

IDEOLOGICAL SHIFT IN THE GERMAN ALTERNATIVE FÜR DEUTSCHLAND (AFD) AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

The far-right German party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), made a dramatic leap in the February 2025 German federal election, securing 20.8% of the vote and emerging as the second most popular party. This development poses a serious challenge to the so-called “firewall” (Brandmauer) that has historically excluded far-right parties from Germany’s political mainstream. This study provides a theoretical analysis of how the AfD has generated and leveraged cleavages within the established German party system, and how existing parties have responded by exploiting those divisions to consolidate their own positions. The analysis traces the origins of the AfD, compares its founding platform to subsequent electoral manifestos, and examines the evolution of its ideology. The rise of far-right parties in Germany has been predominantly influenced by developments in the former East German regions. This phenomenon is primarily interpreted within a socioeconomic context, encompassing the increase in immigrants and refugees, and the subsequent decline in employment opportunities. This study aims to draw implications for peace in light of the rise of far-right parties. By examining the German case—which is already experiencing challenges, and regional conflicts following reunification—, this research ultimately seeks to contribute to the construction of a peaceful and democratic society.

Keywords

Far-right parties, Alternative für Deutschland, German politics, ideological evolution, socioeconomic cleavages.

Resumo

O partido alemão de extrema-direita, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), registou um avanço dramático nas eleições federais alemãs de fevereiro de 2025, obtendo 20,8% dos votos e emergindo como o segundo partido mais popular. Esta evolução representa um sério desafio à chamada «barreira de proteção» (Brandmauer) que, historicamente, tem excluído os partidos de extrema-direita da corrente dominante da política alemã. Este estudo apresenta uma análise teórica sobre a forma como o AfD gerou e aproveitou as divisões no seio do sistema partidário alemão estabelecido, e como os partidos existentes responderam, explorando essas divisões para consolidar as suas próprias posições. A análise traça as origens do AfD, compara a sua plataforma fundadora com os manifestos eleitorais subsequentes e examina a evolução da sua ideologia. A ascensão dos partidos de extrema-direita na Alemanha tem sido predominantemente influenciada pelos desenvolvimentos nas antigas regiões da Alemanha Oriental. Este fenómeno é interpretado principalmente num contexto socioeconómico, abrangendo o aumento do número de imigrantes e refugiados e o subsequente declínio das oportunidades de emprego. Este estudo visa extrair implicações para a paz à luz da ascensão dos partidos de extrema-direita. Ao examinar o caso alemão —



que já enfrenta desafios e conflitos regionais na sequência da reunificação —, esta investigação procura, em última análise, contribuir para a construção de uma sociedade pacífica e democrática.

Palavras-chave

Partidos de extrema-direita, Alternative für Deutschland, política alemã, evolução ideológica, clivagens socioeconómicas.

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IDEOLOGICAL SHIFT IN THE GERMAN ALTERNATIVE FÜR DEUTSCHLAND (AFD) AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

JEONG-AE CHOI

Introduction

The far-right German party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), made a dramatic leap in the February 2025 German federal election, securing 20.8% of the vote and emerging as the second most popular party. This figure represents a doubling of the 10.3% share received in the 2021 election, signifying the inaugural instance of a non-traditional party attaining second place. Germany is currently confronted with a predicament concerning the recognition of the AfD as a significant political entity. Historically, the ascent and mainstreaming of far-right parties in Germany was regarded as implausible within the European context. Nevertheless, the recent success of the AfD poses a substantial challenge to the so-called "firewall"¹ that has traditionally excluded far-right parties from mainstream German politics.

The present study initiates with a theoretical analysis of the ways in which the AfD has generated cleavages within the established German political system. The study examines how existing parties have utilized these cleavages to consolidate their own positions and traces both the origins of the AfD and the process by which it has refined and exploited such divisions. The present study has been conducted for the purpose of comparing the foundational platform of the AfD with the electoral manifestos that the party has subsequently published. In addition, the study will analyse the evolution of the party's ideology. The present study aims to re-evaluate the ideological direction of the AfD and its identity as a political party through this analytical process.

The emergence of far-right political parties in Germany has been predominantly influenced by developments in the former East German regions. This phenomenon is predominantly interpreted within a socioeconomic context, encompassing the increase in immigrants and refugees, and the subsequent decline in employment opportunities. The present study aims to draw implications for peace in light of the rise of far-right parties.

¹ Political firewall (or Brandmauer in German): A tacit or explicit agreement among mainstream parties to politically isolate extremist parties, whether far-right or far-left. This strategy specifically entails: (1) categorical exclusion from coalition government formation; (2) refusal of parliamentary cooperation; and (3) public declarations of political distance. The rejection of coalition formations among political parties is, on occasion, employed as a term 'cordon sanitaire'.



This research seeks to contribute to the construction of a peaceful and democratic society by examining the German case. The German case is already experiencing challenges related to immigrants, refugees and regional conflicts following reunification.

Theoretical Analysis

Since the 1980s, the primary catalyst for the surge in far-right parties across Europe has been the issue of immigration. Immigration to Western Europe saw a notable increase in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with a significant influx from the former Yugoslavia, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union. In accordance with the prevailing immigration theory, the social impact of immigration, in conjunction with elevated levels of economic insecurity, engendered the emergence of far-right political parties that were opposed to immigration. This was due to the perception that immigration was associated with unemployment and crime. From this standpoint, far-right parties evolved into single-issue parties that represented pervasive xenophobia.

The second causal factor was rooted in a sense of political alienation. The prevailing sentiment of voter discontent with established political parties, particularly with regard to their responses to pressing issues such as economic growth, unemployment, corruption, crime, and immigration, has resulted in a pervasive climate of distrust. The far right has been observed to profit from protest votes cast against well-established political parties. This phenomenon can be attributed to the success of the far right in disseminating anti-establishment messages, coupled with their own lack of governing experience².

A review of studies discussing party structure within the scholarship on AfD and far-right parties indicates that the core element behind the rise of AfD is resistance to and rupture from established politics. The political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) is positioned in a political landscape that encompasses both materialism and postmaterialism, in which it competes with the postmaterialistically re-radicalized Bündnis 90/Die Grünen (Grüne). Within the left-right spectrum, it is in direct opposition to Die Linke, while along the moderate-radical axis, it engages in conflict with other established political parties³.

Such patterns of conflict are not unique to the AfD. For instance, the Grüne also experienced a rupture from established parties during the 1980s. In the Grüne party, members who subscribed to a realist political philosophy, with a particular emphasis on the party's transformation into a governing party and the pursuit of pragmatic policies, emerged as the dominant faction. This shift in ideological orientation led to a moderation of the party's previously radical character⁴. In summary, although the Grüne party

² Karapin, R. (1998). Radical-right and neo-fascist political parties in Western Europe. *Comparative Politics*, 30(2), 213–234; Betz, H.-G. (1994). *Radical right-wing populism in Western Europe*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press; Kitschelt, H., & McGann, A. J. (1995). *The radical right in Western Europe: A comparative analysis*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

³ Jung, B.-G. (2023). The emergence of AfD and changes in the ideological structure of the German party system. *European Studies*, 41(2), 17.

⁴ Jung, B.-G. (2023). The emergence of AfD and changes in the ideological structure of the German party system. *European Studies*, 41(2), 17-18.



emerged amid the diffusion of postmaterialist values as a significant social consciousness, the subsequent incorporation of postmaterialism by mainstream political parties prevented the formation of a wholly new axis of cleavage. Consequently, the Grüne were able to assimilate into the prevailing political structure.

Amidst these developments, it can be argued that the AfD has succeeded in establishing a new and robust axis of cleavage. In other words, the recent rise of AfD can be interpreted as a form of resistance to established politics—a feat that the Grüne was ultimately unable to achieve. The transformation of the German party system has already been the subject of academic debate; for instance, the disappearance of the so-called “0.5 party” that once held the casting vote, and the emergence of third and fourth parties as kingmakers, have led to the expectation that, following Sartori’s typology of party systems under competitive conditions, Germany’s party landscape will be reorganized into a moderate multiparty system⁵.

The Cleavage theory, as conceptualized by Seymour M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan, focuses on the emergence of groups with divergent political interests along social lines of division⁶. Lipset and Rokkan paid particular attention to the processes through which such cleavages manifest, leading to the formation of competing political blocs. For instance, society may be divided along economic lines, regional lines, or racial lines, resulting in collective opposition that is expressed through party competition in elections.

Herbert Kitschelt further developed this theoretical framework by arguing that the structure of party competition is defined by positions on three core issues: citizenship, process, and resource allocation. The concept of “Citizenship” is theorized as a spectrum ranging from cosmopolitan to particularistic politics; The term “process” is employed to denote the mode of social decision-making, with authoritarian politics favoring hierarchical decision-making and radical-liberal politics emphasizing participatory processes; and “resource allocation” concerns the distribution of social resources, with two opposing poles of political redistribution and market-based allocation⁷. According to these dimensions, the AfD has adopted an extreme image by positioning itself in opposition to established parties (citizenship), has employed modern approaches such as the use of social media (process), and has taken a strong stance against redistribution, garnering significant support in the former East German regions (resource allocation).

In this model of European party competition, Kitschelt classifies and explains the competitive models of German parties, arguing that the traditional left–right pattern of competition has, as a result of social changes in advanced capitalist societies, gradually shifted to a new axis of political cleavage: ‘left-libertarian’ versus ‘right-authoritarian’⁸. Meanwhile, in his 2004 revision of the theory, Kitschelt explains that the distribution of political preferences is not static but continues to diversify.

⁵ Jeong, H.-M. (2013). “Non-mainstream Parties and Changes in the German Party System,” *EU Studies*, No. 33, pp. 335–374.

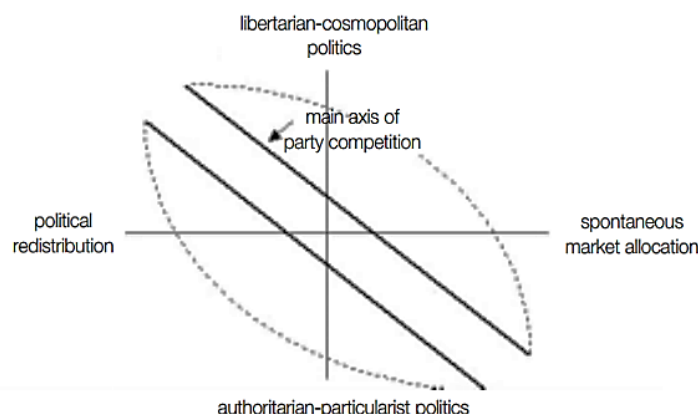
⁶ Lipset, S. M., & Rokkan, S. (Eds.). (1967). *Party systems and voter alignments: Cross-national perspectives*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

⁷ Kim, Y.-T. (2017). The change of the German Green Party’s basic program and the structure of party competition in Germany. *Korean Journal of Party Studies*, 6(1), 193–214.

⁸ Kitschelt, H. (2004). *Germany: Beyond the Stable State*. London: Routledge.



Figure 1. Kitschelt's Model of European Party Competition Structure



Source: Kitschelt, Herbert. (1992).

This revision was necessitated by critiques of the new radical right, as Kitschelt's earlier model had failed to acknowledge the rise of an authoritarian working-class segment that demonstrated a preference for social redistribution in economic matters⁹. Kitschelt's argument posits that the future model of political competition is likely to undergo unpredictable changes, given the fundamental nature of preference formation, which links markets, organizations, and socio-cultural spaces to political positions. The model of party competition that Kitschelt described, spanning from the 1980s to the millennium, is illustrated in the following figure.

The current AfD advocates radical liberalism and market-based resource allocation, which can be illustrated as follows in the model¹⁰. Kim Young-tae (2017) explains the position of the Grüne as that of radical-liberal cosmopolitans, and notes that AfD, in terms of its location and its resistance to the authoritarian interpretations of mainstream politics, shares a similar foundation. The key difference, however, is that while the Grüne is positioned in favor of political redistribution, AfD is situated on the side of market-based allocation.

As Kitschelt's theoretical framework posits, the ongoing fragmentation of political preferences necessitates a multidimensional analytical approach. The potential transformation of the working class and other popular strata into authoritarian-oriented segments, along with emerging forms of class differentiation that diverge from conventional patterns of political redistribution and market-based allocation, signals a need for reinterpreting contemporary social orders through novel perspectives. Increasingly, structural shifts along the axes of digitalization, resource allocation, and supply chain security are evolving into more active and central forces of political-

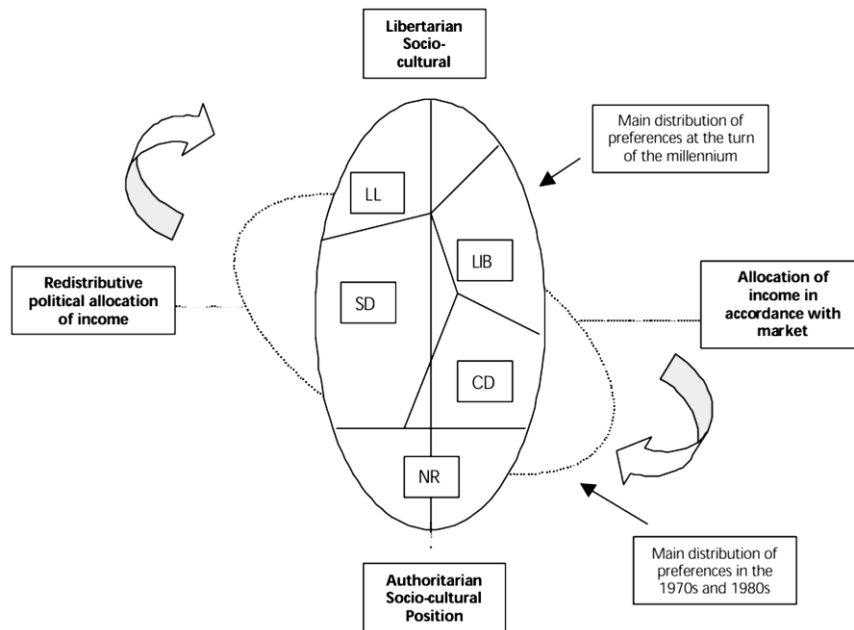
⁹ Kitschelt, H. (2003, May). *Diversification and reconfiguration of party systems in postindustrial democracies*. Accountability and Representation in European Democracy Conference, Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies, Harvard University.

¹⁰ Kim, Y.-T. (2017). Changes in the basic program of the German Green Party and the structure of party competition in Germany. *Korean Journal of Party Studies*, 6(1), 193–214.



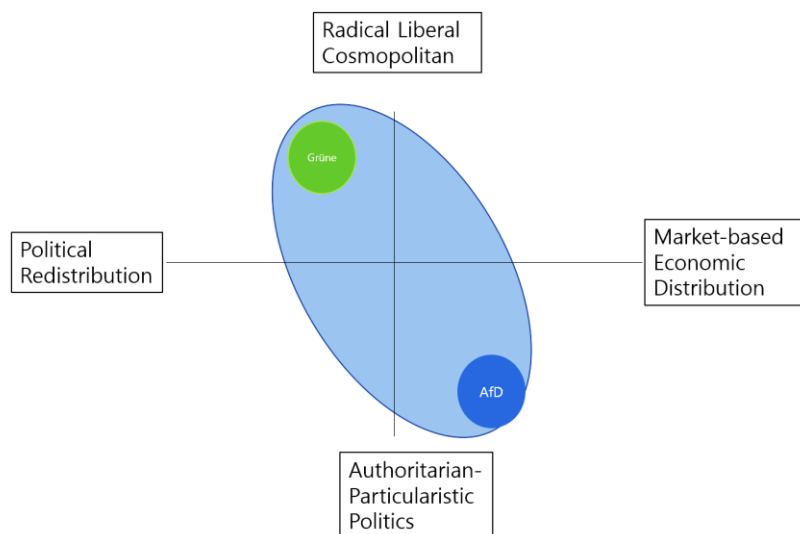
economic change. This development demands renewed theoretical attention to the dynamics of class formation and policy realignment.

Figure 2. Kitschelt's Model of European Party Competition Structure, 1980–2000



Source: Kitschelt, Herbert. (2003)

Figure 3. Position of AfD in Kitschelt's Model of European Party Competition Structure





Changes in the AfD's Platform

The AfD adopted its Basic platform(Grundsatzprogramm) in 2016, a document which meticulously delineates the party's policy orientations and positions. It is important to note that 2016 marked the commencement of internal factionalization within the AfD. The party began to divide along populist lines, particularly concerning economic issues and migration¹¹. The table of contents of the AfD's 96-page Grundsatzprogramm is organized into fourteen chapters. The contents are as follows when classified by policy domain. The opening chapter, titled "Democracy and Fundamental Values," posits that the prevailing political parties offer no viable alternatives in their policy stances. This assertion is characterized by the AfD as a structural constraint that poses a grave threat to democracy and the rule of law (p. 9: "Schlanker Staat für freie Bürger"). The party's initial prioritization of economic policy is evident in sections such as "Europe and the Euro," "Economy, Digitalization, and Consumer Protection," and "Taxes and Finance."

With respect to foreign policy, the AfD places significant emphasis on the preservation of national independence and sovereignty, adopting a critical stance toward supranational integration. While the party expresses support for the maintenance of NATO, it stipulates that German participation in military interventions should be contingent upon alignment with Germany's security interests. In regard to the situation with Russia, the AfD has expressed support for the reduction of tensions.

Table 1. Table of Contents of the AfD's Basic Platform

Category	Chapter
Democracy	1. Democracy and Fundamental Values
Economic Policy	2. Europe and the Euro 10. Economy, Digitalization, and Consumer Protection 11. Taxes and Finance 12. Energy Policy
Foreign Policy	3. Internal Security and Justice 4. Foreign and Security Policy
Social Policy	5. Labor Market and Social Policy 6. Family and Children 13. Nature Conservation, Agriculture, Environment 14. Infrastructure and Housing
Culture, Identity	7. Culture, Language, and Identity 8. Education and Research 9. Immigration, Integration, and Asylum

The most emphatic stance in the basic platform is on culture and identity. In the section on "Education and Research," the party addresses the normalization of social policies, such as opposition to integrated schools and support for traditional educational systems. The party also opposes gender studies and sex education. However, the section then transitions to issues related to migration, refugees, and integration, including opposition

¹¹ Choi, J.-A. (2018). Background of the rise of far-right parties in Germany: Focusing on the Euro and migrant factors. *Oughtopia*, 33(1), 39–67.



to the integration of Islamic education. Keeping the basic platform in mind, the following section compares the AfD's manifestos from three different elections.

Table 2. Comparison of the Table of Contents of the AfD's Manifestos from Three Elections

	2017 Federal Parliament Election Platform	2021 Federal Parliament Election Platform: Germany, but normal	2025 Federal Election Platform: Time for Germany
Democracy	1. Defense of German Democracy	1. Democracy and the Rule of Law	9. Democracy and the Rule of Law 10. The People Are Sovereign
Culture, Identity	5. Refugees Need Borders: Migration and Refugee Policy 6. Islam in Conflict with the Liberal Democratic Basic Order 7. Welcoming Culture for Children: Family Support and Demographic Development 8. Education and Schools: The Courage for Differentiation 9. Culture and Media	9. Islam 10. Immigration, Refugees, Integration: Acting Humanely and Rationally – Protecting Germany 16. Culture 17. Media	7. Refugee and Immigration Policy 13. Culture and Media Policy
Economic Policy	2. The Euro Has Failed: Currency, Monetary, and Financial Policy 10. Taxes and Finance, Economy and Jobs	3. The EU and Europe 4. Taxes and Finance 5. Economy: Blue Deal 6. The Euro Has Failed	1. Social Market Economy and Health 2. Construction, Housing, Infrastructure, Energy, Transport, and Digital Affairs 3. Finance and Taxes 4. Monetary Policy – The Failure of the Euro System
Foreign Policy	3. Finance and Taxes 4. Monetary Policy – The Failure of the Euro System	7. Foreign and Defense Policy 8. Internal Security	6. External Security
Social Policy	11. Social Policy 12. Our Health System Is at Risk 13. Ending Hostility to Technology: Energy and Climate 14. Maintaining and Expanding Transport Networks, Strengthening Housing Construction, Developing Rural Areas 15. Environmental, Nature and Animal Protection, Consumer Protection, and Agriculture	2. Freedom and Responsibility 11. Family Policy 12. Labor and Social Policy 13. AfD's Pension Concept 14. Health Policy 15. Education, Science, and Research 18. Construction, Housing, Rental 19. Climate, Energy, Technology, and Digitalization 20. Mobility and Infrastructure 21. Agriculture, Environment, and Consumer Protection	5. Agriculture, Environment, and Climate 8. Internal Security 11. Family and Demographics 12. Education, Science, and Openness to Technology



In recent years, the AfD has participated in three electoral processes and issued three electoral manifestos. Quantitatively, the 2017 manifesto is 74 pages in length and commences with a focus on the defense of German democracy. In the 2017 election, the AfD emerged as a prominent party, garnering 12.6% of the vote. The party's most significant support base is in the former East German regions, where in 2017, 21.2% of the population expressed support for the AfD, which is nearly double the 10.7% of the former West German regions. In the aftermath of unsuccessful bid to secure parliamentary representation in the Bundestag during the 2013 election, the AfD initiated a systematic electoral engagement starting in 2017, accompanied by the formulation a comprehensive manifesto. This iteration of the manifesto is distinguished by its concise chapters and direct, assertive language.

The year 2017 marked the commencement of profound debates and confrontations surrounding the subjects of migrants and refugees. In this context, the manifesto of the AfD notably incorporated content pertaining to refugees and Islam. The section on education and schools was titled "Courage for Differentiation," and it explicitly and actively expressed opposition to religions, particularly Islam¹². The term "Volk" (people/nation) appeared 67 times. With regard to foreign policy, the manifesto expounds on internal security, with a particular emphasis on the issue of terrorism. In the context of addressing pressing concerns regarding public safety, a range of subjects were discussed, including strategies to combat foreign crime and enhance investigative capabilities. These measures were presented as a series of actions aimed at safeguarding citizens' well-being, collectively referred as an anti-terror response.

In terms of social policy, the AfD is in opposition to the ideology of gender and places significant emphasizes traditional forms of family and marriage. With regard to education policy, the party rejects integrative ideological education and strongly criticizes both comprehensive policies and Muslim-related educational programs. Furthermore, the AfD places a higher value on practical, field-oriented education than on theory-centered approaches. The party particularly asserts that the educational rights of German children are being infringed upon by immigrant children who lack sufficient language skills. The AfD opposes the Bologna bachelor system and has advocated for a return to the traditional Magister/Diplom system. The manifesto further asserts the necessity of academic neutrality in educational institutions, contending that these institutions have become laboratories for left-wing social experimentation.

With regard to the matter of immigration policy, the AfD has highlighted demographic issues in Europe and Africa. Specifically, the party he noted that while Europe is facing with a decline in population, Africa and Islamic countries are witnessing a rapid surge in population growth, leading to significant demographic imbalances and substantial mass migration. In summary, a substantial segment of the 2017 electoral manifesto asserts that German society is experiencing a threat to its cohesion as a result of immigration.

¹² For example, the manifesto rejected minarets (the towers of Islamic mosques) as symbols of Islamic power and opposed the call to prayer by muezzins. According to the manifesto, the muezzin's call asserts that no god exists except Allah, which the AfD described as religious imperialism. This stance contradicts the contemporary practice of tolerant coexistence among religious communities (p. 35).



A significant proportion of the manifesto on culture, media, and social policy addresses or is underpinned by issues related to immigration.

In the realms of economic, social, and technological policy, the AfD persists its use of contentious language. The political party's economic policy is predicated on the premise that Germany should withdraw from the Eurozone and actively advocate for the reintroduction of a national currency, such as the Deutsche Mark. Market-related policies, including taxation, are predicated on the principle of minimizing state intervention and upholding a free market order as a core value. With regard to climate change, the AfD has adopted a skeptical stance regarding the scientific consensus on the matter, characterizing it as a form of ideology. In a variety of social and technological policy areas, including climate, energy, transportation, and housing, the party has expressed a strong opposition to international norms, with a particular emphasis on those established by the European Union.

The 2021 electoral manifesto underwent a substantial expansion, increasing from 15 chapters in the previous version to 21 chapters. During this period, the AfD received 10.3% of the vote. The party's primary support base remained in the former East German regions, with the widening gap of 19.8% in the East versus 8.2% in the West, compared to 2017. A comparative analysis of the 2021 manifesto reveals a shift in the utilization of chapter headings, which have become more attributed to the employment of objective nouns as chapter titles, a departure from the emotive or declarative phrases that characterized previous manifestos.

It is noteworthy that the chapter entitled "Chapter 9: Islam" is written with a discernible objective. The primary contention in this discourse is that the critique of Islam, akin to the critique of any other religion, should be safeguarded by the principle of freedom of expression. The manifesto demands a comprehensive prohibition on the wearing of burqas and niqabs in public spaces and asserts the imperative of addressing any form of discrimination against individuals of Jewish heritage. For instance, on page 84, the following assertion is made: "Jewish life in Germany is threatened not only by right-wing extremists but also from Muslims who harbor animosity towards Jews and Israel. Attacks on Jewish people and anti-Semitic insults must be consistently prosecuted."¹³

The prevailing tone in this section evokes a sense of threat posed by Islam. The employment of terms such as "Parallelgesellschaften" (parallel societies), "Friedensrichter" (Sharia judges), and "Dschihadisten" (jihadists) is a recurring phenomenon, with the intent of conveying the notion that Islam poses a systemic threat. Exclusionary language is also readily employed; for instance, direct references are made to organizations such as the "türkisch-islamischen Anstalt für Religion (DITIB)" and the "Muslimbruderschaft" (Muslim Brotherhood), while strong terms such as "abolition," "ban," and "cessation" are repeatedly used for emphasis.

Examining the manifesto for the general election held in February 2025 and comparing it with previous versions reveals the AfD's evolving trajectory. First, the table of contents

¹³ "Jüdisches Leben wird in Deutschland nicht nur von Rechtsextremisten, sondern zunehmend auch von jüden- und israelfeindlichen Muslimen bedroht. Angriffe auf Juden sowie antisemitische Beleidigungen müssen konsequent strafrechtlich geahndet werden."



has shifted from provocative phrases to more objective language. While the 2017 manifesto featured assertive and emotive headings, and the 2021 version was more specific and issue-oriented, the 2025 manifesto adopts concise and neutral terminology. For example, the 2017 heading “Refugees Need Borders: Migration and Refugee Policy” changed to “Immigration, Refugees, Integration: Acting Humanely and Rationally - Protecting Germany” in 2021, and then to simply “Refugee and Immigration Policy” in 2025.

Second, the AfD continues to emphasize a sense of crisis, particularly in its hardline stance on refugee and immigration policy (“Deutschland muss wieder selbst entscheiden, wer ins Land kommt” - Germany must once again decide for itself who enters the country). The party still employs emotionally charged terms such as “massive Zuwanderung” (mass immigration), “unverantwortliche Politik” (irresponsible policy), and “Überforderung” (systemic overload). However, the 2025 manifesto uses far more indirect language than previous versions. The chapter on Islam has disappeared, and there is no overt criticism of Muslims. While the manifesto still implicitly criticizes immigrants, the tone is noticeably more subdued. For instance, phrases like “Kriminalität steigt, Gefährdung der inneren Sicherheit” (suggesting a link between increased immigration and crime) are less direct than before, and immigrants and refugees are described as a “Belastung der Sozialsysteme” (burden on social systems) without explicit hostility. Some immigrants are framed as “Sozialtouristen” (welfare tourists), indicating a continued, albeit more subtle, critical stance.

Third, the AfD now attaches the term “ideology” to pragmatic issues in an effort to deconstruct the discourse surrounding ideology itself. One of the party’s key issues is climate policy, on which it maintains a strong position. For example, the AfD utilizes chapters on democracy to argue against climate initiatives such as the Green Deal, repeatedly criticizing the EU’s Green Deal as “planned economy” and “climate ideology.” The party’s stance on electric vehicles is also unequivocal: technological development and market forces, rather than ideology-based prohibitive policies (auf ideologischer Verbotspolitik), should determine outcomes. Interestingly, the AfD does not use the term “ideology” indiscriminately. In the 2025 manifesto, the word appears 44 times, most frequently (seven times) in the chapter on “Agriculture, Environment, Climate.” By employing the term “ideology” in areas not typically interpreted as ideological, such as climate and media, the AfD seeks to shed the risks associated with grand ideological discourse and instead project a pragmatic image.

The Limits of the Moderation of the AfD and Its Implications

As demonstrated in the preceding analysis, the AfD has undergone a shift in its ideological orientation, endeavoring to present a more pragmatic facade. These efforts are inextricably linked to the party’s ongoing survival. The German Federal Constitutional Court has observed that the AfD is susceptible to being designated as a far-right party¹⁴. Since 2021, there have been ongoing debates regarding the far-right tendencies of the AfD. In the current discourse, the argument has been posited that the prohibition of anti-

¹⁴ Deutschlandfunk. (2025, May 5). AfD-Verbotsverfahren: Was spricht dafür und was dagegen?



democratic parties or organizations constitutes a tool available to a well-defended democracy, thereby providing grounds for the potential dissolution of the AfD. The legal foundation for such a prohibition is articulated in Article 21 of the Basic Law¹⁵.

However, in February 2025, a majority vote in favor of initiating the ban procedure was not achieved. While 124 members of parliament supported the motion, but this was insufficient to bring it to a vote in the Bundestag. Historically, the Federal Constitutional Court has prohibited the formation of political parties that exhibit Nazi tendencies, as evidenced by the banning of the Socialist Reich Party (SRP) during the 1950s. Similarly, the German Communist Party (KPD), which demonstrated Stalinist leanings, has also been disbanded. While it is possible to follow the ban procedure based on the Court's judgment, concerns have been raised that such a process is not only complex but could also harm the democratic system itself.

Conversely, the capacity of the AfD to attain full moderation, given its present momentum, remains a subject of speculation. A potential avenue through which far-right forces may evolve towards a more moderate stance is through a process of "de-demonization." A proximate illustration of this phenomenon can be observed in France, where Marine Le Pen's strategy of disavowing her father's controversial views proved effective in the 2011 electoral campaign, thereby enabling her to attain a level of electoral success that her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, had not been able to achieve during the 1970s. In the period under the leadership of Marine Le Pen, the National Front (subsequently renamed the National Rally) underwent a transformation that led to its adoption of an image consistent with the traditional right-wing party. This shift was evident in the outcomes of the general elections¹⁶.

An alternative perspective reveals that the moderation of political parties has been demonstrated through the case of the Grüne. The efforts directed towards the moderation of the AfD are associated with the party's capacity to contribute to the promotion of peace. The following strategies are among those that the AfD can employ toward moderation. At the ideological level, the party could adopt a strategy of expanding toward the center, a process exemplified by Grüne. Secondly, it could potentially facilitate the restoration of relations with major parties and contribute to the breakdown of the cordon sanitaire. Thirdly, the initiative has the potential to expand its support base. However, it should be noted that these three conditions are also closely related to the limitations of the AfD's moderation.

Firstly, if the AfD continues to moderate its stance, the party risks losing its dedicated and fervent support base. The formation of the AfD was predicated on the presence of profound ideological divisions, a factor that has been intricately intertwined with the party's identity. The AfD, founded in 2013, initially emerged as a moderate right-wing party that opposed the euro. However, in 2016, due to internal divisions, a faction that emphasized anti-Islam and anti-immigrant stances gained control and expanded its

¹⁵ Parteien, die nach ihren Zielen oder nach dem Verhalten ihrer Anhänger darauf ausgehen, die freiheitliche demokratische Grundordnung zu beeinträchtigen oder zu beseitigen oder den Bestand der Bundesrepublik Deutschland zu gefährden, sind verfassungswidrig (Grundgesetz für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Art 21).

¹⁶ Cho, H.-S. (2024). The French parliamentary election and European populism: The success and limitations of the National Rally (RN). *Legislative Studies*, 30(3), 38–66.



influence. In the face of the inability to identify pragmatic solutions to the substantial influx of refugees, the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 resulted in the arrival of new refugees from Ukraine. Concurrently, Germany encountered supply chain disruptions, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and an economic downturn, precipitating a decline in public trust in the established political parties. During this period, the AfD party experienced significant growth, capitalizing on prevalent anxieties regarding the future and distrust of the political establishment. It is evident that the most significant basis for the proliferation of far-right political entities in Europe is the prevailing sentiment of disillusionment with established left- and right-wing parties. The ascendance of the AfD in Germany can be interpreted as a manifestation of this disillusionment with conventional political discourse. In essence, the capacity of the AfD to effectively assimilate is inherently constrained.

Secondly, due to the political isolation of the AfD, Germany's major parties adhere to a strategy of non-cooperation with the AfD, a practice referred to as the "Brandmauer" (firewall). This phenomenon functions as a structural impediment, hindering the incorporation of the AfD into the political mainstream, irrespective of any policy moderation. In contrast, France's response entailed the exclusion of radical policy stances, thereby embarking on a course of moderation. The RN (Rassemblement National), while maintaining an anti-elite rhetoric, has also recruited elites from institutions such as Sciences Po and ENA into its leadership. Moreover, it relinquished its stance on exiting the eurozone, progressively adopting a stance that advocated for the reform of Europe in accordance with French national interests. In the case of Italy's Giorgia Meloni, it is evident that she has demonstrated a capacity to adapt to the norms and institutional frameworks of the EU. This adaptation is characterized by the adoption of a pragmatic policy approach, which contrasts with the advancement of extreme policy agendas¹⁷.

Thirdly, the AfD has garnered substantial support in the former East Germany. Transcending its geographical limitations necessitates broadening its electoral base beyond this regional stronghold. For instance, in the aftermath of reunification, sentiments of political and economic marginalization—manifested in the perception of being relegated to "second-class citizenship"—fueled not only nostalgia for socialism but also aspirations for national resurgence. Consequently, this socio-political context contributed to elevated levels of support for radical ethnic nationalism and cultural conservatism in these regions.

While the AfD has achieved considerable nationwide expansion by 2025, securing second place in the February 2025 federal election, significant geographical disparities persist. The party continues to command over one-third of votes in eastern states, whereas its support in western regions remains comparatively modest. The party's challenge has evolved from a mere matter of geographical expansion to one of consolidating support across diverse regional contexts. Moreover, it is imperative to overcome its current state of political isolation to achieve governing power. Absent such consolidation, the AfD faces a quandary that fundamentally restricts its progress toward political normalization.

¹⁷ Cho, H.-S. (2024). The French parliamentary election and European populism: The success and limitations of the National Rally (RN). *Legislative Studies*, 30(3), 56-57.



Specifically, the party risks losing its core eastern base while failing to garner sufficient mainstream acceptance in the west.

Meanwhile, the AfD continues to face significant challenges in altering its perception nationwide, particularly within the former West Germany, where its reputation remains predominantly negative. The social underpinnings that foster support for the AfD in former East Germany encompass economic disparities and regional imbalances, phenomena that are also evident in countries such as Italy. While the party's robust support base has undoubtedly contributed to its rise, it is also a significant factor that hinders the party's capacity to consolidate its expansion through moderation. The party's electoral prospects in the Western regions are characterized by volatility and dependence on protest voting. Conversely, any strategic shift toward moderation may result in the alienation of the radical core in the Eastern regions, which is crucial for maintaining organizational stability and ideological coherence.

Conclusion

Thus far, we have analyzed the electoral support for the AfD in Germany has been conducted, along with an examination of its implications. Moreover, the challenges associated with consolidating geographic and regional support have been thoroughly assessed. This support is imperative for the party's evolution. Finally, an analysis has been conducted to determine the ways in which the party has attempted to overcome its political isolation. The crux of this quandary is the paradox of moderation. The AfD has solidified its position as a novel pole of opposition by capitalizing on divisions within the established order. However, it now faces inconsistencies in its attempts to moderate its conduct in order to gain acceptance into that very establishment.

The German case offers several critical implications. First, the most salient grievance among former East German citizens— and a primary catalyst for the far-right party's ascendance— centers on labor market anxieties. These populations regard refugees and immigrants as direct competitors for employment, a perception that has fueled both economic marginalization and socio-political alienation. The electoral entrenchment of the AfD in the former East Germany must be understood within this economic and social context, where citizens have gravitated toward the party's ethno-nationalist and anti-immigration platform as a response to perceived structural disadvantages. Consequently, a more comprehensive examination of the immigrant issue within the context of social alienation in the former East Germany after German reunification is imperative. It is imperative that this examination encompass a thorough assessment of the social integration of immigrants.

Secondly, it is imperative to perpetually examine methods of social integration by evaluating not only the federal government of Germany but also the practices of state governments. North Rhine-Westphalia is the region with the largest immigrant population in all of Germany, possessing a long history of migrant workers. The state government's social integration education is characterized by its comprehensive approach to



educational integration, encompassing both formal and informal educational settings¹⁸. Consequently, despite having the highest proportion of foreigners, North Rhine-Westphalia continues to demonstrate the highest level of social inclusion. A more in-depth analysis is particularly necessary regarding bodies such as the Social Integration Council for immigrants and native residents. The government's endeavors to foster social integration are inherently deficient without the active involvement of local residents. The cultivation of awareness and policy-level reflection, complemented by active social discourse, is instrumental in fostering vigilance against the far-right and nurturing a healthier democracy.

Thirdly, a high level of micro-level analysis of social conflicts is necessary, enabling the development of multi-layered approaches to resolve them. In the case of Germany, it is imperative to undertake a more comprehensive analysis of the support base for the AfD, with a particular focus on examining the patterns of AfD support among both younger and older generations. The emergence of far-right political parties can be attributed to various factors, including economic inequality, population decline, and political alienation. These factors vary in their impact across different generations and geographical regions. Society exhibits diversity across economic and social strata, with multiple interests intermingling.

This finding aligns with the previously emphasized importance of social integration and connects to the significance of social integration education targeting not only immigrants but also the general public. The recent rise of far-right politics, evident not only in Germany and Korea but also in numerous other nations, is indicative of a prevailing trend of polarization. The solution to this issue is found in the facilitation of discussions concerning integration at the individual, regional, and societal levels. This complexity necessitates a multifaceted approach, as addressing one aspect alone would not suffice. The interconnected nature of these dimensions, akin to the interlocking gears of a machine, underscores the necessity for a holistic perspective.

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¹⁸ Choi, J.-A. (2025). Integration policies for migrants in North Rhine-Westphalia. *European Studies*, 43(1), 29–50.



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