributed to the social stigma associated with their openly racist, xenophobic rhetoric modelled after Nazi language that they have long been unable to attract capable politicians and instead engaged in intra-party struggles (e.g. Art, 2011:79). Likewise, with the AfD establishing itself as a slightly more moderate electoral alternative, the small far-right parties in particular have lost a considerable number of voters to the AfD Party (e.g. Dilling, 2018:94). Arzheimer (2020) finds that the AfD does electorally exceptionally well in districts in which the NPD was successful in the past.

Much has been written about East Germans’ susceptibility toward extreme right positions and two main reasons have been identified (e.g. Best, 2015; Best and Salheiser, 2006). For one, the perception of a collective discrimination against East Germans and their relative deprivation following the reunification has been singled out as an important reason. In a similar vein, “the maintenance of antidemocratic, anti-pluralist and anti-capitalist attitudes and norms, that can primarily be linked back to the socialisation in the authoritarian socialism with Soviet characteristics” (Best, 2015:120) is an equally important factor. The latter has also been empirically validated by Goerres, Spies, and Kumlin (2018) on an individual level, while Roth and Wolff (2017) have identified the East-West divide as a significant variable explaining voter behaviour, controlling for other socioeconomic aspects.

The perceived relative deprivation has led to a dealignment with the traditional parties. While the Christian Democrats have been the dominant party in East Germany after the reunification, the party’s inability or unwillingness to significantly improve living standards relative to the West German population has led many to support the AfD. Not only are almost all leading positions in politics and the wider economy filled with West Germans, salaries and pensions on the whole are still much lower in the former GDR. This has led young and educated people to look for employment elsewhere but at the same time left remaining inhabitants with an ever-increased feeling of deprivation. Turning into the ‘East German voice’ has thus proved to be a successful electoral strategy for the AfD, especially in the aftermath of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ onset in 2015. The decision to allow refugees into Germany temporarily has also arguably alienated East German voters in particular and thus

led to a radical rejection of Chancellor Merkel’s policies. In turn, this has been electorally fruitful for the AfD.

In order to analyse the German electorate we have used the 2017 German Longitudinal Election Study Pre-Election Survey (GLES). GLES provides (a) a wide range of attitudinal survey questions, alongside (b) a large sample size of German citizens, that can enhance the overall external validity of the study. In our analysis, we have followed a similar strategy as in our analysis of candidates. We have also created an index that can capture the libertarian-authoritarianism dimension among the voters. The survey questions for voters are slightly different from the questions that the candidates were asked so we have also adapted our index and included the following issues for greater reliability:

1. Immigrants should be obligated to assimilate to German culture
2. There should be a female quota in the supervisory board of large companies
3. The European integration should be advanced further
4. Germany should have a cap on accepting refugees
5. Same-sex marriage should be legal

In this case, the index captures slightly more issue dimensions than the one created for the candidates as it also includes a question of European integration and touches upon gender relations. Similar to our authoritarianism index for candidates, we have first assessed whether the index captures party differences. The mean values on in the index of those voters that have stated clear voting intentions are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Mean Values of Voters’ Score on Authoritarianism Index by Party Voting Intention

Party	Mean Score on Index
CDU/CSU	14.96
SPD	13.67
Greens	11.87
Left	13.60
FDP	14.87
AfD	17.90

Similar to the candidates above, these mean scores are also in line with the expectations based on the parties’ profiles. AfD voters score the highest and are thus most authoritarian, whilst voters of the Greens tend to be more libertarian/progressive.

We then ran an OLS multivariate regression model to investigate whether there are significant differences between East and West German voters in regard to their authoritarian attitudes. Further control variables that we included in our model are gender, age, education, income, migration background alongside social class. Different correlation tests show that this empirical model did not suffer from a multicollinearity problem. Table 4 illustrates the results from this model.

Table 4: OLS Multivariate Regression on Electorate

	Authoritarianism Index
East	0.78*** (0.18)
Gender	-0.65*** (0.16)
Age	0.03*** (0.00)
Education	-0.82*** (0.08)
Income	0.04 (0.04)
Migration Background	0.62*** (0.19)
Social Class	-0.15 (0.10)
R <sup>2</sup>	0.17
N	1698

**Note:** Standard Errors are presented in parentheses.

\* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < 0.001.

The results of Table 4 also confirm H2. Voters in East Germany tend to score higher on our index of authoritarian attitudes than voters in West Germany. This effect also remains highly significant with additional model specifications, such as bootstrapping. The effects of the control variables are also in line with the existing literature. Men display higher scores on the authoritarianism index. We also find that older voters held higher levels of authoritarianism, while a higher education level predicts more progressive/libertarian values.

We also ran an identical model for AfD Voters. However, due to the small sample size (N=119), our empirical model for AfD voters was limited and therefore not presented in this paper, as it lacks external validity. Therefore, we argue that the findings in Table 4 provide important preliminary evidence and patterns regionally in German politics that future scholarship should build on, with larger and more comprehensive data.

## CONCLUSION

This paper adopted a single case study analysis in examining the diverse regional party factions with the far-right AfD Party. This paper makes an original contribution to the far-right party politics literature through the ‘regional’ focus on two dimensions; namely: (a) ‘personnel’ and (b) the ‘electorate’ of the AfD. The central argument of this paper is that contrary to the existing literature, having different regional ideological factions (PRR v. ERW) within a far-right party family can serve as an electoral advantage. The AfD is often characterised as attracting protest voters and yet, in nationwide post-polling surveys, around one third of the respondents say they are convinced party followers instead (Infratest dimap, 2017). Furthermore, the party has built up local structures and its ideology is widely shared amongst the East German electorate allowing the AfD to establish a somewhat loyal party base. Put simply, arguably the AfD became one of the most successful parties in East Germany because of and not despite the party’s continuous radicalisation.

Thus, internal party tensions over ideology and policy may not necessarily constrain far-right parties such as AfD. This is important as these findings imply that in the case of AfD, such a differentiated party strategy across different regions (West v. East) may be an enabling structure and have a positive effect electorally. While it can work out as an electoral advantage, politicians and party members likewise also need to see their factionalism through

this regional perspective. Otherwise their differences may also lead to a potential intra-party conflict. Most significantly, these findings may be generalisable to other far-right parties and case studies in contemporary European politics; most notably in countries such as Belgium (Flemish Interest), Italy (Lega) and Austria (Freedom Party of Austria) where there exist clear tensions ideologically between the PRR and ERW factions. Future research should seek to expand the theoretical argument of this study towards other far-right parties at the comparative level, in countries that have (a) similar regional differences and (b) exhibit ideological diversity/or tensions.



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