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**The success of the AfD in East Germany.
A legacy of German unification?**

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The success of the AfD in East Germany: A legacy of German unification?

Introduction

The guiding subject of this thesis is the attempt to understand how much the recent success of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in East Germany is a late consequence of German unification or driven by those political dynamics unleashed by the long process of unification.

Since its founding in 2013, the AfD has been moving towards the summit of German politics. While not in government, recent polls, such as the ones taken by Forsa¹ at the end of 2025, have shown that they are the most popular party in Germany, and their support is still on the rise. Immigration remains the core issue of their campaign, and the ethnonationalist character of their message has caused concern among many. In this, they are not unique. In the last decade, populist movements have become extremely successful internationally. While the most notable example is the United States, nowadays every European country has its own iteration of a far-right populist contender. Some, like France's "Front National", spearheaded by the Le Pen family, have been on the political scene for decades. Others, like Italy's "la Lega" under Salvini or Geert Wilders and his "Partij voor de Vrijheid" of the Netherlands have ascended much more rapidly and are suffering equally brisk downfalls. Those who discuss and study politics have tended to describe this general shift towards populism as a single, co-ordinated event. Even Cas Mudde, author of the very definition of populism which will be used in this thesis, speaks in terms of a "populist zeitgeist"². This may be a useful and at times even necessary simplification. However, while we are witnessing a eye-raisingly successful period for populist parties, they can by no means be lumped together as one. Populism by its very nature is deeply rooted in the experiences of a particular country and a particular people, and so we must dissect every instance of this movement separately. This thesis is dedicated to the examination of a specific political party: The AfD of Germany. Its rise, characterized by an incredibly strong hold over the eastern part of the country, has been explained in multiple ways. Some claim it is the product of fundamental differences in the values and ideas

¹ "Forsa Sonntagsfrage zur Bundestagswahl 2025," Statista, accessed December 26, 2025, <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/953/umfrage/aktuelle-partiepraferenz-bei-bundestagswahl/>.

² Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," *Government and Opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541–63, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44483088>.

of East and West Germans³. Others view it as the vote of a forgotten and disadvantaged region of Germany⁴. Some chalk it up to the malcontent of the economically disadvantaged. In this thesis, we will argue that its program and history cannot be fully understood without grasping the events of German unification and their varied consequences, and that any explanation of the rise of the populist right in Germany that does not link it to this event is fundamentally incomplete.

First, we must understand where the AfD is most powerful. The party is known for its popularity in East Germany, but the depth of its popularity in the region and the bond that the party has with the East of the country can only be fully grasped through a comprehensive analysis of electoral results. Our first step will thus be to conduct a thorough electoral analysis, to discover where the AfD is most popular and which regions one should look at when attempting to explain their success. Thus, I will initially note that the AfD is not only more powerful in the East than in the West, but that it has achieved in the former an extraordinary level of support, rooting itself deeply into all socioeconomic and age levels of East German society. The AfD's level of support in East Germany is so wide-ranging that it is impossible to explain as a "conventional" electoral success. The success of the party in West Germany, especially in the most recent elections, should not be discounted. However, owing to the uniqueness of the AfD's position in the East, where it has laid its deepest roots, and to the fact that it spent many years as an almost solely East German party⁵ before spreading to the West, we decide to analyse the rise of the AfD as a primarily East German Phenomenon, and its spread to the West as a second stage which falls outside of the purview of this work.

Having narrowed down the rise of the AfD as an event distinctly localized in East Germany, we can begin asking the question of *how* it happened. This is the second step of this thesis. At this stage, we will begin a review of the relevant literature, finding in it the most relevant explanations for the success of the AfD. To facilitate our analysis, the methodology, results and relevant details of the cited studies will be discussed beforehand. This allows for a more direct analysis of the

³ Niederlassung Dresden et al., *Wert- statt Geldmangel: AfD triumphiert im Osten dort, wo es an Toleranz und Vertrauen in die Politik fehlt*, n.d.

⁴ Jennifer A. Yoder, "'Revenge of the East'?: The AfD's Appeal in Eastern Germany and Mainstream Parties' Responses," *German Politics & Society* 38, no. 2 (2020): 35–58, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48588128>.

⁵ Von Anne Hähnig, "Der Erfolg der AfD: Preußisch gemütlich," *DIE ZEIT*, September 18, 2014, <https://www.zeit.de/2014/39/afd-erfolg-junge-ostdeutsche>.

literature. We will find three fundamental theories: the theory of direct unification trauma, the representation gap theory, and the value differences theory.

- *Theory of direct unification trauma*

The first theory links the unification directly to the rise of the AfD, demonstrating how the policies of the unification have directly influenced the political affiliation of voters. This happened through the “Treuhand” program. As the economic integration of East Germany meant a shift to a free market economy, the Treuhand undertook the elimination of large amounts of public companies deemed unsalvageable and eliminated alongside their workforce. The unification acted as a clear inflection point in the lives of those affected. People with stable careers who had built a life under the German Democratic Republic (GDR) had their lives cut off by a targeted program, upheld by the Federal Republic of Germany. The fact that these firings were both wide-ranging and publicly administered, had severe effects on the ability of East Germans to trust their new state, political institutions and political parties⁶. This resulted in better results for extreme political movements. Ergo, this theory states that the rise of the AfD in East Germany is, in part, a direct consequence of voters having lived through the unification. Simply put: the unification was a traumatic event which pushed people into the hands of political extremism.

- *Representation gap theory*

The second theory is based on the distrust of political institutions. It suggests that, following the unification, East Germans saw a rapid decrease in the number of their peers in high-profile positions, and especially in politics. Political parties which were felt to effectively represent the East were lacking, and the massive job losses experienced during the unification had driven a permanent wedge between eastern Germans and the political mainstream of the Bundestag. Weary of those who had been felt to have betrayed them and unable to find another political force to call their own, the East German electorate persisted in a state of scarce representation, until the AfD was able to leverage the political void that had formed. While this “representation gap” is often discussed as a cause onto itself, it is important to note that it is intrinsically tied to the experience

⁶ “EFBI Policy Paper 2023-2: Autoritäre Dynamiken Und Die Unzufriedenheit Mit Der Demokratie - Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut,” n.d., accessed January 9, 2026, <https://efbi.de/details/efbi-policy-paper-2023-2-autoritaere-dynamiken-und-die-unzufriedenheit-mit-der-demokratie.html>.

of the unification. The distrust towards mainstream German parties as a legacy of the rapid privatisation of the East German economy as well as the inability of mainstream parties to offer effective political representation to the new federal states are direct effects of the process of German unification.

- Value differences theory

The third theory is the most commonly echoed. It states that the rise of the AfD depends on the prevalence of chauvinistic and xenophobic sentiments in the east of the country. There is ample data to support this, and it is reflected in the very programme of the party itself. Whether this is also directly linked to the experience of German unification is a more difficult question. Far-Right movements had abounded in east Germany even before the fall of the wall, and events such as the Lichtenhagen riots of 1992 show a pre-existing tendency toward extremist attitudes in the region. On the other hand, the cited studies show that xenophobic and chauvinistic sentiments were, in the years preceding the rise of the AfD, at a much lower level⁷. There are two possible explanations to this impasse. The first is that the AfD, in order to step into the previously discussed “representation gap”, appealed to a pre-existing right-wing impulse, meaning that the AfD is but the expression of a deeply held affection towards authoritarianism and hate towards foreigners. The second is that the AfD leveraged the influx of migrants in order to fashion them into a lightning rod for pre-existing anxieties about their own place in Germany. In this scenario, the AfD, having understood that their voter base feels disenfranchised and forgotten by the German establishment, begins using the issue of migration primarily to highlight the misfortune of East Germans, who, according to the AfD, fall even below the immigrants in the list of priorities of the “wealthy elites”. This second interpretation puts the emergence of chauvinism and xenophobia in the list of indirect consequences of the unification, as the product of the feeling of being “second-class citizens” which stems from the unification directly. As always, the truth is a combination of both factors. Xenophobia cannot be waved off as a simple byproduct of the unification when it has a long and bloody history in East Germany. Simultaneously, one must recognise that the combination of political marginalisation and the impression of being forgotten in favour of immigrants is bound to create tensions, which in turn cannot be properly explained without the unification.

⁷ “EFBI Policy Paper 2023-2: Autoritäre Dynamiken Und Die Unzufriedenheit Mit Der Demokratie - Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut,” n.d.

This leads to the central question of this thesis: can the rise of the AfD be explained without the event of German unification? In other words, are these three leading theories in fact describing different parts of the same process, by which the event of German unification is the fundamental cause behind the rise of the AfD? My assertion is that, indeed, they are, and that any explanation of the AfD's proliferation which does not place significant emphasis on the experience of the unification is incomplete. Seeing your family, friends and community damaged by the process of integration and forgotten by the political establishment is bound to create a deep-seated anger towards democratic institutions and parties. This political distrust can, in turn, be leveraged to suit authoritarian and anti-immigrant discourse. In order to investigate the connection between the origin of the AfD and German unification, the literature review and electoral analysis will be followed by a content analysis of the AfD's party platform, media and manifestos. This last piece of research will focus on how the AfD discusses the unification, looking for connections with the previously discussed phenomena.

Methodology

In order to answer the question to what extent the success of the AfD in East Germany is related to the impacts and experience of German reunification, this study in section A, first looks at the history of the party and that of related organisations such as the right-wing extremist anti-islam organisation "Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes" (PEGIDA). The focus of this short review is to understand the historical context of the AfD's ascent to power.

Subsequently, in section B, this thesis analyses election data to compare the electoral success of AfD in East Germany with the position of the party in the rest of the country. Since the object of this thesis is not only the analysis of AfD's origin but especially its current success and voting base, this comparison is based on the outcome of the last two German federal elections in 2017 and 2021. This national overview will also be complemented by an analysis of voting behaviour in a number of specific electoral districts particularly affected by structural change resulting from German reunification. Furthermore, this study will look at the demography of AfD voters comparing those in East Germany with those in the rest of the country. The aim of this electoral

analysis is to identify the extent to which the success of AfD is an East German phenomenon, or at least manifests itself very differently in both parts of the country.

Section C will describe the available empirical studies on the reasons for the AfD's success in East Germany, detailing for each aims, methodology, results and conclusions. In fact, several studies have analysed the differences between East and West German voter preferences, linking these differences to far-right popularity. Most of these studies are based on surveys of voters to better understand their political ideology, gauging the prevalence of different ways of thinking in East and West.

This is followed in section D by a qualitative literature synthesis of the previously described articles and papers which looks to extract the reasons for the frustrations of East German citizens and the origins of these feelings. As a result of this synthesis we lay out the three prevailing theories (as cited above) to which the vast majority of the relevant literature subscribes.

The final chapter of this thesis in section E analyses the content of a selection of AfD political manifestos, one from each of the last two national elections and two from the last regional elections in the AfD's most important strongholds. This serves to identify to what extent the party based their campaign to the East German electorate by referring to voter sentiments stemming from German unification, but also to sentiments we have identified as secondary effects of it, such as political marginalisation and exclusion from positions of power, which are themselves causes behind the rise of the AfD.

A. The AfD. A short introduction

Founded in 2013, the AfD is the first new party to enter the Bundestag since German unification. Its rise has marked a significant change in German politics. For the first time in the history of modern Germany, a political party with unmitigated nationalistic messaging and which has used increasingly inflammatory language against immigrants and minorities has garnered the votes of large swaths of German voters. Far right parties had long been resigned to the fringes of German society, and yet the AfD is growing. Polls⁸ show that, as of December 2025, were Germans to go

⁸ Statista, "Forsa Sonntagsfrage zur Bundestagswahl 2025."

to the polls, the AfD would win the election. Since their first appearance in parliament in 2017, the party have established a firm grip on the eastern, post-communist half of the country, which has remained their heartland despite increasing gains in the West. This part of the country, officially part of the federal republic since 1990, has experienced a profound transformation, economically and politically, because of the unification. There exists a large body of work concerning the social, economic and political effects of German unification.

While the AfD has become one of Germany's most popular political parties, its politics have changed significantly in their short history. The "Manifesto for an electoral alternative 2013", the party's founding document, had as signatories a group of 58 conservatives, nearly half of whom were academics. A far cry from the populist character it exhibits today, the party saw itself as a challenger to the parties of the centre-right, as Arzheimer (2019)⁹ recounts. Its positions remained close to those of the CDU for its first two years, though significant differences were already apparent. In light of the sovereign debt crisis, the AfD positioned itself as an economically liberal party, closely aligned with the policies of austerity and critical of the EU and the monetary union. Bernd Lucke, an economics professor from Hamburg and one of the party's co-founders, argued against German intervention in the crisis.

The party's shift to the far right can be told through two events occurring in 2015/ 2016. The first was the ousting of its moderate wing, the result of a power struggle around the direction the party was to take. Of its seven members of the European parliament (MEPs), five left entirely. The party was now fully in the hands of its radical wing. The second was the refugee crisis. It is here that the AfD found its key issue. The discussion around immigrants quickly changed, the party grew ever closer to PEGIDA, an explicitly Islamophobic organisation. Nowadays, its nature as a far-right populist party in line with the definition of Cas Mudde ¹⁰ (a "thin-centered ideology" characterised by the dichotomy it creates between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite.") is universally recognised in the academic literature. Additionally, the AfD has now been classified by the

⁹ Kai Arzheimer and Carl C. Berning, "How the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Their Voters Veered to the Radical Right, 2013–2017," *Electoral Studies* 60 (August 2019): 102040, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2019.04.004>.

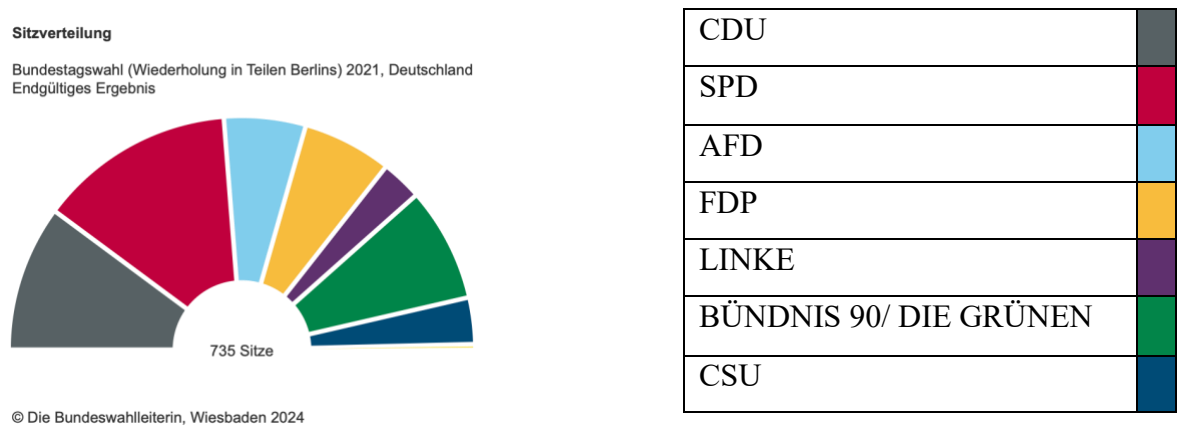
¹⁰ Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist | Government and Opposition," *Cambridge Core*, n.d., accessed December 26, 2025, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/government-and-opposition/article/populist-zeitgeist/2CD34F8B25C4FFF4F322316833DB94B7>.

German Verfassungsschutz, the internal security service, as right-wing extremist. It is the first party of its size to receive this classification.

B. The East-West Divide in Voting Patterns at Recent Federal Elections

In the German electoral system, citizens have two votes: the first vote (“erststimme”) goes to the chosen individual candidate for the voter’s constituency. The second vote (“zweitstimme”) is used to vote for a party in the German parliament, the Bundestag. National election results and polls are predominantly based on the parliamentary vote, as this is the main decider of the party’s strength in the parliament.

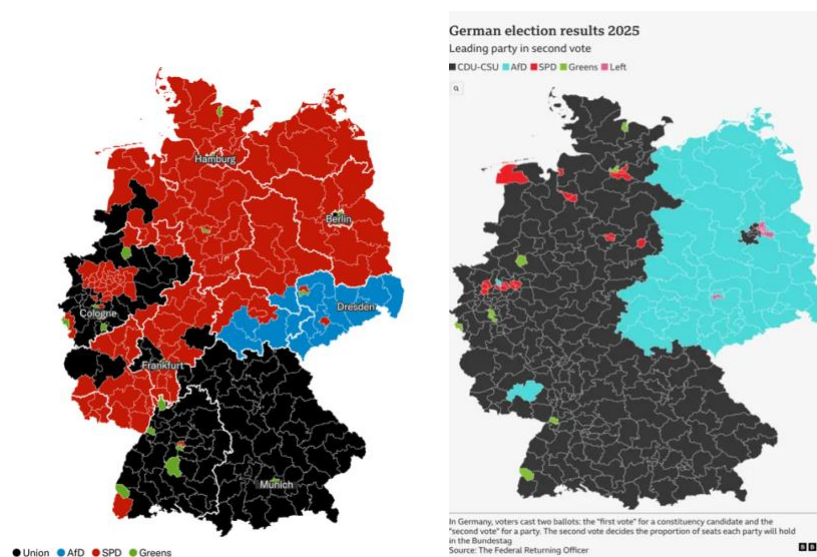
The 2021 German federal election saw AfD achieve the fifth highest percentage of the total parliamentary vote, with 10%¹¹. The AfD thus came in behind the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands-centre-left (SPD), sitting on 26% and Christlich Demokratische Union-conservative (CDU/ CSU) on 22%. The Green Party, Bündnis 90/ Die Grünen, recorded a result of 13.9%, the third highest and the liberal party (FDP) secured 11%. Ultimately, the SPD achieved by far the greatest number of seats with 206 out of 735 which earned them the chancellorship (see fig1).



(fig.1, showing the relative distributions of parliament seats, Die Bundeswahlleiterin)

¹¹ “Ergebnisse Deutschland - Die Bundeswahlleiterin,” accessed December 26, 2025, <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/bundestagswahlen/2021/ergebnisse/bund-99.html>.

This SPD success was fuelled principally by a strong showing in the north-West of the country as well as the regions that once belonged to the German Democratic Republic, or GDR (in German: Deutsche Demokratische Republik, DDR). However, closer scrutiny reveals that while the SPD was strong in both regions, there were significant underlying differences. The second-placed parties show a significant distance remained between German voters in the former East and West. The clearest sign of this is the second most chosen party in each part of Germany. This position was most commonly occupied by the CDU in the former West (with the natural exception of the districts which they won, in which the SPD most often slotted in second). In the East, the AfD was instead the most common runner-up, and discounting the metropolitan areas of Berlin and Leipzig, never fell below third. Berlin and Leipzig are large cities, which in the past have tended to vote more left-wing. Thus, while the 2021 election saw the SPD ahead in both East and West, the AfD remained the second-strongest party in East Germany, demonstrating a fundamental difference with the West, in which the runner-up was the CDU. In fact, the eastern states of Saxony and Thuringia remained the only ones to see a clear AfD victory¹² (see fig.2).



(fig.2, electoral map of Germany based on the 2021 election, NZZ)

(fig.3, electoral map of Germany based on the 2025 election, bbc)

¹² Eike Hoppmann Meyer Simon Off, Olivia, "German Election Results Show Significant Voter Shifts," Neue Zürcher Zeitung, February 24, 2025, <https://www.nzz.ch/english/german-election-results-show-significant-voter-shifts-ld.1872488>.

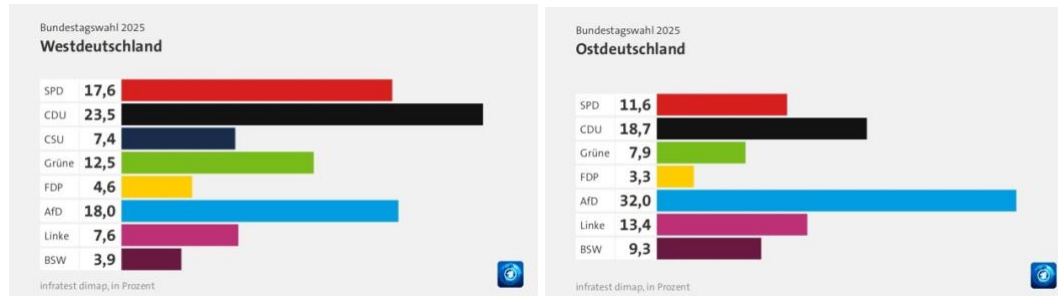
This followed patterns from previous elections, establishing these regions as Germany's main AfD strongholds, and as such are of particular interest in regards to the content analysis that will follow. Across Germany, the great metropolitan areas all saw strong support for the Green Party and SPD with some regional variation, such as Munich's strong CDU showing. The divide between East and West did not contribute majorly to the outcome of the 2021 election, but signs of the AfD's regional popularity were present.

The 2025 election, the most recent, illustrates the political divide between East and West Germany much more distinctly, and demonstrates how strongly the AfD is tied to East Germany. The former governing parties are all holding quite a few less seats in parliament. These were the SPD, Green Party and FDP, the latter even failing to enter parliament at all. The SPD's unpopularity handed their constituencies to the parties that had been runners-up in 2021, the CDU in the West and the AfD in the East. Thus, the regional differences which had been hidden in the previous election are now instantly clear, producing an electoral map which is exactly split between East and West, the former supporting the CDU/CSU and the latter the AfD. Exceptions to this divide are few, mainly in western urban centres which remain the only SPD strongholds, together with the Ruhr industrial region. True to form, the only eastern constituencies not to see a AfD victory are the cities of Berlin and Leipzig, with a resurgent Linke and CDU winning a few urban constituencies¹³ (see fig.3). The degree to which the AfD is an eastern phenomenon is further shown by the difference between the party's strongholds in the East and the constituencies it won in the West. The AfD's strongest result came in Görlitz, Saxony. It is one of four constituencies, all East German, to vote for the AfD by 46% or more. In Görlitz, they achieved a result of 46.7% by comparison, the party's only constituency wins in the West came in Gelsenkirchen and Kaiserslautern, in which 25.8% and 25.9% of voters respectively chose the AfD. Even the AfD's strongest western result is scarcely comparable with their eastern strongholds. This difference shows that ultimately, the party's support is concentrated in the East.

The success that the CDU achieved in the West is simply not comparable with the almost universal success of the AfD in the East. In the entirety of West Germany, the CDU received 23,5 % of total

¹³ "Five Key Takeaways from the German Election," February 24, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx29wlje6dno>.

votes. This is a 5.5 point gap to the next most popular party, which is the AfD at 18%, 0.4% ahead of the SPD at 17.6%. In contrast, the AfD sits at 32% in East Germany, with the CDU at 18.7%. This 13.3% difference is more than double the advantage that the CDU holds in the West. This shows that the AfD is not only winning in the former East German states, but has established a firm grip on them, while the CDU's lead in the western states is far more fragile. Fig.4 shows the distribution of votes in East and West.



(fig.4, distribution of zweistimmen by party in former East and West Germany, das erste)

While it has become clear that the AfD is more popular in East Germany, in order to understand its role in the German political sphere it is useful to understand the demographics of AfD voters in East and West. In the article titled “a tale of two electorates”, Hansen et al.¹⁴ determine the demographic data which is most closely correlated with AfD vote share in order to show the demographic differences between AfD voters in East and West. The study relies on a set of dependent and independent variables. In this case, the dependent variables are the AfD vote shares during the 2021 election. The independent variables are made up of a set of five measurements: percentage of population that is foreign born, percentage of population aged 59 or over, percentage of population with a university qualification, median constituency household disposable income and constituency unemployment rate. The study draws a correlation between these values and the share of AfD votes in each constituency.

The findings from this study show little correlation between the household median income variable and AfD popularity. The percentage of foreign-born population also has no impact according to

¹⁴ Michael Hansen and Jonathan Olsen, “A Tale of Two Electorates?: The 2021 Federal Election and the AfD Voter in East and West,” *German Politics and Society* 40 (June 2022): 110–33, <https://doi.org/10.3167/gps.2022.400206>.

the data. On the other hand, a higher share of university qualified people and a higher share of people over the age of 59 are both correlated with a change in AfD votes. This relationship is negative in the first case and positive in the second. An older population is more inclined to voting AfD in all cases, and a more educated population is always less likely to. This correlation is observed in both East and West Germany, however, the data shows that the share of older voters (59 and over) is much more strongly correlated with AfD votes in East Germany than in the West, where the correlation is still present, but is much weaker. Unemployment rate is not clearly correlated with AfD votes in West Germany. In East Germany, lower unemployment rates are seen in constituencies with higher numbers for the AfD.

Hansen's study thus tells us that the AfD is generally appealing to older voters and unattractive to highly educated ones, but that specifically, AfD voters in East Germany are older than in the West and are more likely to be financially stable, where AfD voters in the West come from all economic backgrounds.

All this leads to the conclusion that the AfD is thus not a uniquely East German phenomenon, but that there remains a significant gap in its popularity between East and West, and any attempt to explain its popularity will have to account for its incredibly strong showing in the East as compared to the West. We will thus be reviewing the literature which aims to explain this existential link between the AfD and East Germany.

C. Analysis of Studies on AfD Electoral Success in East Germany

- Study by Brähler et al.¹⁵ “Authoritarian Dynamics and the Dissatisfaction with Democracy”

-Aims-

The aim of Brähler et al.'s study is to measure the prevalence of authoritarian systems of thought and dissatisfaction with democracy in eastern Germany. It is principally geared towards the measurement of several elements which the authors see as central aspects of authoritarian thought. It also gauges concepts such as self-identification and especially attitudes towards democracy as underlying causes. These values are measured individually for each federal state.

¹⁵ “EFBI Policy Paper 2023-2: Autoritäre Dynamiken Und Die Unzufriedenheit Mit Der Demokratie - Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut,” n.d.

-Methodology-

The study is based on a survey launched in 2022, of 3546 people living in East Germany, who are surveyed via in-person interviews, with the exception of a few questions which are inserted in a printed questionnaire. The first section of the survey is meant to position the respondent ideologically. Respondents are, in average, 51 years of age. This part of the study is made up of 18 statements. These are divided into groups of three. Each group is intended to represent an aspect of right-wing political thought: approval of dictatorship, antisemitism, trivialisation of Naziism, xenophobia and chauvinism. The first four are assigned to a “Neonazi” value and the last two to an “ethnocentrism” value. Respondents are to judge whether they: completely agree, mostly agree, partially agree and partially disagree, mostly disagree or completely disagree with the statements. The study ranks the first three as agreeing with the statements, but distinguishes between partial and full endorsement.

Separately, the study measures other sentiments which are antisemitism based on anti-Israel attitudes, antisemitism based on a revisionism of the holocaust, islamophobia, satisfaction with democracy, identification as East German citizens, political deprivation and the estimation of the own and national economic state.

-Results-

The percentages of respondents agreeing (according to the standards set by the study) with the statements for the different sets of questions in the first section of the study are:

- approval of dictatorship-38.3%
- trivialisation of naziism-21.23%
- social Darwinism-31.4%
- Antisemitism-30.2%
- Chauvinism-58.7%
- Xenophobia-61.36%

Certain federal states showed markedly higher values for all sets of questions than the rest. These were: Thuringia, Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt.

Additionally, the positive responses for the second sets of questions in percentages are:

- Islamophobia-47.4%
- Israel-related antisemitism-20.9%
- Revisionism-related antisemitism-41.9%
- Satisfaction with democracy as an idea-99.6%
- Satisfaction with democracy as enshrined in the German constitution-79.7%
- Satisfaction with democracy in practice-58%

Thuringia, Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt show markedly higher rates of agreement for islamophobic and all forms of antisemitic statements.

Respondents feel they are:

- Losers of German unification-23.6%
- Winners of German unification-45.6%
- Citizens of the former GDR-57.8%
- European-72.6%
- East German-75.1%
- Citizens of the federal republic-78.3%

Percentages of respondents that agree with the following statements:

- “People like me have no influence on what the government does”-77.4%
- “I see it as meaningless to engage myself politically”-64.6%

The study is based on a definition of authoritarianism which sees it as being constituted by four pillars: Authoritarian aggression-the willingness to harm minorities or outsiders through an authoritarian state, submission to authoritarianism-the desire to live in an authoritarian state, authoritarian traditionalism, referred to as “Konventionalismus”-an attachment to traditional social norms and anger at those who stray from them, and a tendency to believe in conspiracy theories. The study measures their presence individually. Below are the percentages of respondents responding positively to statements endorsing:

- Authoritarian Aggression-32.9%
- Submission to authoritarianism-15.3%
- Konventionalismus-25.4%

- Belief in conspiracy theories-34.8%

The study gauges how optimistic East Germans feel about the economic situation in Germany as a whole and about their own finances. The respondent's estimation of the health of the German economy in percentages is as follows:

- Positive-30.3%
- Neutral-38.2%
- Negative-30.6%

Estimation of own financial outlook:

- Positive-43.2%
- Neutral-41%
- Negative-14.8%

As East Germans, respondents feel:

- Powerless when dealing with public institutions-36.8%
- As second-class citizens-32.8%
- Like their rights only exist on paper-37.4%

-Conclusions-

AFD voting states are especially noted as having very high values for ethnocentrism and only to a slightly lesser degree, chauvinism.

The study notes a distinct dissatisfaction with democracy as it functions in practice, in contrast with the high level of support with democracy as an idea. The responses to the democracy related questions indicate that there is a conflict between East Germany and democratic institutions.

Many respondents feel like losers of the unification. More than half do not indicate that they benefitted from German unification, and close to one out of four indicate that it has actively harmed them.

Three Federal states stand out. Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia show distinctly higher rates of xenophobia and chauvinism. It should be noted that Thuringia and Saxony are the two strongest states for the AfD.

- Working paper by Goetzel¹⁶: “When the East Goes to the Poll: Explaining the Regional Differences in AfD-Voting in the 2021 Federal Election”

-Aims-

In the authors’ own words: “This paper sheds light on specific variables that could explain the East-West differences. To achieve this, I develop a two-sided argument which considers both the distribution of common AfD-voting determinants and the socialization experiences of East Germans.” It is intended as a statistical measurement of the different elements which contribute to AfD votes, and how much of the difference in AfD votes between East and West these explain.

-Methodology-

Goetzel puts forward four hypotheses, taken from the relevant literature, labelled H1, H2, H3 and H4.

- H1 states that :” When controlling for the individual objective and subjective economic situation, the regional differences in AfD-voting decrease.”
- H2 states that: “when controlling for the distribution of religious denomination, the regional differences in AfD-voting is reduced.”
- H3 states that: “when controlling for populist attitudes, the regional differences decrease.”
- H4 states that: “When controlling for nativist attitudes, the differences between East and West Germany in AfD-voting decrease.”

The objective of this paper is to test the above hypotheses. To start with, Goetzel uses two variables, an independent variable named “East”, which describes whether the individual subject is East German or not, and a dependent dummy variable, “AfD” which simply represents whether or not the respondent voted for the AfD. This allows to map the correlation between a

¹⁶ Julia Götzl, “When the East Goes to the Poll: Explaining the Regional Differences in AfD-Voting in the 2021 Federal Election,” *DNGPS Working Paper* 9, no. 1 (2023): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.3224/dngps.v9i1.01>.

voter being in the East and them voting for the AfD. Subsequently, using average marginal effects, the author adds the effects of a series of other variables meant to test the hypotheses. These are: socio-economic factors and the respondent's own estimation of their economic circumstances, religious affiliation, age, populist sentiment and nativist sentiment. The first two are used to judge the validity of H1 and are made up of a series of other variables. Socio-economic factors are comprised of household net income, highest achieved school degree, current unemployment and number of years spent unemployed within the last ten years. The own evaluation of the respondent's status comprises class affiliation, the judgement of the current personal economic situation, the projection of the personal economic situation in one year, and the evaluation of the development of the personal economic situation in the last two years. The factors of age and religious affiliation are judged by the author to not be sufficiently associated with the East to allow for the examination of a separate hypothesis (H2). They are however still included. Finally, both the populism and nativism values are tied to their own hypotheses (H3 and H4)

-Results-

The study finds that the basic "East effect", the increase in probability of voting for the AfD when living in the East to which all other variables will be added, is measured at 6.9%. At this stage, the study begins adding the effects of the additional variables. The first one is H1, which states that when controlling for economic circumstances the regional difference drops. However, once the effect of objective economic factors is added the value only drops to 6.9%. This makes it clear that purely economic factors have little influence on the decision to vote for the AfD.

This changes significantly when the respondent's own subjective evaluation is taken into account. The results indicate that once both objective and subjective economic differences are eliminated, respondents in East Germany are only 5.8% more likely to vote for the AfD, which is a significant enough difference to consider H1 valid according to the author, though economic factors cannot be taken to be the driver behind AfD support.

H2 references the religious denomination of the respondents. When the difference in religious affiliation is taken into account, the "+East effect" shrinks to only 5.1%, which shows that religious affiliation does indeed have an influence on the decision to vote AfD.

The paper approaches H3 and H4 differently. Beginning with H3, the hypothesis related to populism, the paper initially creates a populism index, and uses it to evaluate the prevalence of populist attitudes in East and West Germany. The result is a clear prevalence of populist sentiment in the East compared to the West. At this stage, the populist index is mapped into different generations in order to understand whether older or younger people are driving the divide. While the greatest difference is shown in the older generation, the paper notes a statistically relevant discrepancy amongst young people as well. This process is repeated for the nativist value. The author notes that when asked about their views on immigration, East Germans are substantially more likely to choose the negative responses. As was seen with populism, the difference between the nativist tendencies of East and West Germans is greater in the older generation, and smaller in the younger one. However, even younger East Germans are significantly more nativist than their western counterparts.

When populist attitudes are added to the effects of H1 and H2, the paper finds that living in East Germany means one is 4.4% more likely to vote for the AfD. This is a sufficiently large drop to make H3 a valid hypothesis. Similarly, adding the nativist variable shrinks the “East effect” to 3.2%. the paper thus finds that H4 is also valid.

-Conclusions-

While the effects of economics, religion, populism and nativism have all shown to be significant factors in the popularity of the AfD, the paper still finds a remaining 2.8% of the initial “East effect” to be unexplained. The presence of populist and nativist attitudes were found to be the most valid explanations, as they accounted for large parts of the East-West divide. Thus, while the factors behind the popularity of the AfD are multiple, the most significant contributing factors seem to be the prevalence of populist and nativist attitudes.

- Study by Samartzitis¹⁷ et al “Value instead of Lacking Money”

-Aims-

The aim of this study is to understand why the AfD is so much more powerful in East Germany than in the West. It analyses the 2017 elections exclusively. Ultimately, it confronts two possible answers, one economic and one societal.

-Methodology-

The study uses a metric called “social cohesion”, which is drawn from a previous work by Arant et al.¹⁸ for the Bertelmann Stiftung (a German non-profit foundation). The social cohesion metric is measured as a composite of the following elements:

1. Social networks
2. Trust in other people
3. Acceptance of diversity
4. Local/regional identification
5. Trust in political institutions
6. Sense of justice
7. Solidarity/helpfulness
8. Recognition of social rules (order/security)
9. Social participation

The social cohesion metric is mapped across Germany by dividing it into 79 regions, each with around a million inhabitants. The study is comprised of a telephone survey of N=5000 respondents.

The data are then analysed by means of a regression, which yields an estimate of the association between social cohesion and AfD popularity, with particular attention to East Germany. This

¹⁷ Dresden et al., *Wert- statt Geldmangel: AfD triumphiert im Osten dort, wo es an Toleranz und Vertrauen in die Politik fehlt*.

¹⁸ “ST-LW_Studie_Zusammenhalt_in_Deutschland_2017.Pdf,” n.d., accessed January 24, 2026, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/ST-LW_Studie_Zusammenhalt_in_Deutschland_2017.pdf.

initial association between social cohesion and AfD popularity is represented by a first model, Model 1.

Additionally, the study adds a set of control variables. These are economic (unemployment rate, GDP, sectoral structure), demographic and social. If the underlying cause for AfD votes was economic, the association would become statistically insignificant once these control variables are included. These controls are integrated into the second model, Model 2.

The last step is to gauge whether social cohesion affects AfD voting patterns differently in East and West Germany. To do so, a third model is applied which measures East and West Germany independently, Model 3.

-Results-

The results are as follows:

Model 1, without control variables or East-West differentiation, reports an estimate of -1.13.

Model 2, with control variables, reports an estimate of -0.37.

Once the East-West differentiation is introduced on top of the control variables, the estimates are +0.03 for West Germany and -1.22 for East Germany.

The study also ranks the two elements of social cohesion with the greatest statistical impact: acceptance of diversity (-0.70) and trust in political institutions (-0.67).

-Conclusions-

The study finds that the social cohesion value has substantially different impacts on AfD vote share in the East and the West Germany. In the West, the relationship between social cohesion and AfD popularity is not statistically significant, while the East shows a strong negative association, even once socioeconomic factors are accounted for, suggesting that in East Germany, where social cohesion is low, AfD vote share is high. In particular, the fact that the specific elements of social cohesion most tied to the success of the AfD are low acceptance of diversity (and thus anti-immigrant sentiment) and low trust in institutions is very useful in linking this study to the others.

▪ Study by Yoder¹⁹ “Revenge of the East”

The aim of Jennifer Yoder’s article is to investigate the appeal of the AfD party in eastern Germany. This she does by examining how East Germans have been historically underrepresented in German politics, and thus how the issue of political representation drives East Germans to vote for the AfD. Yoder also analyses how different aspects of political representation, namely substantive, symbolic and descriptive, are reflected in the AfD’s language. In her own words: “the discussion focused on ways the AfD has claimed to supply eastern voters with important elements of political representation that they demand.”

Yoder relies heavily on raw election results and engages with the secondary literature. Her approach is based on the idea that there is high demand for representation in East Germany, which was not fulfilled before the advent of the AfD. She concludes that the AfD satisfies three aspects of this demand: symbolic, substantive and descriptive. Substantive representation refers to the similarity between the values, attitudes and policy positions of the represented and the representative (do we agree on policy?). Symbolic representation indicates how strictly the representative upholds symbols that are important to the represented (do you stand for things I care about?). Descriptive representation describes the simple overlap between the demographics of citizens and those of their representatives (how similar are you to me?).

Her conclusion is that the strength of the AfD lies in its ability to leverage all three types of representation, owing to the fact that East Germans did not see themselves being represented by virtually any other party. This is true even though they do not always fit them. For example, the AfD voices East Germans’ grievances about their limited presence in positions of influence, and thus fulfills a need for descriptive representation even though it has no East German roots or leaders. It also addresses hardship and strife endured by East Germans through calls to “protect” the national community along chauvinistic lines, and is seen by its voters as the lone stalwart of “true” German symbols and core values. In short, as Yoder says:” The AfD succeeded in exploiting frustration and a sense of second-class citizenship in the East.”

¹⁹ Yoder, “Revenge of the East’?”

Ultimately, Yoder's argument calls on Germany's other parties to assess their own ability to represent East German AfD voters, and to compete with them not by mimicking their policies, but by offering East Germans a political alternative which also represents them.

- Study by Kellermann ²⁰ *"Trust we lost"*

-Aims-

Kellermann aims to understand the long-term political effects of Germany's Treuhand agency. The Treuhand was created following unification in order to integrate the East German economy into that of the West. At the time, East German companies were state-owned. Given the less-than-ideal state of the GDR's economy, the Treuhand was charged with the restructuring of these companies. Those considered unsalvageable and unable to be privatized, were shut down. Their employees were left jobless. This politically administered loss of jobs affected many in East Germany. Kellermann seeks to understand how this event relates to the current rise of the AfD, as well as to more abstract political indicators such as political identification, political apathy, and instances of extremist thought 30 years after the unification.

-Methodology-

"Trust we lost" is an observational study, drawing on several pre-existing datapoints in order to arrive at a conclusion. To do so, Kellermann requires a few key pieces of information. First, she needs a list of employees fired by the Treuhand. Second, she needs to track these employees and their political tendencies over time.

Kellermann uses a number of different approaches to arrive at a conclusion. Data relating to the activities of the Treuhand and the affected employees are pulled from the ITW Treuhand Database, while data on job loss, trust levels, political participation and party affiliation are taken from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), a long-running longitudinal household survey.

From the SOEP, Kellermann isolates respondents who:

²⁰ Kim Leonie Kellermann, "Trust We Lost: The Impact of the Treuhand Experience on Political Alienation in East Germany," *Journal of Comparative Economics* 52, no. 1 (2024): 54–75, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2023.10.001>.

-lived in East Germany during the period 1990 - 1994

-experienced job loss during that period

Unemployment under the GDR was a rare occurrence, meaning that job loss during these years would likely be tied to Treuhand operations. The independent variable is therefore whether or not the respondent experienced a Treuhand job loss. The study links this with to the SOEP data via fixed-effects regression models, in order to examine how political convictions change over time after a Treuhand-related job loss. Robustness checks and placebo tests are conducted to ensure that the observed effects are attributable to Treuhand job losses.

-Results-

Subjects who were affected by the Treuhand show greatly reduced trust in others and in political institutions 30 years after these measures were taken. Additionally, these respondents are less likely to engage in politics in general.

Crucially, when they do engage in politics, they are much less likely to engage with mainstream parties and more likely to turn towards political extremes. Comparing the results with municipal records suggests that the results hold up on a larger scale: areas with higher levels of past Treuhand activity show an inclination towards participation in the political extremes. Kellermann shows that these effects are not found in non-Treuhand related unemployment, meaning that the experience of losing one's job in such a sudden and politically sanctioned manner caused substantial damage to trust in political representatives.

-Conclusions-

The study does not draw direct conclusions regarding the AfD. However, it does conclude that people who experienced Treuhand job losses are less trusting, especially of political institutions, and that this distrust manifests in their voting choices. This distrust especially manifests against mainstream political parties. This can be linked to the "political representation gap" theory put forward by Jennifer Yoder. The frustration of those who feel they are underrepresented is not only theoretical. In this case, it stems from a very real trauma, lived by citizens who perceive a distance between them and mainstream parties, and thus the impossibility of being properly represented by them, as a clear and present danger. Many may also view the Treuhand

experience as a warning against engaging with Germany's mainstream. The effects of the unification are thus directly linked to voting behaviour today.

▪ *Article by Weisskircher²¹ "The Strength of Far Right AfD in Eastern Germany"*

Manes Weisskircher, in this comparative observational study, aims to explain the East-West electoral divide by referencing and combining a series of explanations and possible causes proposed in the recent literature, rather than pursuing a single line of inquiry. While other studies seek to identify a clear-cut cause for the rise of the AfD, Weisskircher works with multiple explanations, meshing them with historical context and election results to paint a complete picture.

The article frames the current popularity of the AfD in a historical context. In this respect, it is unique. Indeed, far-right, and more explicitly neo-Nazi, movements had already begun to sprout in the late GDR. These frequently communicated with their western counterparts and, as the Wall fell, far-right rhetoric spread quickly. An emblematic event of this period is the 1992 attack on an immigrant community of the Lichtenhagen district in Rostock, where attackers lit housing blocks on fire with their inhabitants still inside. Cities like Dresden became hubs for far-right organisations, which were joined in 2015 by PEGIDA, an early symptom of the eventual rise of the AfD as a mainstream party in the region.

These far-right tendencies were stoked into a profound crisis through the process of liberalisation. Weisskircher, like Leonie Kellermann, notes the effects of the Treuhand, the already cited agency tasked with privatizing East German state-owned companies and closing them if they were not deemed competitive, a process which left many out of work and inflicted a lasting trauma on East Germans. The author notes how the experience of the Treuhand has shaped East German political consciousness and deepened the impression of being second-class citizens.

²¹ Manès Weisskircher, "The Strength of Far-Right AfD in Eastern Germany: The East-West Divide and the Multiple Causes behind 'Populism,'" *The Political Quarterly* 91 (April 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12859>.

This far-right impulse exists amongst a series of other causes. Weisskircher highlights the strength of anti-immigration and authoritarian sentiment in the East of the country. He notes how, due to limited underexposure to immigrants, East Germans have more negative views towards them, especially towards Muslims. These are termed “cultural value” differences: causes for AfD affiliation that are based on the voters’ values and political beliefs, not on personal experience or trauma. They are profoundly ideological in nature.

Weisskircher then introduces a more nuanced explanation, taken from Goodwin and Eatwell, who describe the rise of far-right populism in East Germany through the “four developments”, namely: distrust (in representative politics), destruction (of traditional understandings of national community), (socioeconomic) deprivation, and (partisan) dealignment. A related theory, by Gidrion and Hall, concludes that East Germans have the impression of having been pushed to the margins of society, giving them a low perception of their own social status and thus a desire for recognition (which is very similar to Jennifer Yoder’s explanation). In short, these interpretations of the rise of the AfD are centred on the experience of East Germans in the Federal Republic, their declining trust in democracy, and their perception of themselves as second-class citizens, as opposed to a radically different underlying set of values. Systematic underrepresentation manifests as a lack of East German politicians (Angela Merkel being a rare outlier) in prominent positions, and a lack of political parties to properly represent them.

The article places this, in Yoder’s words, the “representation gap”, in the context of the previously discussed causes. The presence of historical far-right movements and the East’s tendency towards xenophobia and chauvinism, as well as dissatisfaction with democracy and the representation gap, are parts of a single process. Weisskircher is effective in linking these factors.

- Hansen and Olsen²² “A tale of two electorates”

-Aims-

Hansen and Olsen aim to understand the reason why the AfD performed so much better in East Germany than in West Germany during the 2021 election. They also look to compare the Eastern and Western AfD voters in terms of a set of demographic variables.

-Methodology-

The study's dependent variable is the AfD vote share per constituency (246 Western and 53 Eastern). In this case, both the first vote “erststimme” and second vote “zweitstimme” are taken into consideration. The study uses Germany's individual electoral districts to determine AfD support on a local level. In these constituencies, the study tracks the correlation between AfD votes and a list of variables, the incidences of which are publicly available. The list is as follows:

- % foreign-born population
- % age 59+
- Percentage of voters with university qualification
- Median household disposable income
- Unemployment rate

-Results-

- Foreign-born population: no statistically significant impact on AfD votes, in both West and East Germany.
- Age 59+: in the West, higher percentages of voters over 59 are weakly correlated with increased AfD votes (1.5 % increase in constituencies with high number of voters over 59). In the East, there is a strong statistical correlation. When moving from constituencies with 20% of voters in the older age group to 45%, the model predicts a 20 point increase in

²² Hansen and Olsen, “A Tale of Two Electorates?”

AfD votes.

- Percentage of voters with university qualification: Moving from constituencies with 20% of voters with university qualification to 50%, means a 4% to 6% drop in AfD votes. In the West, each 1% increase in university educated voters results in a 0.16% drop for the AfD, while in the East this reaches 0.35%.
- Median household disposable income: almost no correlation in both West and East Germany.
- Unemployment rate: in the West, each + 1% increase in unemployment translates to – 0.7% for the AfD (not statistically significant); in the East, each 1+% increase in unemployment translates to – 1.04% for the AfD (statistically significant);

-Conclusions-

The AfD electorate in East and West is very different. The only common feature being lower educational attainment. In the East, AfD votes are strongly correlated with an older population, which is not observed in West Germany. AfD vote share drops with unemployment, an unexpected result only observed in the East.

Discussion of the studies

In this chapter, we will formulate a comprehensive analysis of the reasons behind the East German success of the AfD on the basis of the previously cited studies. First, we will explain the reason why our investigation is focused on East Germany, and describe the type of support that the AfD has in the region.

Then, we will classify the previously detailed studies into the three theories which have been put forward in the Introduction. We will explain the role that the unification plays in each, and how each theory addresses a different point in the formations of the party.

- *The AfD as an East German phenomenon*

In our electoral analysis, we have established that the AfD is indeed much more powerful in East Germany than in the West. While AfD support is growing steadily in the West as well, we can state that these two regions are drifting towards the AfD for different reasons. Hansen et. al²³ demonstrate how different the AfD voter base is in East and West. AfD voters in the West are young, less economically stable and more likely to be between jobs. On average, their eastern counterparts are significantly older, hold stable jobs and would conventionally not be the typical radical voter. On the basis of this, we diagnose the issue of the AfD separately in East and West.

In the latter, it is a relatively recent phenomenon of voters who, owing to recent German developments (economic downturn and political instability), have sought respite in the extreme policies of the AfD. However, this was only possible once the AfD had become an established party in the East. The East German diagnosis is much more complex. The demographics indicate that the AfD is supported by all levels of society, and that the policies which are seen by political scientists such as Arzheimer²⁴ and government organizations such as the Verfassungsschutz as extreme, have become the prevailing political ideology. These areas are where the AfD made their initial breakthrough. The AfD would not be present in the West if it had not first been adopted by the East. We will thus focus on AfD support in the East as its principal stronghold, from which it spread to the rest of the country.

- Theory of direct unification trauma

The first theory directly connects the rise of extreme parties in East Germany to the experience of the German Unification in 1990. It is based in particular on the recent work of Leonie Kellermann²⁵. Her study focuses on the Treuhandanstalt, which operated from 1990-1994. This government agency was tasked with privatizing the East German economy, closing many companies judged to be unsalvageable. It is the cause for the prevalence of resentment towards the institutions of the Federal Republic of Germany. Leonie Kellermann²⁶ has tracked the effects of its policies over time. Her results show a clear correlation between areas which experienced high levels of Treuhand-related job losses and political apathy. These are precisely the factors

²³ Hansen and Olsen, "A Tale of Two Electorates?"

²⁴ Arzheimer and Berning, "How the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and Their Voters Veered to the Radical Right, 2013–2017."

²⁵ Kellermann, "Trust We Lost."

²⁶ Kellermann, "Trust We Lost."

which best explain how an entire region could ultimately turn into a far-right stronghold, as affected respondents show lower engagement with politics, gravitate away from mainstream parties and are more likely to vote for the political extremes. This is also touched upon in Brähler²⁷ et al.s' study, which explicitly asks respondents to judge whether they are winners or losers of the unification process. The study shows a general dissatisfaction with it and, in a quarter of cases, an explicit belief that life was better under the GDR.

Kellermann's study plays a crucial role in our story, as it tracks the most direct and immediate effects of the unification. Other studies, such as Brähler²⁸(2023), judge the level of satisfaction with the process as a whole throughout East Germany, but are limited in that they only ever use public opinion polls. Opinions on or about unification, while important, offer an only incomplete picture. They are subject to change and to the influence of parties such as the AfD itself. Many other studies support the idea that East Germans are politically disillusioned and drifting away from the political centre. Kellermann's is unique in showing us the cause, allowing us to clearly identify the Treuhand and other unification policies as the root cause. In this, her study is unique. She does not, however, go so far as to include an explanation for the rising levels of xenophobia and chauvinism, which are a fundamental staple of the rise of the AfD. In this regard, her study needs to be inserted into the larger context of the AfD's rise to power in the East. The number of studies which find that these two factors are the best predictors of AfD voting is simply too large to ignore, and while these two interpretations of how the AfD came to power are not mutually exclusive, it is necessary to combine them into one unified story. We will thus use this theory as a good explanation of the root causes of the AfD, but acknowledge that it does not explain many aspects of its popularity. The other two theories will help explain how this initial trauma develops into the political party we see today.

- Representation gap theory.

²⁷ "EFBI Policy Paper 2023-2: Autoritäre Dynamiken Und Die Unzufriedenheit Mit Der Demokratie - Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut," n.d.

²⁸ "EFBI Policy Paper 2023-2: Autoritäre Dynamiken Und Die Unzufriedenheit Mit Der Demokratie - Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut," accessed January 9, 2026, <https://efbi.de/details/efbi-policy-paper-2023-2-autoritaere-dynamiken-und-die-unzufriedenheit-mit-der-demokratie.html>.

The second theory is based on what Jennifer Yoder²⁹ terms a “representation gap” in East Germany. The East had, according to this theory, been ignored by mainstream political parties and kept from its political processes; the East German people perceiving themselves as second-class citizens. It thus interprets the rise of the AfD as a consequence of them being able to find in the East German population a yet unrepresented voter base.

In “Revenge of the East?” (2020), Yoder identifies the lack of political representation, and the desire for it, as an essential element of the AfD’s appeal in the East. According to her, the AfD communicates to their voters three distinct types of representation: descriptive, symbolic, and substantive (“Revenge of the East?”, p40)³⁰. Descriptive representation refers to the concentration of East Germans in elite and leadership positions. Yoder notes how only 25% of Eastern high-profile positions are occupied by East Germans. This creates a profound frustration which instills a great animosity towards the German establishment. Other authors have also highlighted this frustration. Brähler et al, for example, asks his respondents to judge whether they are second-class citizens or at a systemic disadvantage for being from the East, a question which sees high numbers of positive responses. Even though the AfD do not exhibit great concentrations of East Germans in their own leadership positions, they are, according to Yoder, able to address this need for descriptive representation. Symbolic representation refers to a sentiment of having, in the words of Yoder: “lost an identity“(p.44). The AfD are able to act as the champions of a forgotten people, standing up against the elites that have relegated East Germany to its position. Finally, Yoder describes substantive representation as the AfD’s ability to bring the right-wing tendencies common in the region to the political mainstream. This is where further research would be helpful. Yoder offers a few explanations for these sentiments, which are rooted in a perceived distance between the postcommunist East and the multicultural West. On this front, this argument is incomplete. While it is almost certainly partially true, Yoder does not consider the role played by unification in the East German attitude towards immigration. She ascribes the comparatively high levels of xenophobia in East Germany to its citizens scarce experience with foreigners. An underlying distance between a more multicultural West and a more restrictive East does exist, but the post-2014 explosion in xenophobic sentiment cannot be understood without taking into account the experience of German unification. This is

²⁹ Yoder, “Revenge of the East’?”

³⁰ Yoder, “Revenge of the East’?”

consistent with numerous other studies, principally Brähler³¹(2023), who specifies that these tendencies are a fairly recent development, which does not track with the idea that East Germans are simply “intrinsically” antidemocratic.

However, the underlying idea of Yoder’s analysis remains essential to understanding the popularity of the AfD. Like her, Brahler et. al. find that East Germans are fundamentally pessimistic about their democratic representation; Leonie Kellermann³²’s results also typecast the AfD voter as someone fundamentally distrustful of mainstream parties and political institutions. The one question that remains open is why this distrust manifest itself politically only in 2015. The following section will exemplify the role of the migrant crisis of 2015 as an essential trigger for the release of these frustration.

- Value differences theory.

The last, and broadest thesis is supported by the majority of studies on the subject. It finds fundamental differences in the values of East and West Germans, and links these to the rapid expansion of the AfD in the East from 2015 to now. Perhaps the most convincing is Brähler et al., who put the correlation between xenophobia, chauvinism and AfD votes front and center, while also not neglecting the connection to the unification and the loss of trust in political institutions. Not all cited studies are as comprehensive. Julia Goetzel³³ (2021) puts forward a series of theories which include the presence of xenophobia and populist attitudes. The study finds that these are statistically important factors, which in part echoes the Brähler study, but does not refer to chauvinism or to the dissatisfaction with democracy. The most crucial step, the connection between all these factors and the process of German unification is not included. Samartzidis et al.³⁴(2018) essentially mirror these findings, but also considers the simple, economic explanation, for which they find insufficient data. It, too, does not move beyond the simple presence of xenophobia and chauvinism. It does hint at the same effects that are later

³¹ “EFBI Policy Paper 2023-2: Autoritäre Dynamiken Und Die Unzufriedenheit Mit Der Demokratie - Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut,” n.d.

³² Kellermann, “Trust We Lost.”

³³ Götzl, “When the East Goes to the Poll.”

³⁴ Dresden et al., *Wert- statt Geldmangel: AfD triumphiert im Osten dort, wo es an Toleranz und Vertrauen in die Politik fehlt.*

identified by Leonie Kellermann³⁵ as part of the Treuhand. It does this by not relying on simple measures of chauvinism or xenophobia, but using the “social cohesion index”. This also tracks a number of other effects which are meant to indicate the health of the social network, but crucially leaves out the effects of job losses in the past.

This value-based explanation is the most commonly used to tell the story of the AfD. But it is not immediately apparent how these sentiments could be linked to the process of the unification.

Brähler et al³⁶. do give some helpful indications to this effect. The study finds in particular that Islamophobia is extremely prevalent, but also, and more interestingly, that there are high levels of what we can call “institution-related” xenophobia, meaning xenophobia in relation to the fear that immigrants will exploit social services or funds that will thus be taken from “authentic” citizens. This is supplemented by a high level of chauvinism, especially a desire for “strong”, authoritarian sentiment. All of these are significantly more common in areas with significant AfD support, and in fact their correlation has been extensively documented Samardzitis et. al. In their study, the sentiments with the strongest correlation to the frequency of AfD votes are low trust in public institutions (0.674) and low acceptance of diversity (0.703).

This would indicate that the AfD has, starting in 2015, used the issue of immigration with East German voters to touch upon pre-existing anxieties about being abandoned by the state, present since the unification (we have previously mentioned the Treuhand). It would mean that the AfD, having fully grasped the need for these voters to feel represented and in a time where Angela Merkel was making a point of pursuing immigration-friendly policies, were simply met with the ideal vehicle to channel the frustrations of their East German voters, who felt like the German government was prioritizing immigrants over them. On the other hand, xenophobia in East Germany can by no means be explained solely through this process. The policies of Merkel would not have sparked such a strong reaction if there wasn’t already a xenophobic inclination in the East. In fact, these impulses have long been a feature of postwar Germany, and the East is no exception. Weisskircher³⁷ gives us a precious insight into the history of neo-Nazi organisations during the latter days of the GDR. These had already begun to flourish before the fall of the wall.

³⁵ Kellermann, “Trust We Lost.”

³⁶ “EFBI Policy Paper 2023-2: Autoritäre Dynamiken Und Die Unzufriedenheit Mit Der Demokratie - Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut,” n.d.

³⁷ Weisskircher, “The Strength of Far-Right AfD in Eastern Germany.”

By the 1990's, Dresden had become a hub for like-minded far-right extremists. It is here that, years later, PEGIDA would take its first steps into politics. Violent riots aimed at immigrants were all too common in the 1990's, and there is little reason to believe that these circumstances have completely changed in the span of 20 years. Xenophobia and chauvinism can thus be read in multiple ways. They can be pre-existing features of a political environment in which a far-right populist party was always going to be successful, or they are the byproduct of decades-long systemic marginalisation of a large part of the population, directed onto a politically convenient "other". In reality, the truth is most likely a combination of these factors.

The best explanation is that the AfD profited from a "perfect storm" in which the anger that had been brewing towards the German political order since the Treuhand years intersected the policies of Merkel in 2015. At that stage, a chronically underrepresented East Germany found, in the at that time marginal AfD, a party which aligned with their views. The AfD, in the subsequent years, turned the discussion around immigration increasingly inflammatory, as one would expect from a party that's found its winning message. The effect was an exacerbation of the pre-existing xenophobic impulses of their East German voters.

There is another defining characteristic of the AfD beside xenophobia. Identifying the driving force behind the preponderance of authoritarianism in East Germans is similarly difficult. It is possible, and even likely, that the incidence of antidemocratic organisations in the former GDR has causes unrelated to the unification, since it is a phenomenon that has been observed since before the fall of the wall. However, Brähler et al.³⁸ prove that there is a genuine east German desire for democracy, as shown in their research. It thus seems that the current turn towards authoritarianism, which accelerated rapidly post-2015, is more so a reaction to a democratic let-down. East German citizens, initially enthusiastic about the promises of democracy coming from the West, found themselves essentially frozen out by the West German parties. The experience of the Treuhand exacerbated the idea of West German democracy being unable to properly represent them. As such, the chauvinism observed in AfD voters can have one of two possible origins. The first is purely historical, while the second would place it as the consequence of the inferior role they play in the eyes of West German parties. This disconnect between Germany's

³⁸ "EFBI Policy Paper 2023-2: Autoritäre Dynamiken Und Die Unzufriedenheit Mit Der Demokratie - Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut," n.d.

democracy and East Germans, combined with the fact that the reaction to the migrant crisis had reached fever pitch among East Germans in 2015-16, caused a turn away from mainstream politics in general, and the idea of a strong, authoritarian party dedicated to defending “true” Germans (as opposed to foreigners and other minorities) became very appealing to many in the East. This explains the discrepancy in the Brähler et al. study³⁹ between the high level of agreement with democracy as an idea and the low levels for democracy in practice. In this case, as opposed to the previously discussed incidence of xenophobia, the role played by post-unification malaise is much clearer and easier to track. While the AfD almost certainly leveraged a proclivity for xenophobia in the East which is only tangentially related to the experience of German unification, its authoritarian streak can easily be tied to it. While historical factors may still play a role in it, we can confidently assert that, had East Germans not been profoundly let down by the promise of democracy, we would certainly not be seeing it to this extent.

▪ *The AfD through the lens of German unification*

Having evaluated all the relevant theories on this topic, it is now necessary to trace the process that leads to the creation of the AfD, starting with the unification. All the previously discussed elements must be accounted for when doing so, and a clear causal chain drawn out.

To explain how all of these moving parts fit together, we will begin with the first consequence of unification. Leonie Kellermann⁴⁰ finds that after the privatisation of the East German economy, the large amounts of East Germans that had found themselves without a job gravitated more and more towards political indifference, not engaging with politics. Page 17 of her study states: “individuals affected by Treuhand job loss: The probability of indicating a high or very high political interest declines by 3.7 percentage points.” When they did, they were found to vote significantly for the political extremes compared to their non-affected compatriots. Those affected were much less trusting, especially vis-à-vis institutions. Their anger, as Yoder points out, was not only a reaction to the loss of a job. East Germans saw managerial positions in companies they had worked for years go to West Germans, saw East Germans fail to participate

³⁹ “EFBI Policy Paper 2023-2: Autoritäre Dynamiken Und Die Unzufriedenheit Mit Der Demokratie - Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut,” n.d.

⁴⁰ Kellermann, “Trust We Lost.”

in national politics and began to feel like second-class citizens, a fact which is directly backed up by the Braeler et al. study, in which 33% of respondents state that they feel as such. This void, this absence of East Germans from the political discussion in their own country, is what Yoder terms the “representation gap”. Its effects are seen throughout the East, as Brähler⁴¹ in particular notes. Ultimately, this leads to the data, highlighted by Brähler, detailing how large amounts of East Germans regret the unification.

This anger was not only a principled stance at being excluded. The Treuhand had severed careers, lives built over decades that were suddenly cut short. This was particularly shocking for two reasons. First, it was a publicly administered and massive layoff. Unlike other such events, in which the blame of this trauma may be directed towards a boss, or simply misfortune, the Treuhand was sanctioned by political leaders who had a duty towards their constituents. The scale and nature of this shock was sure to leave behind scars, made deeper for a second reason: the affected had taken the stability of their positions for granted, and slowly built their life around them, their positions guaranteed by the state. When the fall came, it was all the harder. By this point, the early-to-mid 90’s, far-right organisations already had a solid foothold in the region. These were, however, mostly gangs of skinheads, their ranks swollen by the influx of disaffected youth. They were not successful politically, and for years the relevant East German party remained the former SED, which today calls itself the Linke. But they were there. The hardships endured by East Germany during the 90’s are accompanied by widespread political agitation on the part of these groups.

The negative effects of the unification are thus perceived by East Germans to be of a very particular type. The main grievances are, as Brähler finds, that democratic institutions and mainstream parties are seen to be responsible for a series of failings. The opposition sees itself as democratic, as championing those who have been left behind by West German politics. Democracy “as it functions in practice” is viewed very negatively still today, and this unease is especially felt in areas with profound AfD support. This feeling is directly tied to the experience of the unification, and specifically to the feeling of being East German in the Federal Republic. The demographic makeup of East German AfD voters as shown by Hansen et al.⁴² clearly

⁴¹ “EFBI Policy Paper 2023-2: Autoritäre Dynamiken Und Die Unzufriedenheit Mit Der Demokratie - Else-Frenkel-Brunswik-Institut,” n.d.

⁴² Hansen and Olsen, “A Tale of Two Electorates?”

indicates that this is a well accepted and “mainstream” position in East Germany, and that it is a fundamental cause for many people’s decision to vote AfD, not simply a statistical artefact. Hansen et. al. are able to tell us that East German AfD voters, compared to western ones, skew wealthier and are employed at higher rates. This is not a demographic consistent with protest votes or radical political affiliation. In East Germany, the resentment towards political institutions is not an extreme one. This is only possible because the perceived emargination of East Germans compared to the West is so far-reaching and absolute. East Germans are marginalised on all fronts. The television they watch is western, the newspapers, too. The parties, with the exception of the Linke, are the authors of the policies which many of them consider so disastrous. East Germans are left behind in the professional world, in which powerful positions are, more often than not, firmly in the hands of their western neighbours. Then, in 2015, the migrant crisis hits. Angela Merkel, who is supposed to be “one of them”, becomes synonymous with it. The fears which many East Germans have towards immigrants are, of course, partially based on discrimination. There is, however, a second element. Feeling so thoroughly left behind, an overwhelming feeling arises that “the elites are giving newcomers the care and resources that are denied to us ‘True’ Germans”, whether the word is read as a racial or as a class distinction, are now squarely in contrast with the political class of their country. This plays extremely effectively from a classic, populist perspective. A party that looks to create a narrative of the ‘pure people’ as opposed to the elites finds in East Germany a social context primed for their narrative. We can see in this event the defining features of the growing party. It is populist, appeals through xenophobic rhetoric and is increasingly at odds with the institutions of democracy. “Die da oben” (translated: “those up there”) has become a common AfD soundbite, used often and worked into their electoral programme to great effect.

This distrust in political institutions is deeply linked with nativist views. This is effectively demonstrated by Brähler, who finds that many East Germans who oppose immigration do so out of a fear that immigrants will, in essence, take away their social safety net. This is also found in the “social darwinism” measure of Brähler’s study, where large swaths of East Germans believe that immigration threatens to “replace” them. We see that the chauvinistic and populist impulses seen in many AfD voters are essentially tied to the experience of the unification, the feeling of being marginalised and ‘cut out’, which allows the AfD to frame immigration as an essential threat to East Germany, as it threatens to ‘replace’ those who are already forgotten by the state.

It is difficult to tell whether the AfD itself was the catalyst for the explosion of xenophobia in their eventual stronghold or whether they capitalised on pre-existing far-right groups and narratives which had already linked the East German experience to race (events like the infamous Lichtenhagen attack point in this direction). What is clear is that, after Merkel's speech in 2015, the AfD made antiestablishment thinking and a distinct xenophobic rhetoric politically viable. In their programme, these things are impossible to separate. It is here that the direct legacy of the unification in explaining the rise of the AfD hits a wall. The unification explains why the East sought a populist, anti-establishment party outside of the political mainstream to represent them. It, however, does not fully explain why this desire materialised in a party such as the AfD, and not one such as Die Linke. While we have observed that the issue of race is, in the mind of the East German voter, intrinsically tied to the perception of marginalisation, especially post-2014, the unresolved question remains how this underlying xenophobia came to be in the first place. It is clear that, in some form, it existed before the rise of the AfD. This question, however, lies outside of the bounds of this thesis. We can reliably demonstrate that the incidence of xenophobic sentiment increased in the years following the unification and, most importantly, we can assert with absolute confidence that the unification informs the manner in which the AfD utilizes xenophobia, which is more than sufficient to justify our initial assertion that the aforementioned three theories, including the one which links the rise of the AfD to xenophobia, all relate back to the experience of the unification. Ultimately, the xenophobic dimension of the AfD is the clearest, most direct "cause" for their success, as the mass of studies pointing towards xenophobia and chauvinism as the true link between party and followers is vast.

D. Analysis of AfD Electoral Programs

In this section, we will analyse the manner in which the AfD itself discusses these topics. To do so, we will be looking at four documents: two national election programs from the last two

election years: 2021⁴³ and 2025⁴⁴. We will also analyse two regional election programs from the regional election year 2024. We will focus on the two states with the strongest AfD support. As previous analysis tells us that the two states with strongest AfD support are Thuringia and Saxony, we will thus use the 2024 Thuringia state Election Program⁴⁵ and the 2024 Saxony Program⁴⁶ for our regional analysis. We will be looking for any direct reference to the unification, and where this is not present, we will look for cases in which the AfD mentions mainstream parties and/or political institutions as well as immigration. According to our previous findings, we will expect to observe that the AfD discusses political institutions by highlighting the political underrepresentation of their voters, and migration by, at least in part, framing migrants as a threat to the social services used by “regular” Germans.

- *Theory of Unification Trauma*

This study analyses the four documents, searching for any direct references to the unification. The AfD refers directly to the event of German unification only on a few occasions. Their 2021 National Program⁴⁷ specifically discusses the policies around the distribution of pensions in East Germany. In fact, the relevant heading begins with the words: “Neben den Ungerechtigkeiten gegenüber Familien bestehen auch 31 Jahre nach der deutschen Wiedervereinigung noch immer Ungerechtigkeiten bei der Überleitung der Ostrenten.”, which translates to “In addition to the injustices towards families, there are, 31 years after the unification, injustices in the transfer of eastern pensions.” This policy treated East and West Germany as two separate calculation areas on account of wages being lower in former East Germany. It should be noted that this issue was formally addressed in 2023.

⁴³ “20210611_AfD_Programm_2021_DRUCK_AK.Indd,” n.d., accessed February 19, 2026, https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/20210611_AfD_Programm_2021.pdf.

⁴⁴ “AfD_Bundestagswahlprogramm2025_web.Pdf,” n.d., accessed February 19, 2026, https://www.afd.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/AfD_Bundestagswahlprogramm2025_web.pdf.

⁴⁵ “Wahlprogramm_2024_web-Min.Pdf,” n.d., accessed February 19, 2026, https://afd-thueringen.de/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/wahlprogramm_2024_web-min.pdf.

⁴⁶ “Microsoft Word - Lektorat Wahlprogramm Landtagswahl 2024 Nach LPT (002).Docx,” n.d., accessed February 19, 2026, <https://afdsachsen.de/wp-content/uploads/afd-wahlprogramm-landtagswahl-sachsen-2024.pdf>.

⁴⁷ “20210611_AfD_Programm_2021_DRUCK_AK.Indd.”

Another mention occurs in the 2025 National Manifesto⁴⁸. German unification is referenced in passing, but the context is noteworthy. The Manifesto calls for the introduction of “swiss-style” referenda, and cites the event of German unification as a “lesson” on the basis of which direct democracy should be encouraged. This refers to the outpouring of public enthusiasm during the fall of the wall, not to the actual process of East German integration.

It is fair to say that discussions of German unification are almost nonexistent in these manifestos. In the very limited cases where the unification is mentioned, it tracks with their high levels of support in the East. That the unification is mentioned in the context of pension discrepancies is not a coincidence. Those who receive lower pensions due to their wages in the GDR are almost certainly older voters. This is consistent with the demographics of AfD support as established by Hansen et al⁴⁹, who tell us that AfD supporters in East Germany are a comparatively elderly group compared to the West. However, if the Theory of unification-related trauma is accurate, then the AfD is certainly not referencing it directly in their election programs.

- “Representation gap” theory

The first document analysed is the 2021 National Election Programme⁵⁰.

In the chapter titled “Democracy and rule of law”, the AfD begins by denouncing the “established parties”, who, according to the AfD, have failed to “stop the accumulation of power in EU institutions”. Immediately following this, the text claims that the “social and cultural future” of Germany, as well as the strength of its economy, has been cast aside in favour of “multiculturalism, diversity and globalism”.

It is in light of these issues that the party suggests the introduction of “swiss-style” direct democracy. It is claimed that this will “force parliament to work diligently”, as well as stopping what the party deems process of European Union (EU) centralisation. The central argument of this section may be summarized in the following quote :” We no longer trust that governments and parliaments will find viable solutions to currency crises, migration, Islamization, or the

⁴⁸ “AfD_Bundestagswahlprogramm2025_web.Pdf.”

⁴⁹ Hansen and Olsen, “A Tale of Two Electorates?”

⁵⁰ “20210611_AfD_Programm_2021_DRUCK_AK.Indd.”

energy transition. The people, as the sovereign, must—through direct participation—be the ones to carry such fateful decisions.”

German political parties are accused of holding undue power in the German electoral system. The program states:” This political instrumentalization of the state is also a cause of the widespread disillusionment with politics.”

Notably, scepticism is directed as much towards EU institutions as national ones. A section titled “EU and Europe” accuses them of attempting to create a supranational European state. This is seen as an attack on the sovereignty of the German people :”We want to preserve the sovereign, democratic nation-state. Only there can popular sovereignty be lived and practiced—the mother and the very heart of democracy.” This lays bare anxieties about a loss of political authority by a local voter base, in terms that echo the loss of political influence east Germans experienced after the fall of the wall. This is followed by multiple mentions of a central policy proposal: a German exit from the EU and the euro, which is specifically criticised.

These trends continue in their National Programme for 2025⁵¹. The EU is again described as dedicated to the construction of a separate state. Again, the program calls for the elimination of the Euro. The program calls for direct democracy on Swiss terms. Interestingly, this section is placed right after the chapter on the EU. The AfD is almost certainly connecting what it sees as a lack of sovereignty of german citizens within the EU with a proposal framed as a dramatic increase of that sovereignty:” As the only party in the Bundestag, we consider the German people to be just as politically mature as the people of Switzerland and other European states.”

The local party programs, of Thuringia and of Saxony⁵², are even more explicit in their messaging. The underrepresentation of East Germans in positions of power is an explicit topic in the program, where it is mentioned, for example, in the context of justice reform in the 2024 Thuringia Party Programme⁵³:” Anyone from East Germany who appears before a judge should be able to trust that, when their case is assessed in Thuringia, the judiciary will also take into account specifically East German life experiences and perspectives. Over more than 30 years since reunification, the way judges and prosecutors have been appointed has led to East Germans

⁵¹ “AfD_Bundestagswahlprogramm2025_web.Pdf.”

⁵² “Wahlprogramm_2024_web-Min.Pdf.”

⁵³ “Microsoft Word - Lektorat Wahlprogramm Landtagswahl 2024 Nach LPT (002).Docx.”

being represented in the Thuringian judiciary and public prosecutors' offices in a clearly disproportionate—i.e., significantly underrepresented—way. Therefore, we want to specifically promote and increase the share of East Germans in the Thuringian justice system.” This is a direct reference to an underrepresentation of East German citizens consistent with the “representation gap” theory, which states that a long-standing underrepresentation of east German citizens in positions of power and in the arena of politics leads to a distrust towards mainstream western institutions.

This distrust can be seen throughout the program. A proposal for “Swiss-style” democracy put forth in the same document begins with the following passage: “Many citizens have the impression that politicians make decisions over their heads—indeed, that politics in general has drifted far away from the realities of ordinary people. This creates distance, disappointment, and disillusionment, which weaken liberal democracy. The AfD emerged not least to give voice to this widespread feeling and to provide a remedy.” While this messaging is consistent with populist parties in general, it should be noted that the explicit connection between this disillusionment and a lack of effective representation on the part of leading parties had not been drawn in the national programs.

The program for the state of Saxony⁵⁴ does not include the direct reference to injustices in the local justice system. It does, however, mirror the one of Thuringia almost exactly in the discussion of “swiss-style” direct democracy.

Throughout these programs, clear anxieties about democracy are present. The constant calls for direct democracy are a clear indication of this sentiment. However, we cannot state with certainty that these sentiments are caused by the East-West split, as the manifestos give us little material to work with in this regard, except for one direct reference to the representation of East Germans in the justice system.

- *Value Differences Theory*

The topic of immigration is the AfD’s most used argument. Accordingly, it features heavily in their electoral manifestos. It not only has a dedicated chapter in each document, but is also

⁵⁴ “Wahlprogramm_2024_web-Min.Pdf.”

mentioned in passing in sections that are actually discussing seemingly unrelated topics. As such, this analysis will focus primarily on the dedicated chapters, but will include other mentions of immigration when necessary. Crucially, our analysis will limit itself to the AfD's assessment of the effects of immigration, and will not include the numerous policy proposals these programs include. Our question is thus: "What is it about immigration the AfD thinks needs fixing?"

The 2021 Programme⁵⁵ gives us an initial summary: "The consequences of this (immigration) are uncontrolled population growth, overstretched public finances, significantly rising crime, and threats to the social security systems and the housing market." This frames Immigration as a drag on the state and especially as a risk for citizens who might be "pushed out" of the social security system and housing market. The allusion to "uncontrolled population growth" is of particular interest. Germany does not suffer from overpopulation, and its declining birthrate is common knowledge. When the AfD talks about "uncontrolled population growth" it is in fact talking about the proportion of people with a migration background in Germany. This short snippet already frames this "uncontrolled (migratory) population growth" as an event which leads to the marginalisation of the AfD's prospective voter.

The AfD is also quick to present the issue as a fundamental disconnect between the German political leadership and "the people". In the introduction to their "Swiss-style" democracy proposal, it is presented as an example of where this policy would be most necessary: "We no longer trust that governments and parliaments will find viable solutions to currency crises, migration, Islamization, or the energy transition. The people, as the sovereign, must—through direct participation—be the ones to make and bear responsibility for such fateful decisions." This section directly links the issue of immigration to a deficit of political representation in the country. It is important to note the use of the word "islamisierung", or "islamisation" in English. This term historically refers to the spread of Islam, but in the context of German politics it is used to describe the perceived erosion of "true" germanhood through an influx of middle eastern refugees. Crucially, it designates a critique of migration for ethnic reasons. It is not a practical concern, but the anxiety that "we" will become more like "them". The word features in the very name of PEGIDA, the organisation with distinctly extremist ties. It was expected that a

⁵⁵ "20210611_AfD_Programm_2021_DRUCK_AK.Indd."

document such as a political manifesto would be careful to sidestep any explicitly islamophobic statements, but the use of the term “islamisation” nonetheless communicates that the concerns with immigration are not only practical, but very much based on chauvinism.

The 2021 National Programme⁵⁶, as expected, also has a dedicated section on immigration. In the introduction, the party lays out what it considers to be the causes behind immigration: “Alongside armed conflicts and state persecution, the enormous population growth on the African continent plays a particularly decisive role. Because this is associated with poverty and the struggle for daily survival, migration pressure, on Europe especially, increases.” This description, not unlike the previous comment, is meant to paint Europe, and by extension its people, as vulnerable in the face of an onslaught of desperate immigrants, who are not described as anything but a burden. This, the document claims, has led to the “destabilisation of Germany”.

These trends continue in the 2025 National Manifesto⁵⁷. The dedicated section on immigration describes its ills in almost the same terms as the one from 2021: it mentions public finances, crime, strains on social security, the housing market and includes a section on home ownership begins with the words: “In large parts of Germany, there is a housing shortage, among other reasons due to uncontrolled immigration.” The immediate reference to immigration when discussing this sensitive, class-related topic is very telling. It enforces the idea that the reason why the reader does not occupy a certain status within the country, in this case home ownership, is down to being “squeezed out” by immigrants. We have seen that these are anxieties which have been accelerated by the unification, as the “representation gap” theory suggests. It will thus be very telling to see how this is discussed in the regional East German programs.

The local election programs link migration with the loss of services for “true” German citizens much more directly. The state programme for Saxony⁵⁸ defines the ills of immigration in several sections. First, when talking about schools, it claims: “Migration exacerbates the teacher shortage through a large and unforeseen number of children of compulsory school age. Furthermore, it has become apparent that these children—partly due to insufficient language

⁵⁶ “20210611_AfD_Programm_2021_DRUCK_AK.Indd.”

⁵⁷ “AfD_Bundestagswahlprogramm2025_web.Pdf.”

⁵⁸ “Wahlprogramm_2024_web-Min.Pdf.”

skills—are unable to follow lessons well and thereby hinder native pupils in their learning progress.” And, separately: “As a result of uncontrolled mass immigration, Germany is receiving mostly low-skilled and unskilled people who, for the foreseeable future, will not contribute to social security contributions and tax revenues. Because of this, these immigrants must be supported both now and in retirement. Our welfare state cannot sustain this in the long run.”

We already see how the party is connecting immigration to the anxieties around a lack of public services. This logic is reiterated repeatedly: “Not only are reception capacities exhausted; in more and more areas of life an ever-present overload is also becoming evident: daycare centers, schools, housing, healthcare, nursing care, security, and public administration. Uncontrolled mass immigration has become a danger to social peace in our country, to our cultural identity, and to our Christian-Western system of values.”

Here, again, public services are a major point of anxiety. We also note the presence of “cultural” grievances, and the word islamification is used once more. This is a recurring point. The section on schools also states: “Serving only ‘halal’ food in cafeterias is an expression of an ongoing Islamization, which we firmly oppose.”

The Program for Thuringia ⁵⁹is, in this sense, very similar. Two statements in particular define how this program frames the issue of immigration. The first is brought up is reference to social service reform: “Germany is experiencing a shortage of skilled workers and labor despite immigration in the millions. This reveals the failure of the concept of recruiting workers through uncontrolled mass immigration. For years, instead of immigration of skilled workers, we have primarily been seeing immigration into the social welfare systems.” The second is the introduction to the section on immigration: “Without restraint, the politicians of the established (“old”) parties spend taxpayers’ money on countless questionable projects and purposes—for example, on the indoctrination of children and young people, or on financing comprehensive medical care for asylum seekers that is not even legally required.”

While national election programs heavily criticize immigration, the link between this and the marginalisation of “native” Germans is highlighted more readily in the regional ones. This,

⁵⁹ “Microsoft Word - Lektorat Wahlprogramm Landtagswahl 2024 Nach LPT (002).Docx.”

however, does not confirm or deny our conclusions on the “value differences” theory. We can confidently state that the AfD speaks to anxieties around public services when discussing immigration, but to what extent these are related to the immigration, and to what extent they are masking blunt xenophobia, we cannot tell from these manifestos.

- *What this analysis tells us*

This analysis of AfD manifestos is largely inconclusive. We have little to no direct references to the unification, and almost no discussion of East-West disparity. We have concrete evidence that the AfD discusses democratic institutions and immigration in ways we would expect from our analysis of the studies. Regarding political representation, they highlight the democratic deficit in the German parliament and the distance between the political mainstream and the people. Their discussion of immigration revolves around the anxieties of their voters of being displaced, both culturally and in the context of public services. However, without being able to identify clear links to the unification, we cannot see this material as a clear confirmation of our theory. Explicit references to the unification, which would definitely back up the conclusions taken from the literature, are possibly found in other forms of the AfD’s messaging, such as online or on local rallies and AfD gatherings.

Conclusions

The rise of the AfD in Germany in the late 2010’s surprised many. It was long considered impossible for a far-right populist party to re-emerge in Germany, yet the AfD is currently leading the German polls. The East of the country is particularly concerned. It is here that the AfD initially rose to power and where its strongholds are. When trying to explain the reasons behind the rise of the AfD, we must acknowledge its Eastern character. German unification in 1990 led to a challenging period of adaptation, in particular in the East.

The aim of this thesis was thus to evaluate the influence that the event of German unification had on the rise of the AfD party.

In order to answer the question, we conducted a comprehensive literature review of the most relevant studies on the subject. We classified these into the most prominent theories behind this phenomenon, the “theory of unification trauma”, the “representation gap” theory and the “value

differences” theory, and evaluated the role that German unification plays in each of them. We then analysed four relevant AfD electoral programs, checking if their content is consistent with those theories.

As a result, we read these three theories not as competing with each other, but as explaining different stages of the process which led to the rise of the AfD. We illustrate that this process begins with the event of German unification. The analysed literature proposes several causes for the emergence of the party. We state that these causes are direct consequences of the process of the unification, at least in part. The policies of the unification caused, as stated by Kellermann, profound resentment in East German society during the early 90’s. This initial resentment was, as Yoder illustrates, accelerated by the underrepresentation of East Germans by the German political establishment. This created a profound feeling of insecurity and the sensation of being second-class citizens. This malaise exploded in 2015, when the migrant crisis exacerbated East German feelings of being “left behind”, which in turn re-ignited xenophobic tendencies in the region. The AfD’s opposition to the policies of Merkel addressed those fears, and at the same time gave East Germans the political representation they longed for, anchoring the AfD in the region in the manner we see today.

The analysis of AfD manifestos does not conclusively back up this story. It does confirm parts of it, such as the fact that the AfD capitalizes on anxieties surrounding lacking political representation and marginalisation of their voters, but there are little to no direct references to the unification in the material. This fact opens the door for future research, but also does not discount our conclusion, it merely fails to support it completely.

The scarce use of quantitative statistical methods could be seen as a limitation of this study. The shown numerical data has been used descriptively. We used it to illustrate patterns, but did not conduct our own statistical analysis. Moreover, the analysis in section E is based on the AfD’s electoral programs. These give the best insight on the official positions of the party, but are not the AfD’s chosen medium of communication with their voters, and as such do not give the best indications on what motivates people to choose the party.

The strength of this thesis is its systematic literature review, which synthesises the findings of the most relevant studies on this matter into a unified explanation for the AfD’s success in East Germany, with particular attention to the legacies of German unification. In this the work is

original. To add to our work, it would be valuable in the future to conduct a thorough observational study of the AfD's messaging, focusing on social media campaigns, local gatherings and campaign materials.

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