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# The Geography of German Populism: Reflections on the 2017 Bundestag Election

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RENEWING  
THE CENTRE

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2017 German elections marked a turning point in the country's political history. The populist AfD has surged to become the third-largest party nationwide, has beaten the Social Democrats in large parts of Eastern and Southern Germany, and has siphoned voters from the far Left and the centre.

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This paper makes three interventions: First, it empirically demonstrates the diversity of social environments where the AfD has gained significant vote shares, and thus suggests that German populism should not be understood as a phenomenon of the radical fringe but as a movement that has grown from the middle of society.

Second, the paper suggests that the AfD has de facto become a mass party. In that regard, it differs profoundly from earlier incarnations of German populism. It is less defined by a coherent radical ideology than by its expansive electoral base – but its future as a potent political force will at least partially depend on its ideological trajectory.

Third, the paper situates Germany in its European context. After decades of relative calm, German politics will more closely resemble those of her neighbours. This also means that Germany's preferred safeguards against radicalization – constitutional and procedural protections – are no longer sufficient to confront the populist threat. An anti-populist strategy in 2017 must be a strategy of counter-mobilization.

## INTRODUCTION

The German *Bundestag* elections mark a turning point in the country's political history: For the first time in decades, a party whose candidates are openly toying with the ideas of the far-Right – and who aggressively fished for votes by playing to nationalistic and xenophobic sentiments – will be represented in the national parliament. In some East German districts, the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) even edged out the political mainstream to become the party with the highest vote share.

Prior to the election, several studies tried to make sense of rising populist sentiments by attempting to pin down the average AfD sympathiser. What they found was a relatively heterogeneous coalition: For example, the AfD now trumps the Social Democrats as the party with the largest share of working-class supporters and surpassed Die Linke as the party with the lowest median household income.<sup>1</sup> But significant support also comes from the ranks of the conservative middle-class, and from voters with stable, full-time, and relatively prosperous employment.<sup>2</sup> According to surveys by the Cologne Institute of Economic Research and the public broadcaster ARD from early 2017, support for the AfD extends across all income groups and social milieus.<sup>3</sup> What seems to unite these disparate voters is often a general sense of unease about the future of their country and community: Less than 10% of AfD voters are worried about their economic situation, but 69% lament the negative consequences of immigration and worry about the fairness of a welfare system that provides basic services to refugees and migrants. Many AfD supporters from the party's strongholds in East Germany have built an economically stable middle-class existence but have also experienced profound political and cultural disruptions over the past three decades that have engendered a sense of disillusion and a persistent experience of marginality.<sup>4</sup> Collectively, these studies suggest that individual

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1 Unionsparteien und SPD werden sich in der Struktur ihrer Wählerschaft immer ähnlicher". 2017. Deutsches Institut fuer Wirtschaftsforschung. Available online at [https://www.diw.de/de/diw\\_01.c.562071.de/themen\\_nachrichten/unionsparteien\\_und\\_spd\\_werden\\_sich\\_in\\_der\\_struktur\\_ihrer\\_waehlerschaft\\_immer\\_aehnlicher.html](https://www.diw.de/de/diw_01.c.562071.de/themen_nachrichten/unionsparteien_und_spd_werden_sich_in_der_struktur_ihrer_waehlerschaft_immer_aehnlicher.html).

2 Deutsches Institut fuer Wirtschaftsforschung 2017.

3 Bergmann, Knut, Matthias Diermeier and Judith Niehues. 2017. "Die AfD: Eine Partei der sich ausgeliefert fühlenden Durchschnittsverdiener?" *Zeitschrift fuer Parlamentsfragen* 43(1)

characteristics – like histories of unemployment and poverty or the embrace of overtly xenophobic and nationalistic sentiments – might be less important in explaining populist surges than the social environments in which populist anxieties can take root. What matters, in other words, is not the idiosyncrasy of individuals but the geography of populism.

This paper links district-level data from the German Federal Statistical Office to 2017 electoral returns to situate vote swings in local social environments and to discover regional trends that are otherwise masked by national averages.<sup>5</sup> It makes three central claims:

- First, German populism should not be understood as a fringe phenomenon but as a pervasive political shift. Support for the AfD is high across much of Eastern and Southern Germany, where it has replaced the Social Democrats as the second most-popular political party. The party has done especially well in East German districts with aging populations and few migrants and across large areas of Southern Germany.
- Second, the AfD has de facto become a mainstream party. This is a novelty in Germany politics: For decades, political radicalism was confined to small parties with clear ideologies but without mass appeal. But today's populism has taken a different form: The AfD continues to be deeply divided over its ideological direction, but its mass appeal is undeniable.
- Third, this shift makes Germany resemble her European neighbours after multiple decades of exceptional political calm. Like France, Austria, or Poland, the country now has to contend with a party that has married populist politics to parliamentary power. Yet the institutional safeguards of Germany's "fortified democracy" are ill equipped to address this threat. They are premised on the possibility of foreclosing paths to power for ideologically radical but politically marginal groups, but cannot easily confront a mass party that is gradually radicalizing its

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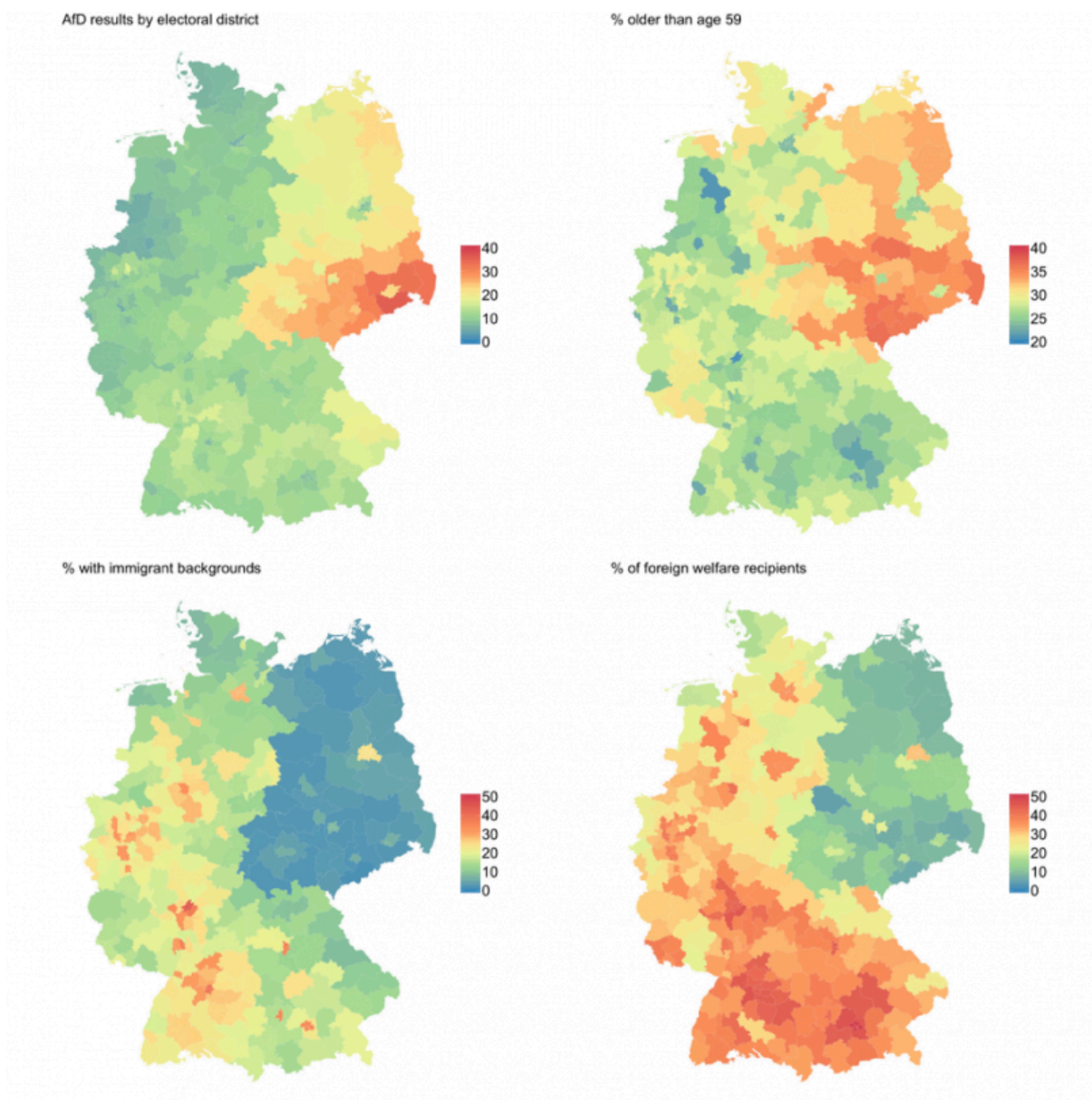
4 Maas, Stefan, and Christoph Richter. 2017. "Der AfD-Wähler – das unbekannte Wesen". Deutschlandfunk.

5 Demographic data is available from the Federal Statistical Office ([www.destatis.de](http://www.destatis.de)). Election data and additional district-level demographics are available from the Federal Returning Officer ([www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/](http://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/)). All datasets used in this paper are available from the author upon request.

platform. Responses to the German populist surge thus cannot rely on constitutional protections but require counter mobilization from the democratic mainstream.

## 1. POPULISM FROM THE MIDDLE OF SOCIETY

In at least three regards, communities with high levels of AfD support are unlike the rest of Germany: They tend to have fewer residents with immigration backgrounds, their populations tend to be significantly older than the national average, and they tend to spend relatively small percentages of their welfare budgets on foreign-born recipients. Insofar as migration has adverse effects on labour markets and local budgets, these communities are unlikely to experience them directly.





Yet this one-sided focus easily masks the degree to which communities with high levels of AfD support resemble the rest of the country. To identify pervasive patterns across a large variety of local contexts, I compare all 115 German electoral districts where the AfD outperformed its national average of 12.6% across different socio-economic and demographic indicators and coerce districts into clusters based on aggregate similarities. An advantage of this approach is that the number of clusters and the distribution of districts into different clusters are not determined in advance. Instead, they reflect latent patterns in the data.

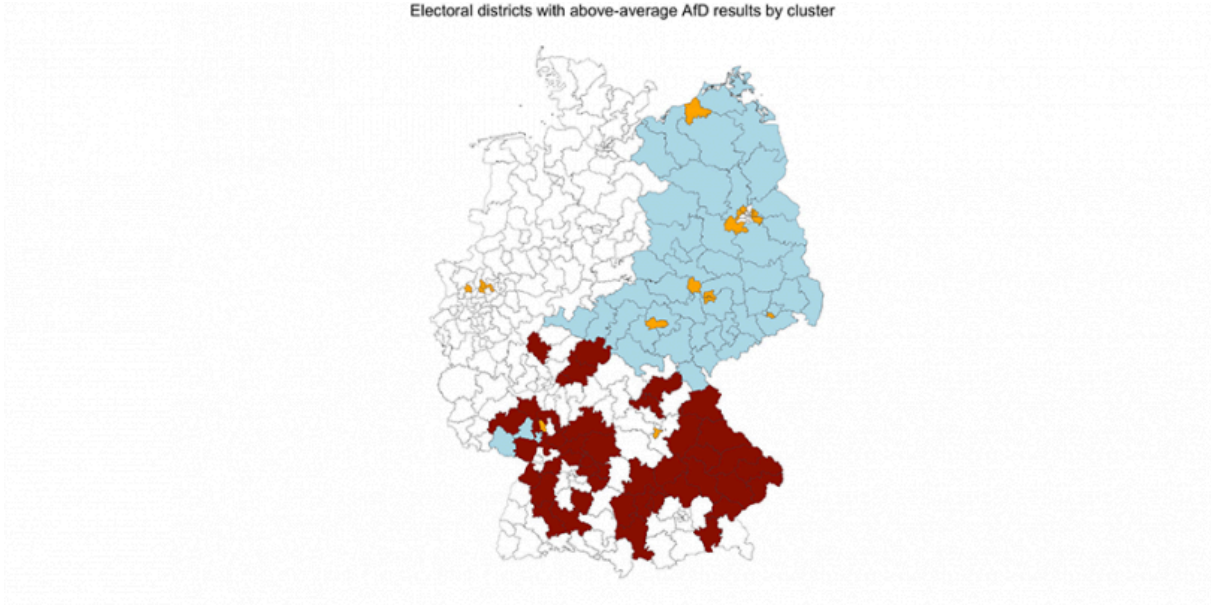
The results, visualised below, indicate that the AfD performed well in three types of social environments: First, its strongest results came across large swaths of East Germany (blue) in regions that have experienced relatively low levels of migration, that are home to relatively few young people, and that have income levels and per-capita GDP slightly below the national average. Yet there is little evidence that these regions are more economically distressed in general. While some communities have high levels of unemployment, others don't. While some have seen an uptick in social welfare recipients and small-business bankruptcies in recent years, others have not.

These communities are the heartland of German populism. In most East German districts, the AfD beat the Social Democrats and established itself as the second-largest party behind the Conservatives. In seven districts, it won the highest percentage of the popular vote. When pundits point out the discrepancy between the AfD's anti-immigrant platform and the relative scarcity of migrants in AfD-leaning communities, these are often the places they invoke.<sup>6</sup>

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6 The geography of German populism also betrays the long shadow of the Cold War: Regions that formerly belonged to East Germany continue to have lower incomes, higher child mortality rates, higher unemployment levels, older populations, and greater support for populist parties. Prior to the AfD's arrival on the political scene, Die Linke (on the democratic Left) and a smattering of far-Right parties found most of their votes in the former East.

Electoral districts with above-average AfD results by cluster



Second, the AfD did remarkably well across Southern Germany in districts that often resemble the national average in their demographic and economic characteristics (red). In many of them, local AfD vote shares doubled or tripled between 2013 and 2017 and turned the AfD into the second largest political party. These districts tend to have below-average unemployment and welfare dependency, but are otherwise similar to the rest of the country in terms of educational attainment, income levels, migrant populations, and age composition. If one were to search for stereotypically German communities, many of them would fit the bill.

Their prevalence as populist bastions casts doubt upon the argument that populism takes root in atypical places that have been rocked by economic shocks or destabilised by persistent economic hardship. In 2017, populism has also prospered in places that Germans refer to as the “*Mitte der Gesellschaft*” – the middle of society.

Third, the AfD has done well in a small number of urban districts in cities like Berlin, Leipzig, or Duisburg (orange). These tell a somewhat different story: They tend to be places with widespread unemployment especially among young people, large populations of recent immigrants who lack German citizenship (unlike many of the guest workers who arrived from Turkey or Italy in the 1960s and 1970s and have largely become assimilated into German culture and

society), low income levels, and a high prevalence of low-skill service jobs.

These patterns complicate the straightforward story of the AfD's surge as a revolt of the elderly or a surge of the far-right fringe. But the heterogeneity of AfD-leaning districts should come as no surprise. Similar trends have recently emerged in the United States, in France, and in Great Britain. In each country, populist parties mobilized voters across a wide range of constituencies. In the US, for example, Trump outperformed expectations in industrialized communities of the Rust Belt but also in conservative heartlands in the Midwest, in poor counties across the South, and in areas with large immigrant populations and a high proportion of low-skill service jobs along the East Coast and in the Southwest. As Emily Ekins has pointed out in her analysis of the US electorate, a key feature of contemporary populism is heterogeneity of supporters rather than commonality of vision.<sup>7</sup> The same argument holds for the AfD.

Voter-level data support the conclusion that populist sympathies are not confined to a radical fringe but extend widely across the country and reach deeply into mainstream society. For example, exit polling by Forschungsgruppe Wahlen indicates that AfD support did not predominantly come from old voters. Instead, the party performed best among voters aged 30 to 59.<sup>8</sup> And while it mobilised about 1.4 million voters who had not cast a ballot in 2013 – enough to account for about 25% of total AfD votes, according to the polling agency Infratest Dimap –, most of its support was siphoned off the CDU/CSU and the SPD.

Thus, while parts of the AfD heartland are quite unique and still betray the country's Cold War division, populist voters aren't always outliers. Some are wealthy and others are poor; some are university graduates while a majority holds technical degrees; and many have a relatively stable job. Prior to the AfD's entrance onto the German political scene, they overwhelmingly coalesced under the broad umbrella of the political mainstream.

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<sup>7</sup> Ekins, Emily. 2017. "The Five Types of Trump Voters". Voter Study Group. Available online at <https://www.voterstudygroup.org/reports/2016-elections/the-five-types-trump-voters>.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/demografie-so-hat-deutschland-gewaehlt-1.3681427>.

## 2. POPULISM AND PARTY POLITICS

Nationally, the AfD surged to become the 3rd strongest party with 12.6% of the vote, well behind the conservative CDU/CSU and the social democratic SPD. But the national trend masks important regional dynamics. Below, I map parties with the highest and 2nd highest vote share for each electoral district. Note that the AfD won or placed 2nd in 20% of all electoral districts.<sup>9</sup> In large parts of the East and the South, it has de facto become a party with mass appeal that can challenge and in some cases defeat the established political mainstream.

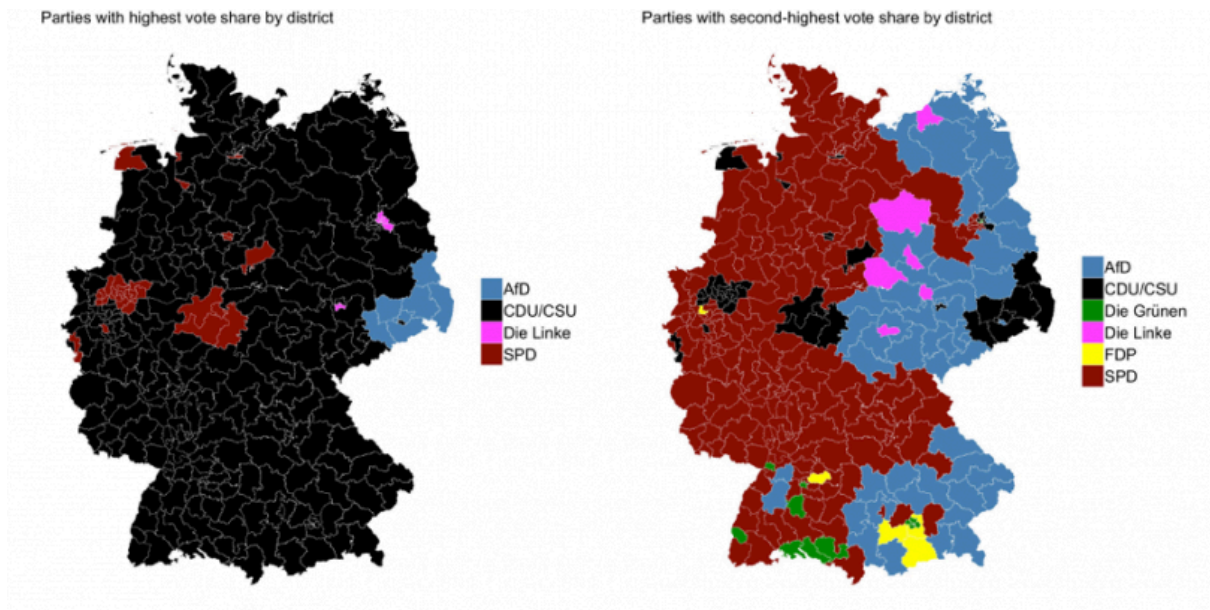
This should give Germans pause. For decades, the Conservatives had claimed a monopoly over the centre-right vote. Franz Josef Stauß, chairman of the Bavarian CSU from the 1960s to the 1980s, famously proclaimed that “there must never be a democratically legitimated party to the right of the CSU”, aggressively courted conservative voters, and relegated far-right parties to the political and ideological fringe. Likewise, the SPD and the far-Left party Die Linke had long claimed to represent the forgotten voices of German politics and provide a natural home for the working class. And while the class base of the Social Democratic electorate has shown signs of erosion for several decades, the Conservatives’ monopoly over the centre-right vote had remained relatively intact.

Yet in the wake of the 2017 election, neither the Conservatives’ claim to the centre-right monopoly nor the Social Democrats’ insistence on representing the common man remain viable. While the long-term trajectory of the AfD is decidedly uncertain, its short-term impact is undeniable: In East Germany, it has wrestled the populist staff from Die Linke.<sup>10</sup> In Southern Germany, it has established itself as a competitor for the conservative vote by mobilizing non-voters and cutting into the CSU’s constituency. And across the country, it has emerged as a party that will challenge the SPD for leadership of the opposition during the next four years.

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9 The AfD won the largest vote share in 7 districts, and the 2nd largest vote share in another 50 districts. By comparison, the SPD won in 29 districts and placed second in 185 districts (out of 299).

10 The electoral gain/loss maps of Die Linke and the AfD are almost mirror images of each other: Die Linke lost significant vote share in its East German strongholds while the AfD gained.



Thus, while the AfD's rhetoric often resembles that of the far Right especially in states like Sachsen (where the local party leadership has openly toyed with revisionist history and racist tropes), its electoral base is that of an emerging mass party. Casting the AfD aside as a phenomenon of the far Right misunderstands its appeal and underestimates its influence on the political mainstream. Indeed, while the outlandish statements of its candidates are headline grabbing, the party's future ideological trajectory remains relatively uncertain. At the moment, the party and its parliamentary caucus remain split between a conservative faction of economic and anti-European nationalists and a far-Right faction of ethno-nationalistic and decidedly illiberal agitators. Already, one of the party leaders resigned in protest of rising ethno-nationalist currents.

In that sense, the AfD differs profoundly from earlier incarnations of German populism. Far-right fringe parties like the NPD, the DVU, or the Republikaner were primarily defined by radical beliefs and remained highly dependent upon a small and ideologically homogeneous constituency. The AfD is a different kind of beast. At the moment, its influence and its ability to unsettle German politics do not depend on a coherent ideology. Instead, they are derived from the party's ability to provide a political home for a loosely linked and heterogeneous constituency of voters who are united, above all else, by a rejection of the status quo of party politics.

Thus, the future of German party politics will partially be shaped by the outcome of a struggle that is internal to the AfD: Will it pursue a far-right pivot that breaks down the remaining boundaries to the neo-Nazi fringe and openly agitates for authoritarian and illiberal governance, or will it embrace an economic nationalism that is laced with xenophobia? Both scenarios should give us cause for concern, and both are likely to polarise political discourses in the near future – but only the latter scenario is likely to shift Germany’s political centre of gravity towards the Right and establish the AfD as a mass party during future electoral cycles.

### 3. THE END OF GERMANY'S SONDERWEG

For decades, Germany was relatively unique among her European neighbours. While countries like the Netherlands, France, Austria, Poland, Italy, Greece, and Denmark have long contended with radical parties in parliament, German radicals were usually denied parliamentary representation at the national level. Because the Bundestag only seats parliamentarians from parties who clear a minimum 5% popular vote threshold, parties of the far Left and the far Right remained largely excluded from the political stage and separated from the levers of institutional power. The result was a long period of relative electoral calm: Germany experienced none of the perpetual turmoil that characterises Italian politics, and little of the public provocation that has unsettled countries like Austria and the Netherlands in recent years. The fact that its main political parties all found themselves at home within the mainstream does not suffice as an explanation, but it is a big part of the story.

This, too, has now changed. As a result of the 2017 election, German politics will more closely resemble those of other European countries. While the prospect of far Right agitation might seem especially disturbing when it happens a stone's thrown from the Holocaust memorial, it has long been the norm rather than the exception of European politics.

Historically, democracies in Western Europe have been relatively successful at constraining the institutional power of populists and limiting their mass appeal. In Germany, this has often happened through the constitutional norms and institutional procedures of the so-called "wehrhafte Demokratie", or "fortified democracy". When the German constitution was written in the shadow of World War II, its authors included language that banned political speech and political parties that were openly opposed to the liberal-democratic order. They also established minimum thresholds for parliamentary representation to limit the number of viable parties and guard against parliamentary agitation by a radical fringe.

The targets of such safeguards were always small fringe parties with clear illiberal and anti-democratic ideologies and small constituencies. In the imagination of the country's post-war leaders, there was a clear sequence to democratic deconsolidation: radical

ideology came first and power came second. However, the institutions of Germany's fortified democracy are much less equipped to confront a party with mass appeal and parliamentary representation that undergoes a process of political radicalization. Yet this is precisely the scenario that many dread today: Led by a group of reactionaries, the AfD might gradually transform itself from a populist protest party into an explicitly nationalistic and xenophobic political force that can wield a non-trivial amount of influence over parliamentary debates.

An anti-populist strategy thus cannot rely primarily on institutional and constitutional protections. Its success depends instead on a sustained campaign of counter-mobilisation. The future of German party politics will also be shaped by the ability of the SPD to reinvent itself as the voice of the opposition and as a home for disconnected and disillusioned voters. After governing for 15 out of the past 19 years in different coalitions, its DNA has largely become unrecognisable. The SPD will now have to offer a political vision that rejects the rhetoric and logic of populism, offers hope for a better future, and also draws a clear distinction to the conservative centre-right. In a country that has historically had two parties with significant mass appeal, an unclear distinction between Social Democrats and Christian Conservatives only plays into the hands of a surging populist alternative.





The 2017 German elections marked a turning point in the country's political history. The populist AfD has surged to become the third-largest party nationwide, has beaten the Social Democrats in large parts of Eastern and Southern Germany, and has siphoned voters from the far Left and the centre.

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