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From the Margins to the Mainstream:
Rise of Right-Wing Parties in Modern Germany

Valerie Shatilov
International Studies : European Track

Abstract

Modern political discourse rarely makes room for right-wing parties and extremist ideology. They are overlooked, not taken into consideration and disregarded as sources of significant political change. In this thesis, it will be important to look at what constitutes a right-wing party, what their main and uniting ideologies are in order to understand the type of interaction these marginalized parties have with the mainstream and the public. Their newly revived presence in the news and with several upcoming elections in countries like the US, France and Germany is concerning to politicians and scholars because it is unprecedented that such parties garner such extensive support. What lends to this change in modern politics? Is rightist presence something that will soon be normalized or will they simply recede back to the margins? This thesis will lend to this conversation by identifying and deconstructing the relationship between the margins and mainstream to predict the longevity of right-wing parties.

Introduction

In modern political discourse, right-wing parties and rightist ideology are often an afterthought; something discussed quickly and left on the margins. In the past, such parties were overlooked because they posed no legitimate threat to the sovereignty of a country. Their popularity increased and fell, their harsh words reached many, but not all stood up to support them. The presence of right-wing parties, while constant in some European countries, is not considered important or conducive to mainstream politics.

In the past few decades, however, and regardless of whether right-wing parties have been considered a legitimate threat by scholars or politicians, presence of rightist ideology has grown more prevalent in political discourse. In Germany, there are records of increased violence and protest in response to presence of foreigners, predominantly Muslim immigrants, which have marked the seriousness of modern right-wing rhetoric. Since 2013, and more specifically since the beginning of the European Refugee Crisis, right-wing parties have burst into the scene with new force and vigor. Long past are the days of preaching to small audiences and being left outside the political scene. Parties in France, Germany and Austria are making great strides in becoming more mainstream and their rhetoric and political discourse more normalized.

What is it that helps right-wing parties acquire such influence over communities that they gain seats in parliament, challenge the political landscape of their respective country and garner support of people who, ten or twenty years ago, would have never voted for a rightist representative? Is it the longstanding presence of immigrants in a highly nationalistic country, a nation that places much emphasis or importance on a unifying national identity, or the disappointment in policies enacted by the government? In this thesis, I will attempt to answer these questions and determine whether there is a correlation between the political actions the

mainstream party takes and how that corresponds with the political agenda and demands of right-wing parties. The analysis of the interaction between the government and right-wing parties will be conducted in order to determine whether popularity and longevity stems from this phenomenon. It will be important to first discuss the kind of research done on modern right-wing parties, which are parties formed after WWII, in order to understand their political stance, their presence on the political field and their influence over communities.

Literature Review

Right-wing parties and rightist sentiment are nothing new to Germany and Europe post-1945. From the atrocities of Nazis during WWII to the longstanding presence of National Democratic Party of Germany, founded in 1962, and Die Republikaner, founded in 1983, until the early 2000s, politicians could never truly write far-right ideology out of German history. Regardless of actions taken by the German government in the post-1945 era, like banning of anti-democratic parties and organizations through the creation of the Grundgesets in 1949 in FRG and including anti-fascist policies in GDR's constitution in 1968¹, right wing parties continued to have followers, though not a significant say in national politics and never enough to become part of the Bundestag. Democratic governments heavily monitored and restricted right-wing activity in an attempt to prevent conflict and the possibility of right-wing insurgence. After 1945, right-wing parties have faced hostile conditions when attempting to make significant impact and get seats in parliament or win substantial influence in the government. Furthermore, right wing sentiment was not limited to Germany, but parties with similar ideologies began to form in France, Netherlands, Italy, Greece and Belgium during periods of economic stagnation and migration.

In recent years, though, right wing parties and movements are reaching more people in German society, and as recent polls show, these ideologies appeal to men and women of difference classes and education levels. In order to understand the prevalence and impact of right-wing parties in modern political discourse, it is important to note the main topics discussed when writing about right-wing parties. Therefore, the next three sections will discuss their core ideologies, popularity within society and under what circumstances they form and rise. It is also

¹ Susann Backer, "Right-wing Extremism in Unified Germany," *The Politics of the Extreme Right: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. Paul Hainsworth (London: Pinter, 2000), 87.

important to define critical terms in the right-wing discourse. In this piece, right-wing parties and radical right parties are describing political groups that share anti-immigrant, xenophobic, racist and ultra-nationalistic sentiment.

Core Ideologies

What characterizes a right wing party, what core ideologies separate them from other political parties? On the political spectrum, right-wing parties belong to the radical and conservative end. According to Selcen Öner, a Turkish professor of EU relations, these types of parties are “against pluralist democracy” and support the promotion of “‘traditional’ moral and religious values.”² Instead of a “pluralist democracy”, rightists propose an authoritarian or totalitarian form of government³ and the ‘traditional’ values often include anti-marriage equality and anti-women’s rights attitudes. The return to ‘tradition’ is frequently seen as an attempt to reconnect to “myths about the distant past” through these policies and ethno-nationalism⁴, which is a type of nationalism where the nation and nationality is defined through a shared ethnicity and heritage.

Xenophobia, racism and anti-immigrant sentiment goes hand in hand with the traditional values and the rejection of a pluralist democracy. In an academic article describing the presence of right-wing parties in Germany and Austria, Öner focused on how-right wing parties have adapted to modern issues. She notes that, “in recent years, especially in Western Europe, the primary focus of far-right parties has been radical Islam, followed by immigration, which they link to security, particularly to crime and terrorism.” Furthermore, she adds that another issue brought up by rightists is the impact of migrants on the economy, as immigration is “seen as a

² Selcen Öner, "Different Manifestations of the Rise of the Far-Right in European Politics: The Cases of Germany and Austria," *Marmara Journal of European Studies* 22 (2014), 88.

³ Backer, 88.

⁴ Jens Rydgren, "The Sociology of the Radical Right," *Annu. Rev. Sociol. Annual Review of Sociology* 33.1 (2007), 242.

threat to the wealth and welfare of the nation.”⁵ By basing their political agenda on such ideologies, they separate themselves from center and leftist groups that predominantly focus on individuals and inclusion of different peoples in society. Right-wing parties envision a government that “takes the shape of a unitary party or an elite which claims to represent all sectors of society and governs in the common interest of the national community.”⁶ Through this type of representation, rightist seek to restore national unity and stability.

A joining, core ideology that recent right-wing parties share is that immigrants do more harm than good to the economy and society. In his piece about the sociology of the radical right, Jens Rydgren, a Swedish political commentator and a professor of sociology, deconstructed this base ideology into four arguments used by rightist politicians. He states that immigrants are a national and cultural threat, they are a threat to “ethno-national identity”, they threaten the safety of societies and that they put a strain the welfare system that Western democracies provide.⁷ By severely restricting flow of migrants, a nation will preserve its homogeneity and strengthen its identity and core values. Whether it is through nationalistic/anti-globalism policies or the emphasis on the goals of the nation, or of the system as a whole, while forgoing individual rights, the “new radical right wing parties share a core of ethno-nationalist xenophobia and antiestablishment populism.”⁸ In his study, Rydgren also includes the theory of Michael Minkenberg, a professor of political science the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt, which states that the rise of new radical right-wing parties can be understood as a desire to overturn social changes associated with modernization.⁹ In this context, modernization is defined

⁵ Öner, 89.

⁶ Backer, 88.

⁷ Rydgren, 244.

⁸ Rydgren, 242.

⁹ Rydgren, 248.

as "a growing autonomy of the individual (status mobility and role flexibility) and ongoing functional differentiation of the society (segmentation and growing autonomy of societal subsystems)."¹⁰ Additionally, these groups also stand against modern democratic governments and want to either reform them or dismantle them in favor of authoritarian regimes. Furthermore, the reason why people struggle against modernization and side with right-wing parties is because people do not feel comfortable in a modernizing society¹¹ and rightists promise to focus more on national-centric needs.

However, what are these policies based on? Where does the xenophobia and racism stem from? According to Susann Backer, a lecturer in European politics, right-wing politicians share a belief "in social, political and often also genetic human inequality, based on criteria such as nationality, race and social background."¹² A grand departure from political norms and the preferred ideologies of center and leftist groups, right-wing parties claim to represent the true feelings of citizens who do not benefit from current government regimes. Those who flock to the right often find themselves underrepresented by the government and unhappy with how it deals with influx of immigrants and preservation of a unifying, national identity. They attempt to find representation and support from parties that speak out on behalf of those who feel marginalized. Much like the right-wing parties themselves, it is easier to identify with those remaining in the margins and those who harbor similar concerns regarding immigration, which are fueled by racism and xenophobia, and availability of jobs. Furthermore, in her work, Backer highlights an important new trend in recent right-wing activity. Extremist parties have moved away from

¹⁰ Michael Minkenberg, "The West European Radical Right as a Collective Actor: Modeling the Impact of Cultural and Structural Variables on Party Formation and Movement Mobilization," *Comparative European Politics* 1.2 (2003), 151.

¹¹ Rydgren, 248.

¹² Backer, 88.

“genetic racism” and now incorporate a “cultural racism” rhetoric that is based on cultural differences and that is easier to defend and to argue against accusations of prejudice and xenophobia.¹³

Popularity

Until recently, right-wing parties have been kept on the fringes of government by political parties in power and by laws enacted against the extremist and racist policies. This, however, does not deter people from supporting and rallying for these parties. Furthermore, it is always reassuring that the politicians share one’s ideas and concerns and promise to fulfill them once in power. Popularity in the last two decades has also jumped significantly for right-wing parties. According to Öner, “electoral support for far-right parties increased significantly across Western Europe during the 1990s, as rising immigration, unemployment and economic stagnation provided a conducive environment for their discourse.”¹⁴ Historically, Europe had homogenous societies and large-scale immigration to the continent only recently became a widespread phenomenon. In order to manage the influx of migrants that come to economically stable countries like France, Germany, Austria and the UK, politicians offer resolutions to curb the flow and integrate new comers while reassuring citizens of national strength. The problems that are not solved and if any issues arise with immigrants, whether it is a crime committed by a foreigner or tension regarding integration, right-wing politicians use these things against current governments in order to show their incompetence and uncover flaws in modern democracy. Criticizing main political parties, while doing so publicly, is a tactic that appeals to supporters and generates a certain level of distrust within communities “as they have become more

¹³ Backer, 111.

¹⁴ Öner, 88.

attractive to electorates dissatisfied with mainstream political parties.”¹⁵ Departing from Susann Backer’s argument that extremist parties rebuke current governments and strive for authoritarian regimes, Öner proposes that “in contrast to the fascist parties of the interwar years, today’s far-right parties usually accept representative democracy while criticising liberal values.”¹⁶ The step away from totalitarianism may signify an attempt to make certain proposals less extreme in order to garner more support and appeal to those weary of extremist ideologies. However, the appeal of right-wing parties lies in their dismissal of liberal rhetoric and direct criticism of current politics and the “softer” façade may simply be temporary.

A tactic that has not changed however is playing on people’s fears and frustrations. For example, a common argument is that immigrants will come and take away jobs from citizens. In most cases, the jobs that will be taken away are lower-level jobs, usually available for poor, working class people. Therefore, fear of economic disadvantage remains an important factor when supporting right-wing parties. As Katja Neller and S. Isabell Thaidigsmann, a social and economic scientist and a political sociology lecturer, state, extremist parties “are in favor of an “economic nationalism” and use the related topics...for generating and reinforcing people’s fear of losing wealth or being disadvantaged.”¹⁷ Although no definite proof in research has been proposed by scholars, rightists utilize such ideas to distress potential followers and gain their support through promises of stricter border control and naturalization processes.

What other modern factors influence right-wing support and transfer of ideas and rhetoric? Internet in the modern age is used as a platform for the promotion and spread of

¹⁵ Öner, 88.

¹⁶ Öner, 88.

¹⁷ Katja Neller, S. Isabell Thaidigsmann, "Right Wing Parties and Euroscepticism in France and Germany," *Euroscepticism: Images of Europe among Mass Publics and Political Elites*. Ed. Dieter Fuchs, Raul Magni-Berton, and Antoine Roger, (Opladen: Barbara Budrich 2009), 218.

policies and ideas. Finding support is no longer difficult with social media, like Twitter and Facebook, and creating a website is one of the easiest ways to advertise and promote the goals and values of a political party. Easy and quick accessibility facilitates support and “increasing transnational cooperation among far-right parties in Europe”¹⁸

Rise and Prevalence

One of the other main topics scholars focus on is the rise of right-wing parties. Under which circumstances do they become popular and mainstream? Who supports them and why? These questions are often the center of academic work regarding rightist parties. Research regarding core ideologies is consistent throughout academia, but the reasons behind rightist popularity differ depending on the study. Recent works have shown that by challenging major Social Democratic Parties in their respective countries, right-wing ideology attracts “working-class voters, who have traditionally supported the centre-left, which may also facilitate the formation of centre-right governments.”¹⁹ While it is difficult for right-wing groups to find support within the government, they often focus on rallying the people in order to highlight the discontentment that mainstream parties in power ignore. The rift between government and working-class citizens grows because of chronic underrepresentation, globalization and the move of jobs overseas and the competition for work on a national level with immigrants. For example, both the Front National and the National Democratic Party of Germany have used such tactics to garner supporters. In France in the 80s and 90s, FN cautioned against the influx of migrants from former French colonies, like Algeria, and demanded strengthening French identity in order to preserve French culture and nationality. Similarly, the NPD used the same ideas in the 90s after

¹⁸ Öner, 93.

¹⁹ Öner, 94.

the fall of the Berlin Wall, during a wave of right-wing populist sentiment, to dissuade people from supporting relaxed immigration policies.

However, not all scholars agree that right-wing parties become prominent when the working class fears competition for job availability with migrants. While it is a common theory, research and statistics do not always support it. In his research, using this information in order to evaluate proper conditions for right-wing dominance, Rydgren concludes with two hypotheses. He identifies two common theories: “that radical right-wing parties will be more successful in areas with many immigrants... and that the new radical right-wing parties will be supported foremost by voters who are more likely to be confronted by competition from immigrants, that is, by lower-educated, unskilled, male voters who aspire to the same jobs and consumption as most immigrant groups in Western Europe.”²⁰ While some research supports these hypotheses, Rydgren states that more thorough research needs to be done in order to determine more concretely what the relationship is between ethnic-heterogeneity and electoral success of right-wing parties.²¹ However, there is a uniting commonality in support for non-leftist or centrist parties: need for security. According to Ronald Inglehart, a political scientist, “relatively secure people are likely to be more tolerant and to be more supportive of democracy than are less secure people.”²² Since right-wing parties lean towards nationalistic and authoritarian forms of government, people who feel economically or financially insecure, or even insecure about changing ethnic demographics, might support those who challenge democratic rule and policies, since mass support and confidence in democracies have experienced a dip in the recent years.²³

²⁰ Rydgren, 250.

²¹ Rydgren, 251.

²² Ronald F. Inglehart, "How Much Should We Worry?" *Journal of Democracy* 27.3 (2016), 20.

²³ Inglehart, 18.

Recent studies, however, show that the correlation between the number of migrants in an area and popularity of right-wing parties is stronger due to the ongoing European Refugee Crisis. The recent rise of right-wing parties in Germany are attributed to the influx of Muslim refugees from war-torn Middle-Eastern countries and poverty-stricken North African countries. Many of these migrants come to Germany to make it their new home, find jobs and resettle their families, and extremist parties fear threats to national security and shifts in national identity. Right-wing populist parties have revamped their rhetoric and approach to modern international and national issues.

Recent Developments and the European Refugee Crisis

Two topics that have not been covered in depth are whether mainstream parties adjust to demands from the right and the longevity of the parties' presence on the political field. While scholars' regularly research core ideologies and telltale signs of when they will be resurfacing, though scholars have not agreed on a definite sign, whether right-wing parties are bound to eventually linger or find a permanent spot in current politics has yet to be discussed in-depth. Perhaps due to the inconsistency of right-wing popularity in polls, brief moments of power in the mainstream, or the strength of centrist and leftist politics and ideologies, rightists would rarely linger in the news. With an ongoing refugee crisis, however, immigration policies and people's opinions regarding migrants are bound to change due to the seriousness of the situation. In this paper, one of the main discussions will be whether right-wing parties are here to stay or if they will lose popularity as the Crisis continues. Furthermore, in order to add to the discourse, this paper will evaluate the relationship between the actions a government takes regarding main issues that right-wing parties are representing, in this paper it will be the presence of immigrants, and if these connections will play a role in their legitimacy and longevity. Does ignoring the

demands and presence of a right-wing party have any influence on its popularity and hold on disgruntled citizens?

This issue has only begun to appear in academic articles and newspaper sources since the Syrian Refugee Crisis started. The political party that has caught the most attention and that is often mentioned is Alternative for Germany. The AfG is a young party, formed in 2013, and most information about it can be found in news articles and their website. Many scholars, however, who write and study the right of the political spectrum note that growing support for this party in a stable democratic country is unusual. The popularity is attributed to the recent and sudden decline in public support of the open door policy. Following terrorist attacks in Paris, Nice and Orlando, fear of ISIS has inspired criticism of Merkel's policies and her plans regarding the future of Germany. Furthermore, the sexual assaults that happened on New Year's Eve in Cologne and various other cities have sparked a massive debate about deportation of migrants that break laws and create unrest, and about German values versus the values of migrants seeking asylum. AfG use these types of events to highlight the incompatibility of German ideals and the ideals held by many Muslim refugees. The right-wing populist rhetoric that the party proposes does not shy away from nationalism, but rather utilizes the idea of the "Volk", or the people, to gain supporters. One of their main arguments is that national, German identity is under attack by Merkel's open door policy and the overwhelming presence of foreigners.

The widespread jump in popularity of a radical political agenda is not only limited to Germany. Support for Alternative for Germany is indicative of the growing discontentment with Merkel's immigration policy and the idea of integrating Muslim refugees. The rise in popularity in parties with similar agendas, for example, Golden Dawn in Greece, Jobbik in Hungary and the

Front National in France symbolize a new political trend that emerged with the ongoing Refugee crisis. Many news sources, like The New York Times, Deutsche Welle, Le Monde, feature articles regarding the refugee flow, their major destinations and humanitarian aid available in camps. In addition, a more popular subject has emerged with upcoming European elections: prevalence of right-wing parties in local governments. With news article being published with titles such as “A Mass Migration Crisis, and it May Yet Get Worse” and “The 5 Big Questions about Europe’s Migrant Crisis”, it is no surprise that they are often accompanied with articles titled “Germany’s Embrace of Migrants Spawns Rise of Far-Right Leader” and “Germany, Eurabia & the End of Europe.” The prolonged presence of right-wing parties is not only becoming a mainstream, newsworthy topic, but it is also putting pressure on centrists and liberals to maintain their preeminence in European politics.

Methodology

Since the European Refugee Crisis began, the international community has put much pressure on Germany to deal with the influx of immigrants and provide them with asylum. The presence of migrants, however, was first met with acceptance and understanding. Germans welcomed refugees with clothes and toys for the children at the train stations. Following subsequent terrorist attacks in Europe and the US that have been linked to ISIS, as well as numerous sexual assaults during the New Year's celebrations, which have been associated by the public with newly arrived refugees, attitudes shifted drastically towards the negative. Right-wing parties, in this case, Alternative for Germany, have used people's discontentment to boost their popularity and appeal. In this paper, in order to explain the inexplicable popularity of right-wing parties across generations and societal levels and the longevity of rightist rhetoric, it will be important to compare two periods in time when rightist ideology and sentiment made a significant impact on German politics.

The first period of analysis will be from 1990-2002 and the right-wing party that will be discussed is the National Democratic Party of Germany. Before the European Refugee Crisis and the formation of the AfG, the NPD came onto the political stage during and following the unification of Germany and the influx of immigrants from third-world countries. Similarly, to the current situation, the party sought to influence immigration policy and demanded to curb the flow of foreigners in fear of multiculturalism and threats to national identity. While not all immigrants that came to Germany were refugees, and certainly not as many came during the allocated span of time, the situation led to rightist popularity in polls at a time of increased immigration. The analysis will first focus on what led to the party's popularity, which will include main messages and ideologies that rightists will be defending in public. If there are any

legitimate interactions with the German government, they will be discussed as well in order to put right-wing parties into mainstream politics in relation to other, legitimate parties. Then, it will focus on the decline in popularity of NPD and if these findings can predict the decline of AfG or explain their potential longevity in modern politics.

The second period of analysis will be from 2013 to the present. This period includes the formation of Alternative for Germany and the beginning of the European Refugee Crisis. It also includes a pivotal shift in German politics and political sentiment that illustrates the discontentment of citizens with Merkel's current policies, and the growing fear of terrorist attacks and islamophobia. The trend of supporting right-wing parties that has spread to many European countries will help to better understand the relationship between society and government in time of mass migration.

The independent variable in this paper will be actions taken by the government and mainstream parties in power when there is an influx of predominantly Muslim refugees from war-torn countries into Europe. This variable will be measured by reviewing and determining official political policy, laws and statements made by politicians against or for curbing flow of immigrants and political asylum, naturalization, status of immigrants/refugees. Also, statistics made by the German government will be used, if needed, regarding how many displaced people that fall into this category have entered the country in the allocated time periods.

The dependent variable is the support of right wing parties by the public. This variable will be measured by looking at the right-wing parties' responses to government's immigration policies and the shifts in public opinion regarding how well the government is dealing with the influx of migrants. Other indicators will be public polls and surveys taken during the appropriate periods that reflect public opinion about political action and presence of immigrants/ refugees.

Therefore, in order to perform the analyses, the sources that will be used are academic journals, books, news articles, and statistical data from both time periods, as well as political platforms and websites to assess the plans and main messages of right-wing parties. The limitations of this study is the lack of research done on the longevity of rightist ideology and the scarcity of sources on AfG and the increased support for rightist ideology in Germany since 2013. Many scholars focus on rightist ideology and explain its popularity with certain classes of people, yet there is little discourse about the possible, long-term and legitimate presence of right-wing parties in modern politics. The reason for such absence is the fact that most parties' popularity rises and falls in cycles. These cycles, according to scholars, are predictable and after public support wanes, right-wing parties return to the margins. Furthermore, there is little academic information on AfG, their policies and influence because they are a young party and most information about it can be found in the news or on their website. Academic work on their policies is also limited because they have not made any grand or monumental actions that have made a significant impact on current immigration policy in Germany. In the next section, two instances will be deconstructed and compared in order to see what the relationship is between the interaction between centrist or leftist parties and right-wing parties and if it has any bearing on the rise or decline of the support of rightist groups.

Case Study 1: NPD from 1990-2002

The National Democratic Party of Germany was established in 1964 and was in many instances considered the party that would reinvigorate right-wing sentiment in West Germany. After many years of fluctuating support and remaining on the margins of national politics, party found itself in a new position after the Berlin Wall fell and the East and West united at a time of international turmoil. The Cold War was coming to an end and people, particularly within Germany, were waiting for an economic boom. Citizens and politicians hoped that the unification of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) would lead to economic prosperity, increased standard of living and decrease of unemployment. The Unification, however, did not result in increased prosperity, but in increased pressure from the public on the government for the issues surrounding the dissolution of GDR. From 1990-2002, when Germany was facing an economic and national identity crisis, the NPD found supporters in communities most disillusioned with current events, such as the poorer-working class. In this section, the immigrants that will be discussed are from foreign countries, particularly Turkey, and East Germans moving into western Germany will not be discussed.

Political Platform

NPD's political platform from 1990-2002 is consistent with usual rightist ideology, but with greater emphasis on economic issues. This is a departure from their previous, main rhetoric, which was concerned more with the preservation of the legacy of certain aspects of the Third Reich, in particular, recovering lost territories after the defeat of Axis powers.²⁴ In the 1990s, NPD was no longer concerned with finding scapegoats for the failures of the Nazi regime or

²⁴ John D. Nagle, "The National Democratic Party; Right Radicalism in the Federal Republic of Germany," (Berkeley: U of California, 1970), 69-70.

glorifying the past.²⁵ NPD's more commonly recognized rhetoric, however, is directed towards an economic threat posed by immigrants and a critique of the German government, which is similar to rightist political agenda and tactics in the 21st century.

The major change in their political platform occurred in the 1990s, following the economic failure of the Unification and increased number of immigrants arriving in Germany. The NPD altered their main program and internal structure in order to gain more followers following a dip in popularity. The party adopted a "militant campaign based around social issues"²⁶ and began scapegoating immigrants, particularly Turkish migrant workers, of unavailability of work and increased unemployment. A specific target, like the federal governments inability to bolster the economy, allowed NPD to focus their political platform on what they considered as injustice to the German state, which they also vowed to restore and improve.

Popularity

While right-wing parties often found support, even if minimal, in Europe, Germany had and has its fair share of rightist outlets that are often covered by the news. After WWII, rightist ideology fell out of favor with many sympathizers, as it became unpopular, frowned upon and censored by the government. Therefore, even if right-wing parties remained, there was never enough support to gain enough seats in parliament to make significant changes to policies. The strength of the NPD, however, lay with attracting and unifying young right-wing voters by becoming an umbrella party for many, much smaller and politically insignificant parties and groups.²⁷ In the time frame of this case study, the largest jump in membership occurred between

²⁵ Nagle, 73.

²⁶ Backer, 92.

²⁷ Backer, 92.

1996 and 1997, increasing from 3,500 members to 4,300.²⁸ Compared to Die Republikaner, a conservative, anti-immigrant party that had twice as many members in the same period, NPD was much smaller, but managed to start a new wave of rightist sentiment that returned right-wing ideology back to the mainstream despite size and the lack of political momentum in parliament. Furthermore, NPD's uniting ability also highlighted the potency of rightist ideology and how attractive certain beliefs are to marginalized, anxious and working class members.

Interaction with Government

One of the main things that separates right-wing parties from leftist parties, is the kind of interaction they have with the main government. In the post-1945 era, right-wing parties were marginalized, their ideology condemned and their propaganda censored. This, however, did not prevent NPD from receiving support from citizens and challenging the national political agenda. Following the increased number of asylum seekers, right-wing parties reemerged on the political stage. In 1992, 438, 191 people sought asylum in Germany. That same year, there was an increase in hostility towards foreigners, particularly those from third-world countries. According to Backer's research, "51 percent of eastern Germans and 60 percent of western Germans favoured the return of foreigners to their country of origin" and that "70 percent of eastern Germans and 60 percent of western Germans felt that there was a need for constitutional change in order to revise the status of immigrants."²⁹ There was also a notable increase in the support for right-wing parties at this time, about 37 percent of the entire German population sympathized with "right-wing extremist tendencies" due the increased number of immigrants and the government's attitude towards asylum seekers.³⁰

²⁸ Backer, 100.

²⁹ Backer, 108-109.

³⁰ Backer, 109.

Despite supporters and increased pressure on the national government, the NPD did not get close to any direct, political interaction with main political parties at the time, like the *Christian Democratic Union* of Germany or the Social Democrats. Regardless, the political agenda was altered in order to appease and subdue unhappy citizens, who most likely favored a rightist agenda. The result of this tension was a new asylum law that was passed in July of 1993. It consisted of three sections that had revised the status of immigrants and introduced stricter guidelines to asylum seekers who wanted to live in Germany.³¹ According data provided by Backer in her research, following the new asylum law in 1993, membership for NPD fell from 5,000 to 3,830 members in 1994, suggesting a correlation between the involvement of main political parties' in immigration policy and the increase or decrease of public support for right-wing ideology.

Rise or Decline in Popularity?

When economic and immigration issues were resolved by the German government, support of NPD and other right-wing parties declined. Although unified Germany did not experience the economic boom that it had hoped for, the economy gradually began to improve. More jobs became available, the immigration restrictions remained and right-wing parties gradually lost support and began returning to the margins. Regardless, membership increased since 1997. In 2000, there were 6,500 members, which was a 500-person increase since the previous year and a significant increase since the mid-1990.³² While there is no record of NPD's direct influence over the political agenda, and the steps taken by the leftist parties to curb the influx of immigrants, the party became associated mostly with right-wing extremist violence,

³¹ Backer, 109-110.

³² Merkl, 226.

skinheads and drop-outs, or people who failed to belong to any single group.³³ Furthermore, NPD remained popular in eastern parts of Germany, while the West had right-wing parties of their own that did not wish to assimilate or unite. NPD's militarized members and association with violent acts failed to interest even those with xenophobic or nationalist sentiment.

By the mid-2000s, NPD had undergone a changed in party structure and poor political planning and the party could not remain united under one, coherent policy. In 2001, the federal government had attempted to ban the party through the Federal Constitutional Court, though it did not succeed, it was a clear sign that rightist politics would no longer be tolerated. In ten years, and come the European Refugee Crisis, the German federal government led by Merkel, would not have the same luck and strength to keep at bay rightist sentiment from coming to the surface by their rhetoric, despite their more conservative stance in politics. The Christian Democratic Union will be at the forefront of dealing with the immigration policy and maintaining peace and unity within the government and society.

Case Study 2: Alternative for Germany from 2013-Present

Alternative for Germany was established in 2013 as an anti-euro party that opposed Angela Merkel's handling of the euro crisis.³⁴ What initially was a movement mainly concerned with economic and financial setbacks, quickly turned into a small, yet influential party aiming to get seats in Germany's state parliaments and the national government. Unlike the NPD, which took other, smaller right-wing parties and rogue extremists under their wing, AfG belongs to the new wave of right-wing parties. They have a definite rhetoric which appeals to a wide array of people, they do not strive to accommodate other extremist parties and they directly attack any

³³ Merkl, 226.

³⁴ Melanie Amann, Jan Friedmann, Nils Minkmar, Michael Sauga, and Steffen Winter, "Inside Germany's Dangerous New Populist Party," *Spiegel*. N.p., 10 Feb. 2016. Web. 10 Nov. 2016.

policies the government enacts that does not meet their demands. For example, AfG's focus switched to immigration, Islam and national identity after the European Refugee Crisis began. At first, the party's presence was met with distrust and suspicion because it came at a time when Merkel's immigration policy was warmly welcomed. However, as this section will show, attitudes have changed dramatically and allowed the AfG to find a legitimate place in Germany's political landscape.

Political Platform

According to research, what makes AfG popular is not simply their rightist ideology, which includes strict anti-immigrant rhetoric and nationalistic values, but their definitive stance against Merkel's government and policies. Although it was founded to be an anti-euro party, it has clearly switched their main focus in order to appeal more to distressed communities and deal with an issue that has not left many indifferent. The spreading fear of 'islamisation' is influencing people, and not only in Germany, to support right-wing parties in the hopes of curbing the flow of Muslim immigrants. AfG proposes introducing stricter border controls, "vetting of claims in countries of origin that are deemed "safe"" and adopting an anti-Islam policy.³⁵ Therefore, many of their policies suggest limiting multiculturalism and the preservation of German monoculturalism. Furthermore, AfG is concerned with the national, German identity, which they claim has no room for Muslim practices and beliefs.³⁶ They do, however, make room for "moderate" Muslims, which they define as those who accept integration.

Alternative for Germany also plays on German peoples' fears about the influx of different cultures, ideology and customs that has come with the 1 million refugees that have entered Germany. Will these people assimilate? Will they learn the German language? How will

³⁵ "What Does Alternative for Germany (AfD) Want?" *BBC*. N.p., 5 Sept. 2016. Web. 10 Nov. 2016.

³⁶ "What Does Alternative for Germany (AfD) Want?"

poor, Muslim men from Syria and other Middle Eastern and African countries treat German women? Where will they live and which jobs will they work? These questions are at the center of AfG and the main concerns of people they claim to represent. Members and followers used these questions to rile up other people and fight for a movement that is primarily based on nationalism, patriotism and the idea that Germany is for German people only.

Popularity

Similarly, to Donald J. Trump's popularity in the United States, Alternative for Germany's success lies in "breaking open a political dialogue and liberating a new and pluralist — critics say racist — language in the mainstream."³⁷ The new wave of populism that is concerning many centrist and leftist politicians is appealing to a more diverse group of people. The manner in which AfG leader, Frauke Petry, speaks of the European Refugee Crisis and vows to deal with issues surrounding integration and influx control appeals to those that feel underrepresented by Merkel's government. Furthermore, the ERC is an event that illustrates the worries of a growing number of people Germany and a shift in the expectations people have of their governments. It also reflects the disappointment of the current government regime and the political decisions made by Merkel. There is a rift in popularity, however, that is present because AfG caters better to former East German areas than to West Germany: in March of 2016, "support for the Alternative for Germany now nears 20 percent — about double that in the west."³⁸

The most significant jump in popularity happened after recent and most unfortunate terrorist attacks in Europe. The sexual assaults and robberies that happened throughout Germany

³⁷ Alison Smale, "Germany's Embrace of Migrants Spawns Rise of Far-Right Leader," *New York Times*. N.p., 9 Mar. 2016. Web.

³⁸ Smale, "Germany's Embrace of Migrants Spawns Rise of Far-Right Leader."

on New Year's have also been used by right-wingers as an example of why the flow of refugees should be constricted and why assimilation is impossible. Citing undisputable cultural differences, one of the main messages propagated is the German culture would dwindle and be taken advantage of by people who are not concerned with respecting the culture of their host country. After the assaults and attacks, and the unclear situation with the media coverage, there was significant backlash against Merkel's immigration policy, who nevertheless insisted that her stance on refugees would remain the same.

The populist movement, with a rightist agenda, is taking place in many countries around Europe and in the US as well: the UK voting to leave the EU, Donald J. Trump winning the electoral vote in the US and the Front National making significant strides in France. Although the rise of such parties and politicians is nothing new in European countries, the power and political influence in the government has risen steady in the past couple of years. Unlike the 1990s, where most right-wing parties were banished to the margins, newly found confidence of rightist leaders is paving the way to mainstream politics.

Interaction with Government

As Alternative for Germany is not part of the Bundestag, there is no direct, political interaction with the national government. Right now, the party can reach its followers through rallies and social media, like Facebook and Twitter. According to news outlets, however, growing support is enough to put pressure on Merkel. One of the main ways that AfG is showing its capabilities of reaching out to more people and securing their votes, is doing better in elections where Merkel's party, Christian Democrats, usually prevails. This demonstrates AfG's capacity to succeed in larger scale elections. Discontentment with refugees, ongoing economic stagnation in Europe and Brexit are proving to be serious topics for all political parties involved

and each is under scrutiny by both the media and citizens. The harshest criticism is coming from AfG, as they question Merkel's leadership and the validity of the current political establishment. This tactic helps garner support when fear and frustration leads citizens away from the CDU and Merkel's policies.

AfG's influence is currently limited to state elections. For example, Merkel's party is based in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, where they have been popular for many years. In 2016, Alternative for Germany won 20.8 percent of votes in the election for the state legislature in this region. Christian Democrats, on the other hand, only won 19 percent, which is their worst result ever in this region.³⁹ While this region does not have a high population and is "politically lightweight," it proved to be a shocking blow to Merkel and her party. Alison Smale, a journalist for The New York Times, wrote that "it is the first time in an election in modern Germany that a far-right party has overtaken Ms. Merkel's bloc of Christian Democrats and their Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union."⁴⁰ Now, scholars and politicians ask whether AfG's recent successes and the Refugee Crisis are leading to a great political "overhaul," and whether right-wing policies and ideologies will have credibility and substantial support from citizens.

Rise or Decline in Popularity

According to a recent poll made by Politico, Alternative for Germany has won 16 percent of votes, which is the highest it has gotten since its formation in 2013. It has now become the third biggest party in Germany, just behind Merkel's CDU and the Social Democratic Party.⁴¹ Winning so many votes for a right-wing party is unusual, considering CDU's landslide victory in

³⁹ Geir Moulson, "Anger over Merkel's Syria Refugee Policy Drives Win for Alternative for Germany Party," *Washington Times*. N.p., 4 Sept. 2016. Web. 10 Nov. 2016.

⁴⁰ Alison Smale, "Far-Right Overtakes Angela Merkel's Bloc in Her Home State," *The New York Times*. N.p., 3 Sept. 2016. Web. 10 Nov. 2016.

⁴¹ Hortense Goulard, "Far-right AfD Hits New Highs in Germany-wide Poll," *Politico*. N.p., 23 Sept. 2016. Web. 23 Nov. 2016.

the federal elections in 2013 and the continued support of Merkel's immigration policy. The growing popularity of AfG signifies the acceptance of right-wing policies that are now much more prevalent and influential because they reach more people by social media and by newspaper coverage. Finding extremist groups is now easier than ever thanks to Twitter and Facebook. Going on a political leaders' page to read his or her comments on current events increases the accessibility of representatives. For example, Kay Nerstheimer, an AfG politician elected to Berlin's state assembly, posted many comments about Nazi Germany, islamophobia and immigrants on his Facebook page, which was available for browsing to the public and included ideas that certain followers will support, despite the nature of the content.⁴² While social media is not extensively covered in the essay, it is important to note that social media plays a significant role in the interaction between politicians and people they wish to cater to. Facebook and Twitter are platforms that can be thought of as anti-establishment because there is very little regulation and censorship, which appeals to rightists, and that by communicating through social media, they find an outlet that lies outside of regulated news sources. Furthermore, due to the recent favor of populism, certain politicians and leaders are inclined to 'say it how it is' and denounce political correctness. Perhaps triggered by Donald Trump's campaign and antics, there is a domino effect in Europe and many are no longer afraid to voice their opinions regardless of the consequences they might face. This shift in politics is spreading across the U.S. and Europe, challenging the established political order. Moreover, right-wing parties are strengthening their core ideology by ensuring consistent political rhetoric and preventing any drastic changes to party structure or member lineup.

⁴²Goulard, 2016.

Conclusion

Right-wing parties and rightist rhetoric will have a place in mainstream politics. They already do. The victory of Donald Trump in the Presidential Election of 2016 has caught everyone by surprise, even the candidate himself. The unexpected win of Alternative for Germany in a key region where Merkel's party has always prevailed has many focusing on the party more seriously now because they represent the fears and frustrations of people that feel unrepresented and ousted by the deferral government's policies. Those who feel marginalized and are disappointed with modernization or democratic governments will have a stronger incentive to venture to the right. The strides that right-wing parties are making in Europe are changing the modern political rhetoric. In Germany in particular, AfG challenging CDU is a challenge against German politics and established political orders in general. Unlike the federal government of the 1990s, which dealt with the influx of immigrants and introduced stricter immigration laws, the current government has maintained an open door policy. While it was supported by many Germans, the anxiety and fear over asylum seekers eventually changed the opinions of many people. The federal government, however, does not address or adjust to these fears or to the demands of AfG to change their policies and close the national borders, or at least change policies regarding who and how many can enter the country. This disconnect between two political groups and the citizens has led to a decline in Social Democratic rhetoric and the extended support for rightist policies. According to the research presented in this thesis, cooperation, or at least main political parties addressing issues presented by right-wing parties, is necessary if one wishes to keep rightists away from the mainstream and only limited to the margins.

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