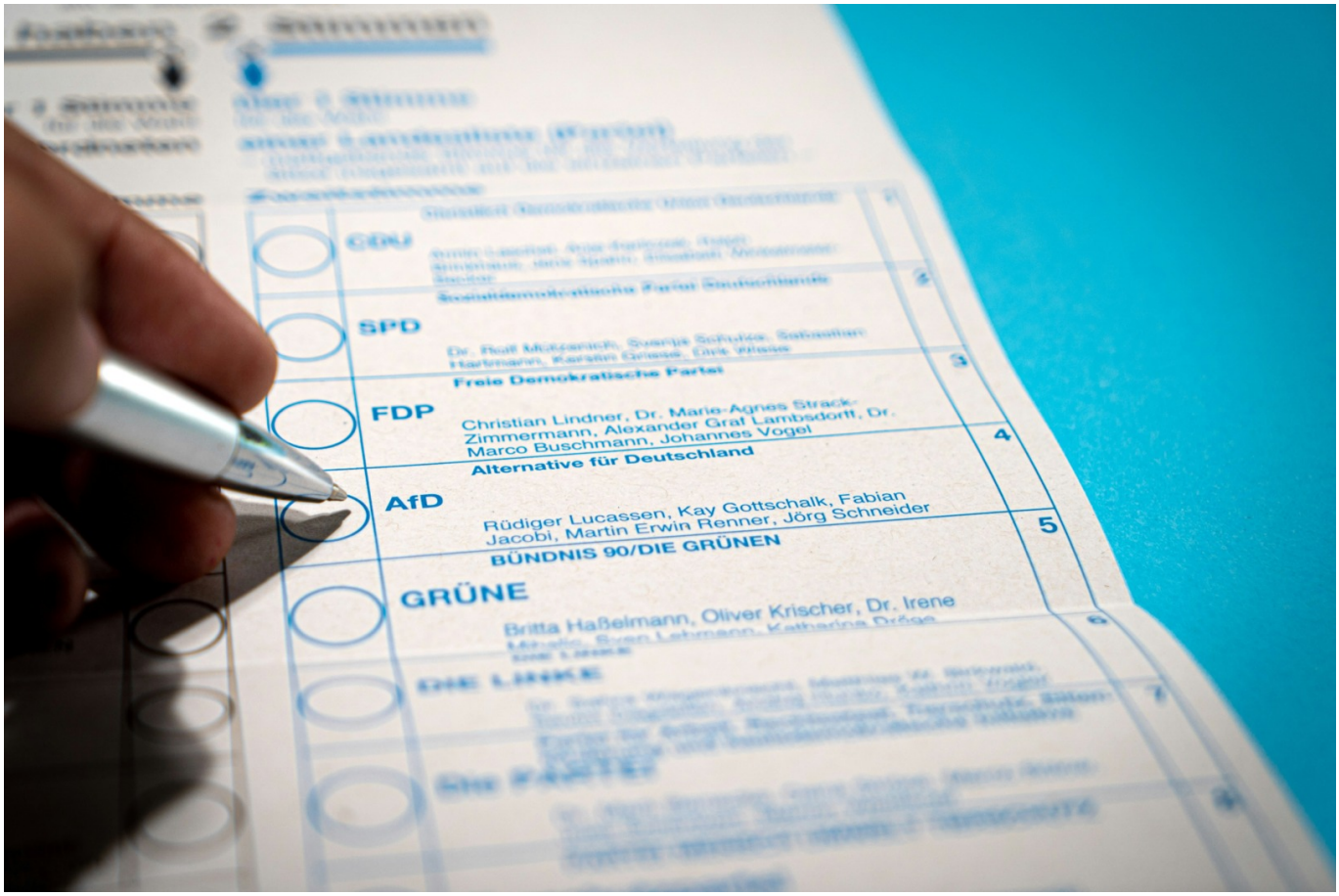
Germany’s Populist Right-Wing Party’s Decade of Success

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The Alternative for Germany (AfD), founded in February 2013, began as a Eurosceptic movement and later expanded to challenge immigration policies. In just a decade, the AfD has gained popularity across all federal states by securing significant votes in regional, national, and European elections among all age groups. Initially dismissed as a protest vote against established parties, more supporters now assert they vote for the AfD out of conviction. The party’s appeal among young voters during the latest EU elections has forced democratic parties to confront an uncomfortable question: How has populism become so popular?

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Populist right-wing parties are rising across Europe, and Germany is no exception. The Alternative for Germany (AfD), the country's leading far-right party, achieved a breakthrough in the June 2024 European Parliament elections, securing 15.9% of the votes – roughly one in six ballots. This success shook the German political establishment. Particularly striking were regional elections in Saxony, Thuringia, and Brandenburg, where the AfD won 30.6%, 32.8%, and 29.2% of votes, signaling a shift in voter sentiment towards the far-right. In 2025, the party performed well in the federal elections, reaching the second place just under the conservative CDU/CSU.

These figures challenge the stereotype of a middle-aged white male as the typical AfD voter. The party has now reached the center of society. Particularly concerning are the results among young voters, with 16% of voters aged 16 to 24 supporting the far-right in the latest EU elections. Both young and older voters increasingly state they support the AfD out of conviction, reflecting a broader societal shift toward radical views. Long considered immune to right-wing populism due to its distinctive past, the rapid rise of the AfD in Germany proves otherwise. Beyond the implications for the country and the European Union, it is vital to reflect on why significant segments of the society feel represented by a populist right-wing party.

Meeting Young Voters Where They Are

Since 2024, 16- and 17-year-olds in Germany are eligible to vote in the European elections. Earlier that year, the then President of the German federal parliament Bärbel Bas (Social Democratic Party of Germany), stated that schools bear primary responsibility for conveying democratic values, ensuring that "students learn not to rely solely on TikTok or YouTube for information and to distinguish between information and fake news." I argue that this approach is problematic on two fronts.

Firstly, Ms. Bas fails to recognize the importance of reaching young people where they are. In the digital age, no democratic party can afford to be absent from social media – the primary arena for communication today, especially among youth. The Alternative for Germany party effectively leverages the fast-paced and polarizing nature of online content, creating a strong "youth-oriented communication offering" through digital campaigns (David Begrich, NDR, 2024).

Secondly, already after elementary school, the German school system divides children into secondary school tracks with different specializations. This fragmentation results in a lack of a cohesive strategy to educate students about politics and democracy, making it impossible to assume that all young people possess the same understanding of political systems or historical contexts necessary for informed voting.

Lowering the voting age can only benefit democracy if accompanied by comprehensive reform for political education in schools, and if democratic parties realize that investing in a strong social media strategy is key to mobilizing young voters.

Recognizing the Lingering Impact of the German Democratic Republic's Legacy

The German experience of World War II has long been viewed as a deterrent against the resurgence of radical right populist parties; however, the impact of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany's (SED) dictatorship has never been examined as a potential factor in this resurgence. Recent election results in the eastern federal states suggest a need to explore a connection between the AfD's success in these regions and the historical legacy for former citizens of the German Democratic Republic (GDR).

Studies link populist rises in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) to socio-economic challenges such as youth outmigration, low representation of East Germans in leadership roles, and income disparities persisting 35 years after reunification, while the long-term effects of the socialization of former GDR citizens on their political attitudes remain largely overlooked. A recent policy paper by the Else-Frenkel-Brunswik Institute shows widespread dissatisfaction with democracy, feelings of political powerlessness, and a desire for strong authoritarian leadership in East Germany. I argue that the socialist-era norms still shape East Germans' beliefs. The legacy of restricted democratic participation and censorship under the GDR regime has profoundly impacted East Germans' perception of personal freedom.

However, this yearning for liberty has not necessarily fostered support for liberal democracy. Instead, it has paradoxically contributed to the appeal of right-wing populist rhetoric. This distrust of institutions, and nostalgia for a repressive yet reliable system, contribute to making East Germans more receptive to populist messages effectively harnessed by the AfD. It is crucial that political leaders acknowledge this historically rooted desire for autonomy to foster more inclusive politics.

Effective Political Communication is Half the Battle

Over the last decade, the Alternative for Germany party's communication strategy has effectively mobilized its electorate while other parties struggle to win back far-right voters. Statements like the one from the Social Democratic Party's Lars Klingbeil, who urged "all reasonable people…to speak up [against the AfD]," highlight a key issue in modern political communication. It has become common to label supporters of far-right parties as "unreasonable," patronizing their political choices and reinforcing an "us vs. them" dichotomy that distinguishes between "true democrats" and those deemed irrational.

Although the AfD, classified as a suspected right-wing extremist party, poses a clear threat, it is important not to equate it with its voters. The real challenge for liberal democracy is to re-engage populist right-wing voters and encourage them to adopt more moderate political views and approaches. Despite the urgency, strategies for engaging and "deradicalizing" these electorates remain largely underexplored. A 2023 study by the Research Institute for Social Cohesion (FGZ) reveals that established parties often focus on forming alliances against the AfD rather than understanding voter motivations.

While populist parties exploit social upheavals and dissatisfaction, it is

essential to develop effective communication strategies that address concerns, regain trust, and allow far-right voters to move back towards the political center, free from reproach. Tolerance is a door that swings both ways and German politicians must engage with far-right voters if they want to safeguard democracy; otherwise, there is a risk of completely alienating whole segments of the society.

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Note: This contribution stems from a blog post which is part of a series on

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