

Assignment 2 - Research Proposal

What explains the recent electoral success of the Alternative for Germany?

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Introduction

Within less than three years of being founded by discontented members of the incumbent Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the newly-formed party “Alternative for Germany” (AfD) has already achieved extraordinary vote share in the General election of 2013, the European Parliament election of 2014, (Arzheimer 2015) and lately in the three state elections in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, and Saxony-Anhalt held on March 2016. The rise of a party that stands against European Integration, argues for a re-arrangement of Germany’s liberal foreign and economic policies, and vows for taking strong measure against immigrants, has presented a novel scenario into understanding factors that drive electorate to vote for a party that seemingly stands against the ‘norm of the land’. Thus this research proposal endeavors to understand the factors that explain the success and rise of AfD in Germany’s political landscape. In the following, we present current literature, and identify the plausible datasets and methodology that this research is going to base on. All work is done using the software R (R Core Team 2015).

The Research Project

On March 13, 2016, Germany’s political landscape experienced “a landslide”(Pausch 2016). At the three state elections in Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, and Saxony-Anhalt, the AfD received double digit results from scratch, meaning that it has not been present in the state parliaments before. In Baden-Württemberg (BW), the party received 15.1%, in Rhineland-Palatinate (RP) 12.6%, and in Saxony-Anhalt (SA) even 24.3% (Baden-Wuerttemberg 2016; Rheinland-Pfalz 2016; Sachsen-Anhalt 2016), becoming the third strongest party in BW and RP, and the second strongest in SA. Not only does the tremendous success of this new political player harden the set up of the future governments in the respective states, it is also a clear sign that the party has arrived in German mainstream politics (Gathmann and Wittrock 2016).

Our main research question is:

“What explains the recent electoral success of the AfD in the different constituencies of Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, and Saxony-Anhalt?”

We want to understand which structural factors affect the electoral success of the AfD and whether the characteristics of its voters identified in post-election analyses are reflected in the constituency level data. Furthermore, we want to find out whether the AfD success follows the same patterns as the electoral success of radical right populist parties in the rest of Western Europe.

About the AfD

Having been founded in February 2013 initially as a eurosceptic party, the AfD just missed the entry into the German national parliament at the federal elections in September 2013 by only 125,000 votes (Schmitt-Beck 2014). Not a single party in the post-war era was that successful in national elections being only established seven months before(Niedermayer 2015). This emergence is attributed to the Eurocrisis and chancellor Merkel’s strong state interventionist austerity politics that opened political potential to the right of the established right wing parties CDU/CSU and FDP. The AfD recognized that potential and positioned itself initially

as an expert knowledge based eurosceptic party. But over the last years, it became a new host for now unrepresented national conservatives as well as right wing populists. The unifying factors for these different groups are the anti-establishment attitude of the AfD and the image of being the political underdog who is “honest” in face of political and medial lies. In this regard, the AfD shares similarities to other European right wing populist parties (Haeusler and Roeser 2015).

The recent refugee crisis that has hit Europe and especially Germany is seen as a major factor that led to new and increased support for the AfD. Chancellor Angela Merkels slogan “Wir schaffen das”, expressing optimism with regards to the capability of government and society to handle the refugee crisis, was mostly criticized by members of the AfD and to some extent from the CDU itself. As long as the refugee crisis persists, it is assumed that the AfD is going to continue to gain more support (Gathmann and Wittrock 2016). After the March elections, a large debate arose within the CDU/CSU whether the refugee crisis response by chancellor Merkel was responsible for the loss in votes for the CDU. Interestingly, leaders of other parties who supported Merkels “Wir schaffen das” experienced less loss of votes. However, left parties such as “Die Linke” seemed to be especially vulnerable to the emergence of the AfD (Gathmann and Wittrock 2016). Also, the social democrats (SPD) seem to have lost many voters to the AfD (Pausch 2016).

Literature review

Early analysis of the elections has shown that the AfD was especially successful in mobilizing former non-voters (Gathmann and Wittrock 2016). It was also very successful amongst labourers and unemployed people. In Saxony-Anhalt, almost one third of this group voted for the AfD. But the analysis also showed that more people with medium education and income voted for the AfD. It is suggested that they are increasingly afraid of change, see the refugee crisis as a culmination of external threat, and are skeptical in the governments capacity to solve it (Pausch 2016).

In a mixed-methods study focussing on the AfD’s history, self-description, positioning in the public discourse, and its supporters, Berbuir, Lewandowsky, and Siri (2015) found that the party can be described as a “functional equivalent for a right-wing populist party in a country where right-wing politics are strongly stigmatised” (Berbuir, Lewandowsky, and Siri 2015). For our research this means that the AfD can be located in the tradition of new radical right wing populist (RRWP) parties in Western Europe.

When it comes to the understanding of the rise of RRWP parties, Ivarsflaten (2008) and Swank and Betz (2003) offer important insights. In her large scale study comparing the electoral success of RRWP parties, Ivarsflaten (2008) found that successful RRWP parties almost always used anti-immigration rhetorics in their electoral campaigns. The other two focus areas of RRWP parties - opposing political elitism and complains about the economic development - were not always instrumentalized by successful RRWP parties and seem to be more context specific. Swank and Betz (2003) analyzed the impact of globalization on the electoral success of RRWP parties in national elections in 16 Western European nations between 1981 and 1998. Their core finding was that the generosity of the welfare state was an important factor that mitigated the impact of economic globalizations on the rise of RRWP parties. Besides that, they found that the volume of refugees and asylum seekers, the level of international immigration, the height of domestic tax burden, previous electoral success of left libertarian parties, and the past voteshare of the RRWP parties all systematically and positively influenced their electoral success. In some occasions, previously declining strength of established right-wing parties was another factor that explained RRWP party success. Interestingly, slow economic growth and the rate of people employed in manufacturing jobs did not have a significant impacts (Swank and Betz 2003, 230).

Hypotheses

Based on the insights from previous research on the success of RRWP parties in Western Europe and the findings from post-election analysis for the AfD, we aim to test the following hypotheses for the three state elections.

Demographic hypotheses

H1a: The average level of education in a constituency has a negative impact on the electoral success of the AfD.

H1b: The unemployment rate in a constituency has a positive impact on the electoral success of the AfD.

Foreign exposure hypothesis

H2: The volume of refugees and asylum seekers in a constituency has a positive impact on the electoral success of the AfD.

Economic hypothesis

H3: The height of local tax rates has a positive impact on the electoral success of the AfD.

Political hypotheses

H4a: The rate of non-voters in previous state elections in a constituency has a positive impact on the electoral success of the AfD.

H4b: Declining voteshare of established right wing parties in previous state elections in a constituency has a positive impact on the electoral success of the AfD.

The last hypothesis is based on the assumption that it is the left-shift of established right parties that opens up potential for the AfD. A left-shift of a conservative party often occurs when it faces political pressure which should be visible in a relative decline in vote share when comparing the previous two state elections.

Data sources and methodology

We access the electoral data via the State Offices for Statistics in Baden-Württemberg (Baden-Wuerttemberg 2016), Rhineland-Palatinate (Rheinland-Pfalz 2016), and Saxony-Anhalt (Sachsen-Anhalt 2016). We will use the datasets on the March 2016 and the previous two elections in order to retrieve the secondary vote share of the AfD as our dependent variable, and the previous vote shares of right wing parties for hypothesis H4b. The rate of previous non-voters is also retrieved from these datasets. The Federal Returning Officer (Bundeswahlleiter 2013) offers data on constituency level containing information on the unemployment rate, the level of education, and business tax (which we will use as a proxy for local taxation). The Federal Statistical Office DESTATIS (Bundesamt 2015) provides data on the number of refugees in the constituencies. This data is available on county level, which is why we will disaggregate the data according to the population size in each constituency.

After merging the data, we will first analyse descriptive statistics in the form of maps, graphs, and distributions in order to provide a basic overview of the trends in the data. Since our dependent variable is vote share of AfD, we will perform OLS estimations and run different linear models. Besides, we expect to run interaction models in order to test our aforementioned hypotheses.

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