8-23-2019

Comparative Models in German Elections: Using the German Far-Right Party as a Proxy for Ethnic Conflict

Clay H. Parham
Baylor University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/urceu

Part of the Comparative Politics Commons, and the International and Area Studies Commons

Comparative Models in German Elections: Using the German Far-Right Party as a Proxy for Ethnic Conflict

6

Comparative Models in German Elections: Using the German Far-Right Party as a Proxy for Ethnic Conflict

Clay H. Parham

Baylor University

ABSTRACT

In 2017, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) became the first the far-right party to win seats in the Bundestag since 1933. By campaigning on ethnic division, the AfD saw an unprecedented rise in support, especially in East Germany. This paper tests two models of ethnic conflict within comparative politics, primordialism and constructivism, to see which better explains the result of the AfD's 2017 election. By examining the rhetorical use of political advertisements, the Manifesto Project's analysis of the AfD's platform, and differences of support between East and West Germany, the paper finds that constructivism better shows that highly-educated elites within the AfD purposefully constructed ethnic division to gain political support. Clear implications are drawn for the future of the two ethnic models and for European far-right politics.

KEYWORDS

Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany), comparative politics, far-right, ethnic conflict, 2017 German election

1.   INTRODUCTION

Far-right parties' popularity in Western Europe increased drastically since the 1980s. Some authors have pointed to this increase as a kind of "silent counter-revolution" to the New Left – parties such as the Greens or the European Left (Ignazi, 2016). Others argue that the far-right originated as "contemporary capitalism" activated "political partisan appeals to economically rightist positions" were increasingly effective (Kitschelt, 1995). Still others argue that the far-right revolution is simply a continuation of the political development of Europe (Cole, 2005). It is clear there is not a consensus of where far-right parties' support originated, but what is clear is that while far-right parties have been increasing in popularity for decades, the Alternative für Deutschland's (AfD) unprecedented success after one election signals a new era in far-right European politics.

There have been a plethora of proposed reasons for the AfD's success in Germany: an economic slowdown, fears about immigration, or distrust and disdain for German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the EU. Little English-language academic literature relating to the AfD's election exists. However, German literature provides some insight into their success. An article published immediately following the election examined the relationship between the AfD and the economic position of voters in Germany, finding "the lower the ability and the lower the income, the higher the AfD's chance of election" (Söllner, 2017). Conversely, most news publications point to the AfD's anti-immigrant and Eurosceptic policies as the predominant factor behind their support (Eddy, 2017; Hagen, 2017; Hill, 2017). However, no consensus exists as to why East Germany had higher vote totals for the AfD, something remarked upon by Hill (2017) shortly after the election. The following research hopes to shed some light on the AfD's activation of ethnic conflict.

Germany has a troubled history of far-right nationalism, but until recently, German far-right parties had not found success in national elections. However, the 2017 election showed far-right nationalism is not dead in Germany. Far-right nationalism gained in Poland and Hungary, and the National Rally (formerly National Front) party in France usually controls 10-15 percent of the legislative seats, but in 2017, AfD became the first German far-right party to gain seats in the Bundestag since 1933. Interestingly, the AfD's support divided geographically between the former-communist German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and the capitalist Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany). East Germany had significantly more support for the AfD. The stark difference between East and West Germany in support for the AfD, and the AfD's anti-immigration rhetoric, means there we have a rare opportunity for a within-case test of two ethnic conflict models within comparative politics, primordialism and constructivism. Based on an analysis of how these two models explain ethnic conflict, I conclude that a constructivist approach best explains the differences between East and West Germany and their support for the AfD.

I begin this paper by describing background on the founding and political position of the AfD. Then, I outline the effectiveness of using the AfD's vote total as a dependent variable to test models of ethnic conflict. Next, I analyze the test case using a primordial model and constructivist model. Finally, I conclude with normative statements about the rise of far-right nationalism in Europe and the greater Western world.

2.   DEPENDENT VARIABLE

Since Europe does not presently experience violent ethnic conflict on a large scale like Africa or parts of Asia, a proxy must be used if we wish to test models of ethnic conflict.

Necessarily, this requires a different dependent variable than violent conflict. Additionally, Europe's overall domestic stability and security position means the sample size for race-related crimes is low. Instead, our model must unavoidably differ from traditional measures of ethnic conflict. Fortunately, the AfD campaigned along primarily ethnic lines, which makes them a suitable proxy as a measure of ethnic conflict, and the prevalence of election and demographic data in Germany adds quantitative data to our research. As such, the dependent variable for this paper is regional support for the AfD in Germany.

Using this dependent variable gives us several advantages. First, Germany's position as a recently-separated-but-ethnically-German state means we can test primordial theory's ethnic component. Second, the AfD's changed its political platform to a message that highlighted ethnic division, making their actions an appealing test case for constructivism. Finally, a marked difference exists between East and West Germany's support for the far-right party, testing primordialism's hypothesis that ethnic divisions are long-standing and unchanging. Thus, Germany serves as an effective within-case comparison for ethnic conflict models. Using this within-case comparison gives us the ability to test long- and short-term cultural differences as well. Since primordialism and constructivism test those cultural differences respectively, that gives us additional robustness within our test.

3.   MODEL 1: PRIMORDIALISM

Primordialism is a theory within comparative politics where ethnic conflict originates in long-standing ethnic divisions. Under primordialist theory, differences are fixed between ethnic groups based on a mixture of filial relationships and biological underpinnings. Filial relationships and biological underpinnings are expressed through the "perceived common origin, skin color, appearance, religion, language or some combination thereof" of the members of an ethnic group (Bayar, 2009). Everyone belongs to one but only one ethnic group. There are several measures of ethnic diversity, but the ethno-linguistic fractionalization index (ELF) is a popular, albeit outdated, index for much of Europe. However, under primordialism, "ethnic diversity (as measured by the ELF) is often seen as a 'problem' and many policy responses rest on the assumption that multi-ethnic societies are conflict-prone and that ethnic mobility needs to be lessened or eliminated where possible" (Alesina & Ferrara, 2005; Muro, 2015). Once assumed, ethnic identity is unchanging, and differing ethnic identities in close proximity can lead to ethnic conflict.

By playing off of primordial feelings of German nationalism and targeting Islamic refugees, the AfD make this an effective case in which to test the primordial model. East and West Germany had only been separated for a few decades, and while van Hoorn and Maseland (2010) found that there were cultural differences between the two groups, especially in terms of market economy compatibility (with East Germans being surprisingly more biased towards market economies), a primordial theorist would say that the few decades they were separated would not lead to substantial ethnic differences. If this model were true, East and West Germany should not have significant ethnic differences, and ethnic conflict should be present in regions with high percentages of people with a migrant background, regardless of geographic location. Furthermore, if primordialism is correct, we should see no difference in the voting percentage for the AfD for either East or West Germany. Upon close analysis, however, the number of refugees in a population has no correlation on the strength of the AfD.

Unfortunately, while Alesina and Ferrara's (2005) EFL is usually an effective indi-

cator of ethnic fractionalization in a country, the number of refugees from the Syrian crisis has made the index outdated and unusable. Instead, to further test this model, I gathered information from the German Federal Returning Officer's website, where the Federal Government compiles demographic data to the voting precinct level ("The Federal Returning Officer," n.d.). Additionally, while testing this model, differences between East and West Germany should not be significant once controlling for number of people with a migrant background.

Table 1 is a regression analysis of demographic, economic, and social data of German voting constituencies. This data shows that, contrary to the primordial model, higher numbers of migrants in a voting district actually appeared to decrease the AfD's vote share (Parham, 2019). In actuality, there remained a significant difference in the AfD vote share, controlling for number of people with a migrant background, depending on whether the voting constituency was in East or West Germany, with East Germany seeing a much higher voting share for the AfD. Clearly, primordialism in this test case is not well supported by the empirical data. Instead of a constituency with many immigrants resulting in more support for the AfD, we see the opposite effect. Additionally, the primordial model would not suggest sizeable differences between East and West Germany's vote share for the AfD. The influencing factor would instead be the number of people with a migrant background living in the area. However, the critical factor still seems to be an East/West divide. Moreover, primordialism fails to account for other, non-homogenic cultural differences (language, religion, etc.) in Germany between East and West.

Table 1. Regression Results from 2017 German Election

AfD's Vote Share

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Former East Germany	12.51***	(8.51)	9.740***	(6.70)	9.484***	(3.54)
% of Pop. Foreign	0.384	(1.94)	0.278	(1.57)	0.319	(1.57)
Population Density	-0.000439	(-1.01)	-0.000303	(-0.78)	-0.000711	(-1.49)
Birthrate Replacem~t	-0.215	(-0.69)	-0.335	(-1.20)	-0.235	(-0.76)
Migration Balance	-0.309***	(-3.48)	-0.243**	(-3.03)	-0.284**	(-3.14)
% of the Pop. Ove~60	0.0202	(0.11)	-0.0510	(-0.30)	0.0362	(0.19)
% with Migrant Bac~d	-0.117	(-1.02)	-0.116	(-1.14)	-0.130	(-1.14)
GDP per Capita	0.0000201	(0.38)	0.0000491	(1.04)	0.0000170	(0.32)
% Admitted to Uni.	-0.106	(-1.95)	-0.123*	(-2.53)	-0.116*	(-2.12)
Unemployment Rate	-0.578*	(-2.06)	-0.412	(-1.64)	-0.531	(-1.89)
AfD's Vote Share i~o			1.270***	(4.30)		
Centrist					-0.164	(-1.35)
Constant	18.54**	(3.33)	13.68**	(2.70)	30.61**	(2.91)
R-squared	0.796		0.842		0.802	
Observations	75		75		75	

t statistics in parentheses
* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

The data show high ethnic fractalization does not translate to higher vote totals for the AfD in Germany. We would expect the AfD's vote totals to not be linked to geographic area within Germany but rather to the number of immigrants living within a community. What we instead see is the dividing line between East and West Germany as the primary factor for the AfD's vote totals. A primordialist theorist may say that Germany has only unified relatively recently (Bismarck formally unified Germany in 1871) and so ethnic divisions may be along other geographic lines like former kingdoms or Catholic/Protestant divide.

However, upon viewing a map of the AfD's vote percentage, the clearest dividing line is between East and West Germany, not from other possible dividing lines.[1] This in itself invalidates the primordialist model, but the other data presented above further show that the primordialist model does not fit this case study.

4.   MODEL 2: CONSTRUCTIVISM

Constructivism theorizes that ethnic conflict is constructed by leaders in order to drive political agendas. Specifically, "constructivists go beyond making the instrumentalist point that elites and intellectuals deliberately select and rework pre-existing social and cultural traditions to engineer products that resonate with the masses," by clarifying "why individuals think that ethnic and national boundaries are meaningful, valuable or useful" (Barth, 1970; Muro, 2015). For constructivists, political leaders are able to recognize what could serve as cultural or ethnic identities and activate those differences. In fact, constructivism serves as a counterpoint to primordialism, since "(1) individuals have multiple, not single ethnic identities; (2) these identities are constructed and can change (although often they do not); and (3) such change, when it occurs, is the product of some human process" (Chandra, 2012). Skillful elites are then able to harness ethnic identities to make salient certain political points.

The AfD is a relatively new political party in Germany. Their original political platform focused on economic issues, primarily Euroscepticism and anti-Eurozone. In fact, the AfD's founders, Alexander Gauland, Bernd Lucke, and Konrad Adam, were a mixture of economists and journalists.[2] However, because of the backlash from German Chancellor Angela Merkel's stated immigration policy of "*wir schaffen das*" (we can manage this) after nearly 1 million migrants arrived in Germany seeking asylum, AfD party members elected nationalist Frauke Petry in 2015 as their leader. Under Petry's leadership, "Alternative for Germany [AfD] shifted its focus to domestic security and immigration. Its tone became increasingly nationalistic, populistic and — its critics said — racist" (Eddy, 2017). Interestingly, the policy shift also led to a dramatic increase in support for the AfD. While the AfD gained some political points in the 2013 election, they did not receive 5% of the vote, failing to achieve the apportionment threshold for parties to gain seats in the Bundestag. The position shift in 2015 preceded double-digit victories in the 2016 state elections of Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, and Saxony-Anhalt and a surprising upset in the 2017 election, where they received 12.6% of the national vote and became the main opposition party.

We would expect, under a constructivist lens, the political elite in the AfD to engineer ethnic identity to gain political favor. However, the support for the AfD would take root specifically in East Germany, since, according to Alesina and Ferrara (2005), "rich democracies are more capable of 'handling' productively ethnic diversity," and East Germany has a bleaker economic outlook than West Germany (Aumann & Scheufele, 2010). Further research by Dancygier (2010) found that ethnic conflict primarily exists in places of economic scarcity. The poor economic conditions in East Germany, compared to West, would show why East Germans felt ethnical divided. The AfD's success in East Germany

---

1 See Appendix 1.

2 It is interesting to note that all three founders of the AfD and Frauke Petry, the AfD's political leader during the election cycle of 2017, have doctorates. The party began as a collection of highly educated economists and journalists, and party leadership today has kept that tradition of advanced education.

would result from the creation and activation of ethnic differences between Germans and migrants.

Like most states behind the Iron Curtain, East Germany lags behind West Germany economically. However, Fuchs–Schündeln and Izem (2012) argue that traditional measures of human capital in East Germany, i.e., years of schooling or education level, were higher in the East than in the West. This should lead to higher economic outcomes, but instead labor productivity has remained low in the geographic East. In fact, by 2001, economic prospects for East Germans commuting into the West became equal with their western counterparts, but workers remaining in the East continued to lag (Burda and Hunt 2001). Studies show that wage gap and unemployment differences between East and West, caused by sharp wage increases, "deteriorated competition and led to an increase of unemployment" (Smolny, 2009). Aumann and Scheufele (2010) found the East's unemployment rates should be equal to the West's ten years following the publication date, while gross domestic product (GDP) per capita and manufacturing production will be equal in 49 and 94 years, respectively.

Most important for this case study, though, is the AfD's transitional language from Euroscepticism to ethnic nationalism. To indicate if this transitional language was effective, the same variables as those in the primordial model will be used, namely level of support in East versus West Germany. Additionally, the AfD would have had to consciously shift its political message to ethnic conflict, showing that the "elites and intellectuals deliberately select[ed] and rework[ed] pre-existing social and cultural traditions" (Muro, 2015). If a size-able difference in voting share for the AfD exists and the party has changed its message to illuminate cultural differences, then the model may be proven useful in this test case.

The clearest indicator of the political shift from Euroscepticism to anti–immigration can be seen by looking at the Manifesto Project's efforts to track political changes in party platforms. The Project shows a clear shift in feelings about European integration (becomes less opposed) and multiculturalism (becomes more opposed) (Volkens et al., 2018).[3] The transition in rhetoric from Euroscepticism to anti-immigration correlates closely with the increased vote percentage for the AfD. Clearly, some measure of ethnic identity was reached.

As commented on above, English-language academic literature on this most recent German federal election is sparse, but newspaper and long-form reporting commented on the curious dividing line of AfD support between East and West Germany. In fact, the AfD gained 21.6 percent of the vote in former East Germany, significantly higher than the country-wide average of 12.6 percent (Hagen, 2017). It is worth noting that the models tested are for general ethnic conflict, and the AfD, which campaigns primarily on anti-immigrant nationalism, Islamophobia, and general Euroscepticism, used ethnic and nationalist language during their campaign. The AfD's political advertisements were overtly racist, saying things such as "Islam? Doesn't fit our cuisine," "Burkas? We prefer Bikinis," and "New Germans? We make them ourselves" (Wildman, 2017). Since the AfD used ethnic language in their campaigns, their surge in East Germany serves as an effective lens from which to study conflict and rhetoric's impact on vote shares in Western Europe. Because far-right success is a novelty in Germany, journalists frame the AfD as a fledging, far-right organization, outside the norm of German politics. However, we can find expansive English-language literature on East Germany's economic and political recovery, and naturally German sources delve

---

3 See Appendix 2.

more deeply, and often more empirically, into the 2017 German election.

Several psychological studies comparing East and West Germans found marked differences between them. First, narcissism indexes and self-esteem scales between East and West Germans, and in adults who graduated from the East German education system and children who did not, starkly differ. Vater, Moritz, & Roepke (2018) found that East Germans are typically less narcissistic and more self-confident than their western counterparts. Regarding economic and cultural differences between East and West Germany, van Hoorn and Maseland (2010) found that cultural differences between East and West Germans do exist. However, these cultural differences do not impact economic performance.

Existing research seems to match the first part of the constructionist theory, that the party deliberately changed its position to appeal to ethnic differences.[4] At the very least, the Manifesto Project's findings from 2013 to 2017 show a sizable shift from Euroscepticism to anti-immigration. The second part of the theory—that it should only effect East Germans because of the bleak economic development of East Germany—is also confirmed. Again, this is borne out in Table 1, where the regression found sizeable differences between the AfD share of the vote for East and West Germany. Accordingly, the parameters of the constructivist model have been met.

5. CONCLUSION

Primordialism has been all but discredited in comparative politics, and this study has again shown why it is no longer widely accepted. By using Germany as a within-case study, controls for a primordial model are already in place, and we find that the model is not viable. In contrast, for the test case of the 2017 German election, a constructivist approach is more suitable. What appears to be deliberate rhetoric by the leaders of the AfD to frame the election in ethnic terms (anti-immigration, anti-Islam, etc.) has taken hold in East Germany, a region of Germany struggling economically. Like any general theory, constructivism can be refined to better match this test case, but the generalized theory is still sufficient. As the far-right continues to gain in Europe, a constructivist approach can be used to better understand and analyze their base of support, helping to solve the voters' ills and issue effective counter-campaigns to these parties.

While this may seem ostensibly to have implications for only Germany, the rise of far-right parties in Poland and Hungary speak to a larger issue at play. Despite reunification and the inclusion of a former Soviet state into Germany, Germany has remained a leader of the European Union. Seeing such a powerful result for the far-right electorally, especially in Germany, is worrying for the European Union and for other like-minded international bodies. However, the previous success of moderate parties in the East show that the far-right surge in Germany can be avoided. Instead of playing to demographic data, or simply ignoring East Germans' political power, moderate German political parties must consider cultural differences between East and West.

---

4 It is difficult to decode if the AfD, and specifically Petry, gained political power by using existing ethnic resentment or if they bred ethnic resentment to gain political power. However, it is clear that Petry specifically was the catalyst for ethnic division in the AfD's platform. Immediately preceding the 2017, Petry was ousted from the party, and since, the party has appeared to return to Euroscepticism (see their recent campaign against the EU's diesel car directives).

REFERENCES

Alesina, A., & Ferrara, E. L. (2005). Ethnic diversity and economic performance. *Journal of Economic Literature; Nashville*, *43*(3), 762–800.

Aumann, B., & Scheufele, R. (2010). Is East Germany catching up? A time series perspective. *Post-Communist Economies*, *22*(2), 177–192. https://doi.org/10.1080/14631371003740662

Barth, F. (Ed.). (1970). *Ethnic groups and boundaries—the social organization of culture difference.* Bergen: Universitetsforlaget.

Bayar, M. (2009). Reconsidering primordialism: an alternative approach to the study of ethnicity. *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, *32*(9), 1639–1657. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870902763878

Burda, M. C., & Hunt, J. (2001). From reunification to economic integration: Productivity and the labor market in Eastern Germany. *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, *2001*(2), 1–71.

Chandra, K. (2012). *Constructivist theories of ethnic politics.* Retrieved from http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199893157.001.0001/acprof-9780199893157-chapter-1

Cole, A. (2005). Old right or new right? The ideological positioning of parties of the far right. *European Journal of Political Research*, *44*(2), 203–230. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2005.00224.x

Dancygier, R. M. (2010). *Immigration and conflict in Europe.* Retrieved from http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bayloru/detail.action?docID=585350

Eddy, M. (2017, December 22). Alternative for Germany: Who are they, and what do they want? *The New York Times.* Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/25/world/europe/germany-election-afd.html

Foster, A. (2017, September 25). German election results MAP: Where the far-right AfD made shock gains in Germany. *Express.* Retrieved April 26, 2019, from Express.co.uk website https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/858566/German-election-results-map-where-AfD-won-Angela-Merkel-lose-maps

Fuchs-Schündeln, N., & Izem, R. (2012). Explaining the low labor productivity in East Germany—A spatial analysis. *Journal of Comparative Economics*, *40*(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2011.09.001

Hagen, L. (2017, September 26). How the AfD won. *The Atlantic.* Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/afd-germany-right-wing-merkel-petry/541089/

Hill, J. (2017, September 26). Why so many voters in Germany's East chose AfD. *BBC News.* Retrieved from http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-41398628

Ignazi, P. (2016). Party system change and the emergence of the extreme Right. In *The Populist Radical Right: A Reader.* Retrieved from http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/bayloru/detail.action?docID=4710543

Kitschelt, H. (1995). *The radical right in Western Europe: a comparative analysis.* Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015031881728

Muro, D. (2015). Ethnicity, nationalism, and social movements. In Della Porta, Donatella & Diani, Mario (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199678402.013.18

Parham, C. (2019). *Soviet education, Euroscepticism, and the AfD: How the German far-right party*

gained support in East Germany. United States.

Smolny, W. (2009). Wage adjustment, competitiveness and unemployment—East Germany after unification. *Jahrbücher Für Nationalökonomie Und Statistik/Journal of Economics and Statistics*, *229*(2/3), 130–145.

Söllner, F. (2017). "It's the Economy, Stupid!:" Bemerkungen zum Abschneiden der AfD bei der Bundestagswahl 2017. *Ifo Schnelldienst; München*, *70*(22), 21–24.

The Federal Returning Officer. (n.d.). *Bundeswahlleiter.* Retrieved November 1, 2018, from https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/bundeswahlleiter.html

van Hoorn, A., & Maseland, R. (2010). Cultural differences between East and West Germany after 1991: Communist values versus economic performance? *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, *76*(3), 791–804. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2010.10.003

Vater, A., Moritz, S., & Roepke, S. (2018). Does a narcissism epidemic exist in modern western societies? Comparing narcissism and self-esteem in East and West Germany. *PLoS One; San Francisco*, *13*(1), e0188287. http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0188287

Volkens, A., Krause, W., Lehmann, P., Matthieß, T., Merz, N., Regel, S., & Weßels, B. (2018). Manifesto Project (MRG/CMP/MARPOR). *Manifesto Project.* Retrieved March 18, 2019, from The Manifesto Data Collection website https://visuals.manifesto-project.wzb.eu/mpdb-shiny/cmp_dashboard_selectable/

Wildman, S. (2017, August 31). The German far right is running Islamophobic ads starring women in bikinis. *Vox.* Retrieved November 1, 2018, from Vox website https://www.vox.com/world/2017/8/31/16234008/germany-afd-ad-campaign-far-right

APPENDIX 1

AfD's 2017 Election Results (Foster, 2017)
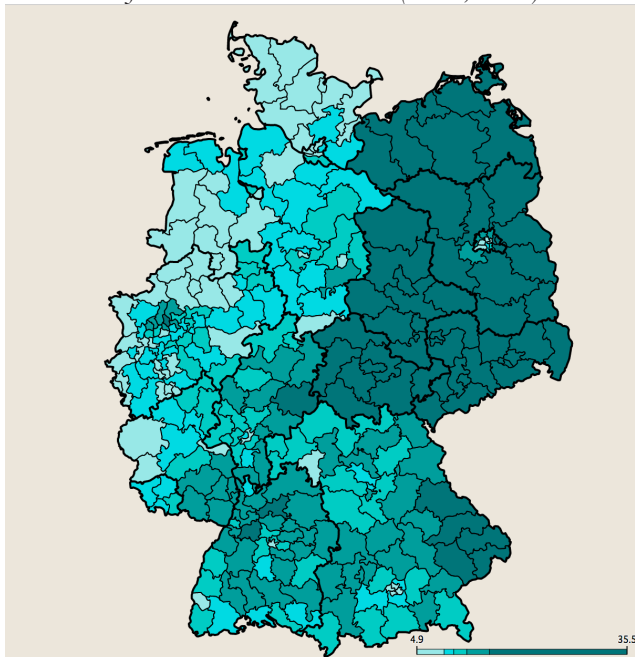
APPENDIX 2

Manifesto Project's Analysis of AfD's Rhetorical Shift from 2013-2017 (Volkens et al., 2018)