

Many losers – One winner? An examination of vote switching to the AfD in the 2017 German federal election using VAA data

Party Politics

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Abstract

The German federal election of 2017 saw significant losses for the two German mainstream parties (Volksparteien) and governing coalition partners, the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democrats (SPD). The major beneficiary was the Alternative for Germany (AfD), a right-populist party, which almost tripled its amount of votes received from the 2013 federal election. Making use of data from a Voting Advice Application, this article seeks to explore the AfD's extraordinary electoral success with particular attention to the party's capacity to attract voters from the two mainstream and traditionally powerful parties. Drawing on the literature on radical right-wing parties in Europe and tracking the route of AfD from a single-issue Eurosceptic party to a radical party with broader programmatic appeal, this work tests hypotheses regarding demographic, political and attitudinal determinants of voting for AfD, in general, and switching one's vote to AfD from CDU/CSU or SPD more specifically. In line with previous literature, individual-level analyses show that voting for the AfD seems to be more tangentially related to demographic variables, such as sex, age and education and more strongly connected to political concerns, e.g. "conservative" self-placement and attitudes toward specific policies, immigration and Euroscepticism in particular.

Keywords

2017 German federal election, AfD, radical right-wing parties, Volksparteien, Voting Advice Applications

Introduction

The German federal election of 2017 delivered record losses for the two most powerful parties, the largest number of parties in the Bundestag (seven) in more than 60 years and an acrimonious negotiation for the eventual formation of a coalition government. The German political system had proven to be remarkably stable and consolidated since the 1960s, when the nine parliamentary parties of the post-World War II Bundestag had been marginalized by the Christian Democratic/Social Union (CDU/CSU¹), the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) – a configuration that remained stable until 1983 and 1990, when the Green Party and die Linke ('the Left' – formerly Party of Democratic Socialism) entered the Bundestag, respectively. Parliamentary power during this period was predominantly shared by the two mainstream parties (Volksparteien), the CDU/CSU and the

SPD, which cumulatively averaged 82.7% of the vote between 1961 and 2005. While this sum dropped to 59.1% between 2009 and 2017, electoral losses were primarily confined to the SPD, while the CDU/CSU was considerably more successful than other conservative parties across Europe in retaining the loyalty of its electorate (Bale and Krouwel, 2013).

The 2017 election saw a continuation of the trend of diminishing power for the Volksparteien that started in the mid-2000s; the CDU/CSU secured 32.9% of the party list (second) vote and the SPD 20.5%, losses of 8.6% and 5.2%,

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the second worst and worst electoral performance since WWII, respectively. Together, the two parties obtained 4.5 million fewer votes than in 2013, which translated into unequally distributed gains for the smaller parties. The parties to the left of the SPD, the Greens and die Linke, attracted an additional half a million voters each (gains of 0.5% and 0.6%, respectively, in terms of the overall second vote share), while the major beneficiaries were the FDP, which increased its vote share by 5.9% (2.9 million more voters), and the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which attracted approximately 5.9 million voters (12.6% of the electorate), 3.8 million more votes than in 2013, a gain of 7.9% vote share. The rise of the AfD was perhaps the most notable feature of the 2017 election, as beyond becoming the third largest party in the Bundestag, they also managed the best result of any party entering the Bundestag for the first time since 1949 (Goerres et al., 2018). Moreover, it was the first time since 1957 that a party, explicitly positioning itself to the right of the Christian Democratic Union in the political spectrum, succeeded in entering the Bundestag (Dilling, 2018: 84).

Interested in understanding this uncommon electoral success of the AfD in 2017, we use data from a Voting Advice Application (VAA) to explore the thesis that this success is attributable to the AfD's discursive turn from an anti-Eurozone party with neoliberal economic policies towards a radical right-wing party (RRP) focusing on the sociocultural domain. We proceed by reviewing explanations for the success of RRPs in Europe generally before providing more details on the AfD and the 2017 electoral campaign context. In terms of findings, we present a multinomial regression model examining individual-level factors contributing to voting for the AfD, splitting them into structural demographic characteristics (e.g. sex), broader ideological preferences (e.g. left–right) and attitudinal preferences for specific policies. Using a second model, we focus on the factors that help explain the ability of the AfD to attract voters from the two mainstream Volksparteien (CDU/CSU and SPD) specifically – a relatively understudied niche in the relevant literature (Coffé and van den Berg, 2017).

Radical-right parties in Europe

Despite disagreement, when it comes to nomenclature ('radical RRPs', 'radical right-wing populist parties' etc., see Hobolt and Tilley, 2016) and even sometimes these parties' programmatic content (Rooduijn, 2018), there is remarkable agreement as to which parties belong in this 'party family'; in the words of Cas Mudde, 'We seem to know who they are even though we do not exactly know what they are' (2009: 7). A minimalist definition of radical RRPs would suggest two unifying elements: First, these parties adhere to an exclusionary ethnocultural notion of citizenship (Immerzeel et al., 2015), and second, they

combine this notion with a tendency towards authoritarianism and less tolerance for cultural pluralism and minority rights (Mudde, 2009: 19–25). Some parties in the category additionally incorporate 'populist' ideas, adopting narratives positing a homogenized group, the 'people', in an antagonistic relationship to an equally homogeneous corrupt or indifferent 'elite' in a competition more 'moral' than socio-economic in nature (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2013).

The emergence of RRPs has been largely enabled by the dealignment between voters and parties observable in many Western industrialized nations (e.g. Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002) and the declining importance of traditional institutional cleavages (e.g. class structures), particularly among younger voters (Walczak et al., 2012). Simply noting, however, the increasing dealignment between voters and parties does not sufficiently explain the variability of electoral success of RRPs across Europe, nor why such processes have not translated into electoral gains for the political left (with the notable exceptions of Podemos in Spain and Synaspismos Rizospastikis Aristeras (SYRIZA) in Greece). Explanations of the phenomenon then generally follow one of the two complementary approaches, focusing on either constraints and opportunities offered by the political system in which parties operate ('supply-side' explanations) or on the electorate ('demand-side' explanations; see Mudde, 2009; Rydgren, 2007).

Supply-side factors used to explain the electoral success of these parties are generally split into external and internal factors, that is, factors under the control of the party itself (e.g. its organizational characteristics). A good example of the latter is strong or charismatic party leadership, which has been suggested to replace party identification as a vote-driver (e.g. Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). A generally underappreciated external supply-side factor is the positioning of established parties, since it is the policies followed by the latter that define the space in which newer parties can inhabit (Arzheimer, 2009; Lubbers et al., 2002). Particularly relevant for the study of RRPs are cases where major established parties converge towards each other's ideological positions, allowing for a gap on the right of the party spectrum, something which radical new parties have been able to capitalize on (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006; Veugelers and Magnan, 2005) – an, pertinent here, example being the case of the 'refugee crisis' of 2015 across Europe.

Most individual-level explanations, on the other hand, are based on some form of the 'losers of globalization (or modernization)' thesis, which has existed since the 1960s (Mudde, 2010). This explanatory framework suggests that globalization processes and changes in the labour market are leaving an increasing number of low-skilled individuals with less formal education vulnerable to economic deprivation. This, combined with low responsiveness from established parties, erodes the political systems' representation function, enhances populist sentiment and drives support

for RRP voters out of a sense of generalized discontent (Betz, 2002; Van der Eijk et al., 1996). While there indeed seems to be a particular profile for RRP voters (men, with less formal education, of lower socio-economic status – e.g. Arzheimer, 2009; van der Brug et al., 2000), recent meta-analyses show that socio-structural variables only explain about 10% of variance in the success of RRP (Bornschier and Kriesi, 2012), suggesting that this line of argument is unable to fully explain the RRP phenomenon.

More nuanced versions of this framework suggest that support for RRP is a rational choice for voters who prefer protectionist economic policies in the emerging environment of globalized competition forming the basis for an uneasy coalition within RRP constituencies between low-skilled workers and petit bourgeoisie elements, for example, small business owners (Lubbers, 2001; McGann and Kitschelt, 2005). More recently, the framework has been expanded to include ‘cultural’ competition (see Kriesi and Pappas, 2015), reflecting the emergence of social values as an independent site of contention (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). This version of the thesis suggests that both cultural and demographic changes, as well as the increasing importance of supranational organizations (e.g. the European Union (EU)), are seen as a threat to traditional values and the homogeneity of national identity (Ivarsflaten, 2005; van der Brug et al., 2005) fostering RRP success. It has been further suggested that, in recognition of the fact that their electorates are divided over economic policy preferences (Ivarsflaten, 2005), these parties attempt to mobilize across social or cultural values (Rovny, 2013; Röth et al., 2017) or to only support chauvinistic redistributionist policies that cater exclusively to members of their own nation (e.g. Ennser-Jedenastik, 2016; Goerres et al., 2018; Schumacher and Kersbergen, 2016).

Overall then, as loyalties towards established parties become weaker, other factors such as policy and pragmatic considerations gain importance (Zhirkov, 2014), with partisans being more likely to cite ‘issues, political goals, and candidate traits as a basis of their vote’ (Dalton, 2012: 43). This tendency, enhanced through strong anti-establishment sentiment following the financial crisis of 2008, leads to rejection of established parties in power towards formerly marginalized parties, RRP among them (Hobolt and de Vries, 2015; Kriesi and Pappas, 2015).

Demand-side explanations for the success of the AfD

The AfD party was founded in 2013 with a relatively short party programme heavily focused on a single issue, arguing against Germany-supported bailouts of banks and other European member states (Arzheimer, 2015; Berbuir et al., 2015; Schmitt-Beck, 2014). Competing for the 2014 European Parliament (EP) elections, the party attempted to enhance its programmatic profile by adding some nationalistic overtones and emphasizing its support for market

liberalism, while also adopting a ‘softer’ anti-Eurozone stance. Following the EP elections, the nationalist forces within the party, present since its very beginning (Faas and Klingelhöfer, 2019: 2), gained in power. This rightward shift continued with the party’s ‘Herbstoffensive 2015’ (Fall Offensive 2015), hosting rallies and events effectively mobilizing support by opposing the government’s immigration and asylum policies (Hambauer and Mays, 2018: 150). This new national conservative agenda, combined with less market liberal but more welfare chauvinist positions (Goerres et al., 2018), fostered even more electoral success at the state level, with the AfD entering 14 of the 16 state parliaments prior to the German federal election of 2017.

Although considerable amount of work has gone into studying the AfD’s organizational structures and its official political agenda and discourse, we know less about its voters (Goerres et al., 2018), reasonably so, given both the small amount of time since the party’s formation and the confounding factor of the AfD’s shift towards more standard RRP positions (Berning, 2017; Goerres et al., 2018). Our three main sources of information as to who votes for the AfD (univariate analyses of AfD voters, multivariate modelling of voting behaviour and aggregate/state-level analyses) broadly tend to suggest that the AfD’s adoption of more ‘culture war’-related rhetoric has been accompanied by a shift in the type of voter who expresses support for the party (Schmitt-Beck, 2017).

Earlier univariate analyses suggest that AfD voters tend to be predominantly men and of working age (Berbuir et al., 2015; Lees, 2018), with average incomes slightly below that of all voters (Bergmann et al., 2017; Brenke and Kritikos, 2017), while conflicting evidence has been offered as to the effect of formal education (contrast Berbuir et al., 2015, to Brähler et al., 2016). Moreover, AfD voters are suggested to be more worried over immigration and the refugee crisis, to hold more Eurosceptic attitudes and more conservative positions (e.g. anti-homosexual couples’ rights) in general (Berbuir et al., 2015; Dudášová, 2017; Kroh and Fetz, 2016; Schmitt-Beck, 2017).

Multivariate analyses of voting behaviour confirm some of the aforementioned intuitions. Voting for the AfD, for example, has consistently been associated with being a man (Berning, 2017; Dilling, 2018; Franz et al., 2018; Giebler and Regel, 2017; Goerres et al., 2018; Schmitt-Beck, 2017; cf. Hansen and Olsen, 2018) and voting in states of the former German Democratic Republic (East Germany – Campbell, 2017; Franz et al., 2018), though this effect was diminished for people socialized in Eastern Germany after reunification (Goerres et al., 2018). Less ubiquitous are findings concerning age, with some studies finding a tendency to support the AfD among younger populations (Campbell, 2017; Hansen and Olsen, 2018), while others find higher support among middle-aged respondents (Dilling, 2018; Franz et al., 2018) or no statistically significant

relationship between age and AfD-voting (Goerres et al., 2018). Similarly, when it comes to education, Berning (2017) finds an association between less formal education and voting for the AfD, while others (Goerres et al., 2018; Hansen and Olsen, 2018) report none. Reported findings are also inconsistent concerning income, with Goerres et al. (2018) reporting a relationship between higher incomes and AfD-voting, while Hansen and Olsen (2018) find that lower incomes are more likely to be associated with voting for the AfD.

Findings from studies that include attitudinal variables are somewhat clearer, with one general observation being that including such predictors tends to significantly raise the predictive capacity of the models employed (Dilling, 2018; Hansen and Olsen, 2018; Schmitt-Beck et al., 2017). The most persistent finding among this category of predictors is a clear connection between voting for the AfD and holding anti-immigration (Baron, 2018; Berning, 2017; Goerres et al., 2018; Köppl-Turyna and Grunewald, 2017; Schmitt-Beck, 2017) and Eurosceptic positions (Campbell, 2017), while anti-same-sex marriage (Dilling, 2018) attitudes have also been noted among its electorate. Evidence concerning economic attitudes, on the other hand, has been less consistent: AfD voters are sometimes found to be in favour (Campbell, 2017) or against (Goerres et al., 2018) state redistributionist policies, while yet other studies report such positions to be unrelated to AfD support (Hansen and Olsen, 2018). Goerres et al. (2018) have suggested that this discrepancy can be explained by considering ‘welfare-chauvinism’, that is, support for redistributionist policies only when the latter target ‘native’ populations.

Finally, when considering evidence from aggregate data, higher support for the AfD has been associated with Eastern German states (Berning, 2017; Schmitt-Beck et al., 2017) and areas with higher numbers of asylum seekers (Goerres et al., 2018; Molodikova and Lyalina, 2017). Evidence for regional average incomes and AfD support, on the other hand, has been ambiguous (cf. Molodikova and Lyalina, 2017, and Dorn et al., 2018, to Schwander and Manow, 2017), as is the case for an urban–rural cleavage in supporting the AfD (cf. Martin, 2019, to Giebler and Regel, 2017). More generally, evidence from the aggregate level seems to suggest that the party has been asymmetrically successful in mobilizing part of the electorate that would have otherwise not voted, with AfD support being associated with areas with higher voter turnout rates compared to previous elections (Martin, 2019).

The context of the study – The 2017 German federal election

The public discourse in the run for the 2017 federal elections was dominated by discussions concerning the ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015, with 49% of the German population considering the issue of the integration of refugees and

asylum policies as the most important problem facing the country (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 2017). Realizing the salience of the issue as well as the heterogeneity of its electorate in other domains (e.g. liberal, market-oriented policies – see Kim, 2018), the AfD attempted to mobilize voters along a heavily anti-immigration discourse (Geiges, 2018).

The governing coalition parties (CDU/CSU and SPD) were more constrained in their ability to respond. Centre-right parties frequently attempt to regain ownership of the sociocultural issue of the day from competitors on their right by hardening their stance (Schain, 2006; van Spanje and van der Brug, 2009); the CDU/CSU, however, would have had to openly position themselves against their own government’s policies and the chancellor’s famous statement: ‘Wir schaffen das!’ (‘We can manage this!’). The junior coalition partner SPD, on the other hand, had to face the expected trade-off in such situations of risking alienating voters of either its core electorate on the left or its more numerous centrist support. This lacklustre responsiveness created a ‘representation gap’ (see König 2017: 339), allowing AfD ‘ownership’ of the issue (Geiges, 2018: 66) by focusing on xenophobic sentiment, anti-globalization and anti-EU positions (Siri, 2018: 142), and indeed, the AfD has been found to be four-and-a-half times more likely to attract voters who saw immigration as a threat to the country (Dilling, 2018: 97). Instructively, the party leader, Alexander Gauland, called the refugee crisis ‘a present for us [the AfD]’ (Geiges, 2018: 52).

Research hypotheses

So far, we have mapped out the AfD’s transformation from an almost single-issue Eurosceptic party defining its positions on economic grounds to one whose main mobilization efforts depend heavily on non-economic concerns, namely on immigration issues. Recent literature has suggested that explanations including voters’ attitudes towards particular policies as predictors fare much better than explanations only employing socio-demographic characteristics, which leads us to our first hypothesis:

H1: Voting for the AfD in 2017 is expected to be associated with attitudinal factors more so than with socio-structural characteristics, such as demographics (sex, age etc.)

Furthermore, we were particularly interested to examine the factors that foster driving ‘defection’ towards the AfD among individuals who voted for one of the two Volksparteien and government coalition partners (CDU/CSU or SPD). We therefore employ a second model directly comparing citizens who voted for these parties in 2013 and voted for the AfD in 2017 to voters who remained loyal

to the CDU/CSU or the SPD or voted for a different party (but not the AfD), hypothesizing that:

H2: Socio-demographic factors will be less influential in driving such vote-switching behaviour towards the AfD than disagreement with the party of these individuals' previous vote, especially when it comes to 'cultural' issues-related policies (e.g. immigration) compared to other policy domains (e.g. economic policies).

Method

All data employed in the analyses were obtained through ParteINavi (2017), a VAA designed for the 2017 German federal elections that operated between August 29 and September 23, the day before the election. VAAs are online platforms set up in the pre-electoral period to provide voters with information as to the closeness of the various candidate parties (estimated through an expert iterative survey) on the basis of their agreement or disagreement on a number of policy statements. These data were obtained in the usual manner for VAAs, with users freely visiting the website and responding, in a self-completing capacity, to a number of items, from demographics and political orientation questions to a total of 25 items concerning policy positions.² ParteINavi ultimately attracted 12,581 users (an unusually small sample for VAAs), a sample pool further reduced to 9,367 respondents after removing users with more than one set of responses from the same computer, more than six identical consecutive answers or 'no opinions' in the 25 policy items and responding times of less than 2 s per question being removed (see Andreadis, 2014, for the cleaning criteria).

Data preprocessing

As expected from VAA-generated data, the data set was highly non-representative of the German electorate in a number of respects, with, for example, median age of 32 years, users being predominantly men (69.2%) for the most part from West German states (80.4%) and so on. We therefore attempted to calculate two independent weights: the first on the basis of a cross-tabulation of sex, age and state (voting in East vs. West Germany) from census data³ and the second on the basis of users' self-reported 2013 (second) vote in the federal elections.⁴ The two weights were combined using 'raking' (see the *anesrake* R package – Pasek and Pasek, 2018) and adjusted to match the overall N of the sample with a full set of responses ($N = 4,369$, weighted $N = 4,368.9$), yielding a data set to an extent representative as to the characteristics employed (see Online supplemental material II⁵), with generally acceptable weights (90% under 2 and 95% under 3.2). A notable exception to this were the categories of women, over 60

years of age in both East and West Germany, who were significantly underrepresented in the sample and for whom the calculated weights exceeded 7; these were truncated down to 7 and as such, any generalization of the results that follow for these categories should be very tentative.

Analyses

Below, we present results from two discrete models, both employing the same type of predictors. The first is a straightforward multinomial regression of VAA users' vote intention (second vote) in the (then upcoming) 2017 federal election, comparing voters of the five parties in parliament to those of the CDU/CSU. The second model combines information from users' previous vote in the 2013 federal election with their vote intention to create a binary variable and only involves individuals who voted for the CDU/CSU or the SPD in 2013 and either did or did not intend to vote for the AfD in 2017.

The models employ predictors that can be roughly split into three categories: demographics-related information, three questions relating to politics more generally and users' preferences towards specific policies. Considering demographics, we use age, sex, education and federal state (East vs. West) – for the operationalization of these, see Online supplemental material IIIa.⁶ When it comes to politics-related variables, we employ two self-placements, one asking users to place themselves along a 'left–right' 10-point scale relating to their preference of how much the state should intervene in the economy and a second similar 'progressive–conservative' 10-point scale relating to traditional/progressive social values (see Online supplemental material IIIb for wording) and, finally, an 'interest in politics' question, originally measured using four response categories. The reader should note the skewed distribution of the data set in terms of some variables, for example, political interest, an expected outcome of using a VAA to collect data. There was only a relatively small number of individuals with little formal education or low interest in politics, thus the two variables were made binary: without or with university degree for the education variable and mid or lower versus high interest for political interest; for comparison purposes, the reader can see the equivalent percentages from surveys using stratified sampling (German Longitudinal Election Study and European Election Study) in Online supplemental material V.⁷

Finally, concerning policy preferences, VAA users were provided with 25 policy statements to which they could express their approval or disapproval using a five-point Likert-type scale (*completely agree* to *completely disagree* plus an explicit *no opinion* option). Since a number of these policy items were thematically close and putatively connected, rather than use all 25 as predictors, we elected to reduce them to a smaller number of groups (factors). To do this, we employed factor analysis using polychoric

correlations (using the ‘psych’ R package – see Revelle and Revelle, 2018) producing seven latent factor scores from 18 items using the ‘tenBerge’ method. The seven latent factor scores calculated independently from one another, and consisting of two to four policy items pertaining to ‘green’ policies, state intervention in the economy, redistributionist (Tax & Spend) policies, immigration, EU-related attitudes, sociocultural values (same-sex couples’ adoption rights and the importance of ‘Christian values’) and state-control policies (monitoring of Internet activity and video surveillance of public spaces) – see Online supplemental material III⁸ for details. We should note here that splitting the items into seven ‘factors’ was a post hoc choice, rather than one driven by statistical considerations, and indeed, the parallel analysis process suggested five factors, grouping together issues relating immigration and the EU into a single factor and state intervention and redistributionist policies into another. However, due to the nature and history of the object under study described above, we wanted to examine the effect of the seven groups separately from each other (e.g. Euroscepticism from immigration-related issues), thus we calculated each of the seven ‘factors’ independently. This should not be taken to imply that the German policy space is reducible to seven dimensions (or even five); it is, rather, an analytical choice.

Model 1 uses users’ self-placements and factor scores as predictors of vote intention in general. Model 2, on the other hand, focuses on individuals who voted for the CDU/CSU or the SPD in 2013 and uses distances from the users’ previous party instead. The logic behind this choice is that the differences between one’s own position and those of the parties are the drivers of defection to another party rather than the positions themselves. In other words, using distances rather than the positions themselves helps differentiate between policy areas where there is disagreement between voters and (previous) party of choice, without altering the relationship between switching to AfD and the predictors, since the latter are merely centred on the party position per factor (minus a constant that is different between factors). Party positions on the relevant factors were calculated by the positions assigned to the parties by an expert survey for *ParteiNavi* and by applying the loading matrix obtained through the factor analysis on user data. We additionally employ distances between the user’s self-placement on the more holistic ideological Left–Right and Conservative–Progressive scales and the position of the parties, taken from the Chapel Hill flash expert survey of 2017 (Polk et al., 2017).⁹ The newly created ‘distances from parties’ variables were entered in the model as interaction terms with previous vote, so that distance from CDU/CSU only affected CDU/CSU (but not SPD) voters and the corollary for SPD.

All analyses were conducted through the R statistical software, using the ‘nnet’ package for the multinomial

regression (Ripley et al., 2016). The reader can access the raw data and replication code for the analyses through data-verse.harvard.edu by following this link: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FH8PEW>

Results

We begin the presentation of our results by examining the movement of users between the six main German parties as indicated by, and limited to, the (weighted) sample of VAA users employed here. Concerning the AfD, the party largely managed to retain the vote of users who had casted their vote for it in 2013 (85.5%), perhaps suggesting the formation of a core group of regular voters for this relatively young political organization. Considering voter migration from other parties (see Table 1, noting that the relative frequencies therein are row percentages), we find that a large number of VAA users who had previously voted for the CDU/CSU declared support for the AfD in 2017 (27.5%). Coincidentally in line with data from exit polls (Neu and Pokorny, 2017), indeed, 54.6% of VAA users with AfD vote intention were former CDU/CSU voters. Somewhat contra previous evidence, however (see Dilling, 2018), we find that the AfD was less successful in attracting previous SPD voters, at least in this particular sample, with SPD ‘defectors’ primarily declaring support for the Left (17.6%) or the Greens (11.9%) and 10.2% for the AfD; by contrast, CDU/CSU defectors moved primarily to the AfD (27.5%) and secondarily to the FDP (21.2%).

Wanting to examine which individual-level attributes made it more likely for one to declare vote intention for the AfD, we employed a multinomial logistic regression using the predictors described above and voting for the CDU/CSU as the reference category. Table 2 presents the increase in the model’s capacity to predict vote intention for any party (compared to the CDU/CSU), both in overall terms (the last line) and stepwise as groups of predictors enter the model sequentially.

While all three ‘steps’ of the model are a significant improvement on both the intercept-only baseline model and on each preceding step (the x^2 -associated columns), the largest improvement, beyond what can be explained by previously entered predictors, comes from the addition of the seven policy factors. We suggest that this offers some tentative support for the proclamation of van der Brug and Fennema that, at least some, ‘do not cast their votes in agreement with which social group they belong to, but in agreement with their own ideological and policy preferences’ (2003: 66). That said, the reader should also note that although ‘statistically significant’, even the final model with all predictors leaves a considerable amount of variance unexplained (Hosmer–Lemeshow overall $R^2_L = 0.373$) by other factors not measured here which are known to be associated with

Table 1. Vote switching (%) between the 2013 and the 2017 German federal elections.

		Vote intention (2017)						
		CDU/CSU	SPD	die Linke	Grüne	FDP	AfD	Overall
Previous vote (2013)	CDU/CSU	589.1 ^a 37.6% ^b	70.1 4.5%	69.6 4.4%	75.6 4.8%	333.4 21.2%	432.5 27.5%	1570.2
	SPD	53.5 5.6%	457 48.2%	167.1 17.9%	112.4 11.9%	60.9 6.4%	96.4 10.2%	947.3
	die Linke	3.7 1.1%	19.3 5.9%	227.6 69.3%	11.9 3.6%	2.8 0.8%	63 19.2%	328.3
	Grüne	5.2 1.8%	41.4 14.2%	47.3 16.2%	180.9 61.9%	13.8 4.7%	3.7 1.3%	292.2
	FDP	22.1 11.7%	3 1.6%	2.9 1.5%	5.2 2.7%	131.8 69.9%	23.8 12.6%	188.7
	AfD	1.9 0.9%	7.2 3.6%	10.3 5.1%	0	9.9 4.9%	171.9 85.5%	201.1
	Overall	675.4 19.1%	598 16.9%	524.7 14.9%	386 10.9%	552.5 15.7%	791.3 22.4%	3527.9

Note: AfD: Alternative for Germany.

^aFrequencies calculated on the basis of the data set weighted for sex, age, state (East/West) and vote in the 2013 German federal elections; weighted *N* after removing individuals with invalid previous vote (2013) and vote intention (2017) = 3527.9.

^bRelative frequencies refer to row percentages of the matrix.

Table 2. Information criteria for model 1 (multinomial logistic for vote intention).

Model	AIC	-2LL	Stepwise statistical testing			Hosmer–Lemeshow <i>R</i> _L ²
			χ^2	$\Delta(df)$	<i>p</i>	
Baseline (intercept only)	NA	7358.4			NA	
Demographics only ^a	7111.2	7061.2	297.2	20	<0.001	0.04
Demographics + political variables ^b	6717.9	6637.9	423.3	15	<0.001	0.098
Demographics + political variables ^b + policy factor scores	4763.9	4613.9	2024	35	<0.001	0.373

Note: Model weighted *N* = 2060.9 (unweighted *N* = 2294); weighted *N* for respondents with vote intention for CDU/CSU = 381.9, for SPD = 393.1, for die Linke = 301.7, for die Grünen = 289.5, for FDP = 330.8, for AfD = 364. Overall model performance: $\Delta(-2LL) = 2744.5$, $\Delta(df) = 70$, *p* < 0.001; Hosmer–Lemeshow *R*_L² = 0.373. AfD: Alternative for Germany; FDP: Free Democratic Party; LL: log likelihood; df: degree of freedom; NA: not applicable; AIC: Akaike’s Information Criterion.

^aSex, age, education, state (West/East).

^bInterest in politics, self-placement on Left–Right and Progressive–Conservative Scales.

party preference (party identity, income levels etc.) or others.

Focusing our attention specifically on voting for the AfD (vs. voting for the CDU/CSU; for parties other than the AfD, Online supplemental material IVa and IVb¹⁰) and taking into account results only from the final model with all predictors present (Table 3), we find a number of both demographic and policy preferences-related variables to be significant predictors. These results, then, suggest that voting for the AfD is considerably more likely for voters in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) (East Germany) and men, in broad agreement as would be expected from the previous literature. Also in line with some previous findings (Goerres et al., 2018) but contradicting others (Campbell, 2017; Hansen and Olsen, 2018), we obtain no significant association between voting for the AfD and age. This is not the case for the relationship between having a

university degree and voting for the AfD, which is statistically significant here (cf. Hansen and Olsen, 2018, and Goerres et al., 2018), although not in the direction suggested in Berning (2017). Namely, we find that university education was positively, rather than negatively, associated with voting for the AfD, though the reader should keep in mind the relatively small number of VAA users with the lowest levels of formal education (Volks-, Hauptschulabschluss) in the sample, when considering this result.

When it comes to politics-related variables, we find a marginally non-significant tendency between placing oneself further towards the conservative end of the Progressive–Conservative Scale and voting for the AfD, though we obtain no such association with the more economy-focused Left–Right Scale or high levels of self-reported interest in politics, at least as the variable was operationalized here, though we again note the small numbers of

Table 3. Coefficient parameters for voting for AfD (vs. CDU/CSU).

	Predictor	B (SE)	95% CI for odds ratios		
			Odds ratio	Lower	Upper
Demo	Intercept	−3.74 (0.6)*	0.02	0.01	0.08
	Sex (man)	0.8 (0.26)*	2.23	1.33	3.71
	Age	0.002 (0.01)	1	0.99	1.02
	State (East Germany)	1.32 (0.33)*	3.75	1.98	7.1
	Education (university degree)	0.51 (0.25)*	1.66	1.02	2.71
Political variables	Interest in politics (high vs. mid or lower)	0.08 (0.25)	1.08	0.66	1.76
	Left (0)–right (10) self-placement	−0.05 (0.04)	0.95	0.87	1.04
	Progressive (0)–conservative (10) placement	0.08 (0.05)	1.09	0.99	1.19
Policy attitudes	Anti-Green policies	0.24 (0.16)	1.28	0.93	1.75
	Pro-State intervention policies	0.32 (0.17)	1.37	0.98	1.93
	Pro-redistributionist policies	−0.25 (0.14)	0.78	0.59	1.03
	Anti-immigration policies	2.36 (0.28)*	10.59	6.18	18.16
	Pro-EU attitudes	−1.75 (0.17)*	0.17	0.12	0.24
	Progressive social values	−0.12 (0.16)	0.89	0.65	1.21
	Anti-State control policies	0.75 (0.15)*	2.12	1.59	2.83

Note. Reference category: CDU/CSU. AfD: Alternative for Germany; EU: European Union; CI: confidence interval; SE: standard error.

* $p < 0.05$.

individuals with ‘no interest at all in the sample’ (see Online supplemental material V).

Concerning policy-related factors, we find three of the seven to be in some fashion associated with voting for the AfD. Unsurprisingly, given the party’s rhetoric, we find that preference for anti-immigrant policies¹¹ substantially increased the likelihood of voting for the AfD, while holding pro-EU attitudes¹² does the reverse, in line with previous literature on both RRP parties across Europe, in general, and the AfD, in particular (e.g. Goerres et al., 2018; Schmitt-Beck, 2017). We also find AfD voters to be more likely to be against state surveillance policies such as monitoring the Internet and public spaces than their CDU/CSU-voting counterparts. Considering the two economic scales, there was a tendency for AfD voters to be more pro-State intervention in the economy,¹³ while being against redistributive policies,¹⁴ though both to a marginally non-significant extent. Finally, we find no association between preference for ‘Green’ policies or holding progressive social values and voting for the AfD, which could have been expected to be negative.

Broadly in agreement with previous literature then, we find voting for the AfD to be associated more strongly with policy-related attitudes than with demographics and more general political variables measured here; moreover, within the former category, negative attitudes towards immigrant-related policies were the best predictors of AfD-voting, followed by EU-related attitudes rather than economic or other considerations. We were additionally interested in examining the attributes of individuals who ‘defected’ to the AfD between the 2013 and 2017 elections, and model 2 compares users who self-reported voting for the CDU/CSU

or the SPD in 2013 and who either intended to vote for the AfD in 2017 (weighted $N = 260.4$; 211.8 former CDU/CSU voters, 48.6 former SPD voters) or not (weighted $N = 1217.1$).

Table 4 presents the information criteria from the logistic regression model. In terms of overall predictive capacity, model 2 is significantly better than model 1 (Hosmer–Lemeshow $R^2_L = 0.629$ for the final model), although it shares important similarities when considering the stepwise improvement of the model, in the sense that distances from the previous parties on policy factors added the most to the model, followed by political variables then demographics.

When considering individual predictor coefficients in the final model (Figure 1 and Table 5 in the Online supplemental material I), it is interesting to note similarities and differences between the two models. Sex, for example, remains a significant predictor, as does having a university degree. By contrast, voting in East Germany turns non-significant, while age remains a non-significant predictor, albeit to a marginal degree with a tendency for older age to prevent defection. We find, then, that men were more than two times more likely to switch their vote to AfD, while holding a university degree also fostered defection from the Volksparteien. On the other hand, somewhat surprisingly, high (versus mid or lower) political interest was not associated with a switch in voting behaviour.

Interesting is also the pattern that emerges when examining former CDU/CSU and SPD voters separately. The two groups appeared united in that disagreement with their previous party on immigration policy and their pro-EU stance and tertiary with their pursuit of green policies. However, the most powerful predictor of

Table 4. Information criteria for model 2 (binary logistic for switching to AfD from CDU/CSU or SPD).

Model	AIC	-2LL	Stepwise statistical testing			
			χ^2	$\Delta(\text{df})$	<i>p</i>	R_L^2
Baseline (intercept only)	NA	1376.2			NA	
Demographics only ^a	1270.8	1260.8	115.4	4	<0.001	0.084
Demographics + interest in politics (high vs. mid/lower)	1272.2	1260.2	0.6	1	0.439	0.084
... + Distance on left–right axis	1271.7	1255.7	4.5	2	0.105	0.088
... + Distance on progressive–conservative axis	1140	1120	135.7	2	<0.001	0.186
	Overall for political variables		256.2	9	<0.001	
Demographics + political variables + factor I distance: anti-Green policies	1007	983	137	2	<0.001	0.286
... + Pro-State intervention	961.8	933.8	49.2	2	<0.001	0.321
... + Anti-redistribution	932.1	900.1	33.7	2	<0.001	0.346
... + Anti-immigration	677.8	641.8	258.3	2	<0.001	0.534
... + Pro-EU	565.5	525.5	116.3	2	<0.001	0.618
... + Progressive values	563.2	519.2	6.3	2	0.043	0.623
... + Anti-State control	558.3	510.3	8.9	2	0.012	0.629
	Overall for policy factors		609.7	14	<0.001	

Note: Model weighted *N* = 1477.5 (unweighted *N* = 1121); weighted *N* for switchers to AfD from CDU/CSU = 211.8; from SPD = 48.6. Overall model performance: $\Delta(-2LL) = 865.9$, $\Delta(\text{df}) = 23$, $p < 0.001$; Hosmer–Lemeshow $R_L^2 = 0.629$. AfD: Alternative for Germany; LL: log likelihood; df: degree of freedom; NA: not applicable.

^aSex, age, education (university degree/no), State (West/East).

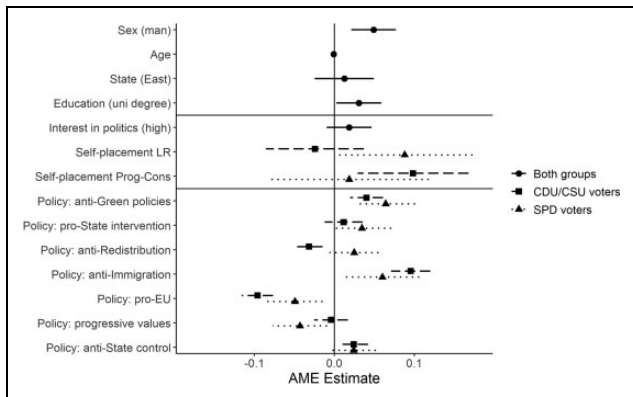


Figure 1. AME for switching vote to AfD from CDU/CSU or SPD. AfD. Points (+95% CI) present Average Marginal Effects; the change in probability for switching one’s vote to AfD in 2017, after voting for CDU/CSU or SPD in 2013 accompanying a 1-unit change in the predictor, while keeping all other predictors at their mean or at reference level. Dashed lines refer to former CDU/CSU voters, dotted lines refer to former SPD voters; solid lines refer to both, cumulatively. AfD: Alternative for Germany.

defection to AfD from CDU/CSU was placing oneself further towards the ‘conservative’ end of the Progressive–Conservative Scale than Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) experts placed the party, something not true for former SPD voters. When it comes to the remaining policy factors, discrepancies between VAA users’ own positions and the positions assigned to the parties by experts on redistributionist measures, such as increasing taxation and

enhancing the state’s ability to monitor the citizenry, played a factor in voters’ decision to defect; being against state control measures increased the likelihood of supporting the AfD, while being anti-redistributionist policies prevented defection.

When considering former SPD voters, the strongest predictor also involved self-placement, although in this case on the left–right axis, with former voters placing themselves to the Right of the party being more likely to switch their vote to the AfD. Additionally, holding more progressive values, for example, supporting adoption by homosexual couples, prevented defection. Some caution should be used however not to overgeneralize these findings, given the relatively small number of switching individuals (48) involved in the comparisons for SPD, also observable in the confidence intervals for the average marginal effects in the graph.

Conclusions

In this article, we took advantage of the data set generated through the ParteieNavi (2017) VAA to examine individual-level determinants of vote switching from the two Volksparteien in Germany (CDU/CSU and SPD) towards the AfD, whose trajectory went from a Eurosceptic and liberal market-oriented party to one that can be counted among the radical RRP family (Arzheimer, 2015). These parties, established in many Western European democracies and with notable recent electoral success, have been found to be moving more readily along the sociocultural,

rather than economic political dimension (McGann and Kitschelt, 2005; van der Brug et al., 2005).

Our analysis finds general motivations for voting for the AfD to be connected to some demographic variables, such as sex, voting in Eastern German states and holding a university degree. Additionally, greater preference for anti-immigration policies and holding more Eurosceptic attitudes were the primary drivers of AfD vote. When considering motivations only for voters who moved away from the two German mainstream parties (CDU/CSU and SPD), being a man and holding a university degree were significant predictors of such behaviour. For this group of voters, however, self-assessed perceived ideological distance from their previous party was a strong indicator of AfD support, albeit on the 'progressive–conservative' axis for former CDU/CSU voters and the 'left–right' axis for SPD defectors. Moreover, disagreement between voters and their former party on immigration and EU-related policies fostered defection to the AfD. Although we find that discrepancies in other policy domains also mattered (on redistribution and state control policies for CDU/CSU and on holding progressive values for the SPD), these did so to a lesser extent.

We propose then that the future of the AfD is likely to, at least partially, depend on the reaction of the two Volksparteien to its electoral success and the perception among the electorate of their ability and willingness to address specific concerns, most importantly immigration. Commenting on a similar situation in 2009, Kurella and Pappi noted the established parties having failed to address similar concerns, it became impossible for their voters to 'base their vote decision on the immigration issue, as there is [was] no party representing their position' (2015: 99). Although it is difficult to forecast whether the representational gap at the conservative end of the sociocultural axis can be closed by any policy changes (or if CDU/CSU is willing to make such as an effort), centre–right parties in other contexts have been shown to do better in elections when they respond to such crises by adopting or strengthening anti-immigration and nationalist discourses, particularly if they are perceived to be better able to deliver the relevant policies (Bale and Krouwel, 2013; Ivarsflaten, 2005). Provided then that the more acute phase of the crisis of the day begins to subside, the ability of the AfD to attract new voters and sustain its current level of support might be dependent more on the ability of the established political system to address the relevant issues, rather than actions of the AfD itself.

Finally, we note a series of limitations that need to be taken into account when interpreting these results, the most straightforward one being that while we refer to voter decisions for the 2017 election, we measure vote 'intention' with no avenue to ascertain that users who declared 'vote intention' for the AfD followed through with this decision. We maintain, however, that declaring support for a party close to the elections is an interesting phenomenon in and of itself. Less easy to dismiss are concerns regarding our

sample having been obtained through a VAA. VAAs by nature tend to attract politically interested individuals, thus making it difficult to avoid the insinuation that any findings on this basis only relate to them rather than the general (voting) population. This could be the case here as is discernible in the distribution of the 'interest in politics' variable (see Online supplemental material V), which, although not as unbalanced in terms of 'somewhat' and 'fairly' interested individuals, as in other VAA cases, suggests important under-representation of less politically inclined individuals from what can be guessed from probability-based samples. However, in the absence of reliable estimates from the population, we elected not to weight to this variable. As such, the findings reported here carry the aforementioned caveat, and in a more than usually pronounced fashion, given the rather small sample size for a VAA. Still, we trust that VAA data and the data set employed here can be useful in offering insights concerning voting behaviour, particularly of niche subsegments of the electorate which are difficult to obtain, as in this case. Finally, the interested reader is invited to review the operationalization of the variables used as predictors in the reported models, particularly as this concerns the calculation of factor scores for the policy-related items and what the substantive meaning of each factor is (Online supplemental material IIIb¹⁵).

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. The CSU is a party that operates only in Bavaria but forms a common party group in the Bundestag with its larger counterpart, the CDU. The CSU is considered more conservative and located to the right of the CDU in the political spectrum.
2. For example, 'In the future, there should be a ban on diesel and petrol cars'.
3. Our original intent was to also include education in the weighting parameters; however, the joint distribution of sex,

- age, state and education was not available through census data, see <https://www-genesis.destatis.de> ‘Current updating of population figures (code:12411)’.
4. As a consequence, Voting Advice Application users under the age of 22 were excluded from our analysis, as they were not eligible to vote in the previous election.
 5. Online supplemental materials along with replication files are available through dataverse.harvard.edu here: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FH8PEW>
 6. Ibid.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Ibid.
 9. See <https://www.chesdata.eu/1999-2014-chapel-hill-expert-survey-ches-trend-file-1>.
 10. Online supplemental materials along with replication files are available through dataverse.harvard.edu here: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FH8PEW>
 11. For example, ‘Asylum seekers and applicants who have been rejected should be deported, including to Afghanistan’.
 12. For example, ‘German membership in the European Union is a good thing’.
 13. For example, ‘It should be harder for companies to lay off people’.
 14. For example, ‘Top earners ought to be taxed with higher rates’.
 15. Online supplemental materials along with replication files are available through dataverse.harvard.edu here: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/FH8PEW>
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