Nationalism's deep roots

New research finds parallels between German votes in 1933 and now

In some regions, support for the far right in 2017 echoes votes for the pre-war Nazis

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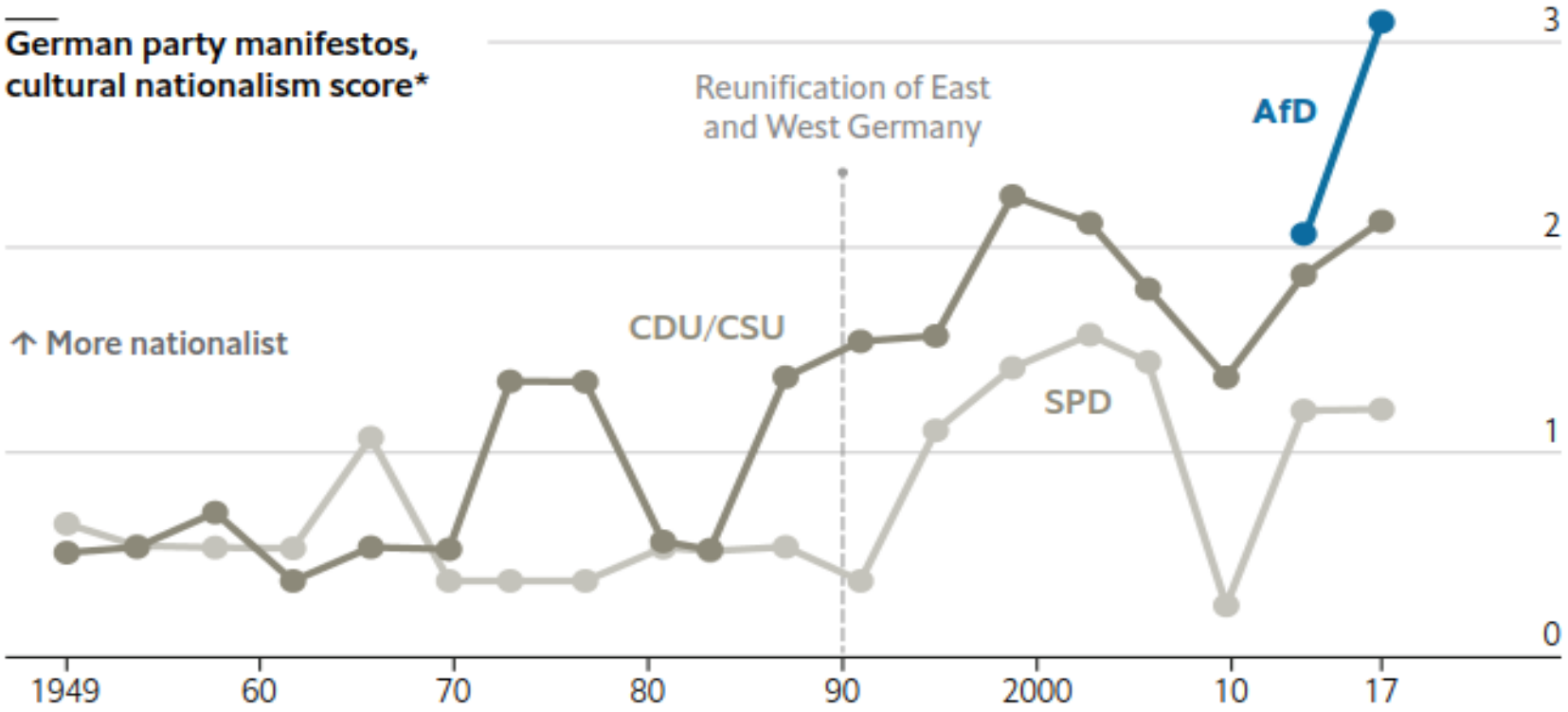
The Alternative for Germany (AfD) is the most culturally nationalist party to enter parliament in post-war Germany



*Harmonic mean of standardised Manifesto Project scores for supporting a "national way of life" and "traditional morality", and opposing "multiculturalism", re-scaled to positive numbers

FEW COUNTRIES have done more than Germany to repent of the sins of the past. Its post-war constitution banned Nazi symbols and anti-democratic parties. For decades the conservative Christian Democratic Union has guarded the right-wing frontier of German politics and kept extremists out of parliament.

Against this background, many Germans were alarmed when the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) won 13% of the vote in 2017, making it the third-biggest force in parliament. The party was founded to oppose EU bail-outs of debt-stricken countries like Greece, which many Germans saw as a transfer from industrious German taxpayers to feckless Greeks. In 2013 it fell short of the 5% of votes needed to enter parliament. The AfD was then transformed as nationalists took it over and began to rail against immigrants and Islam.

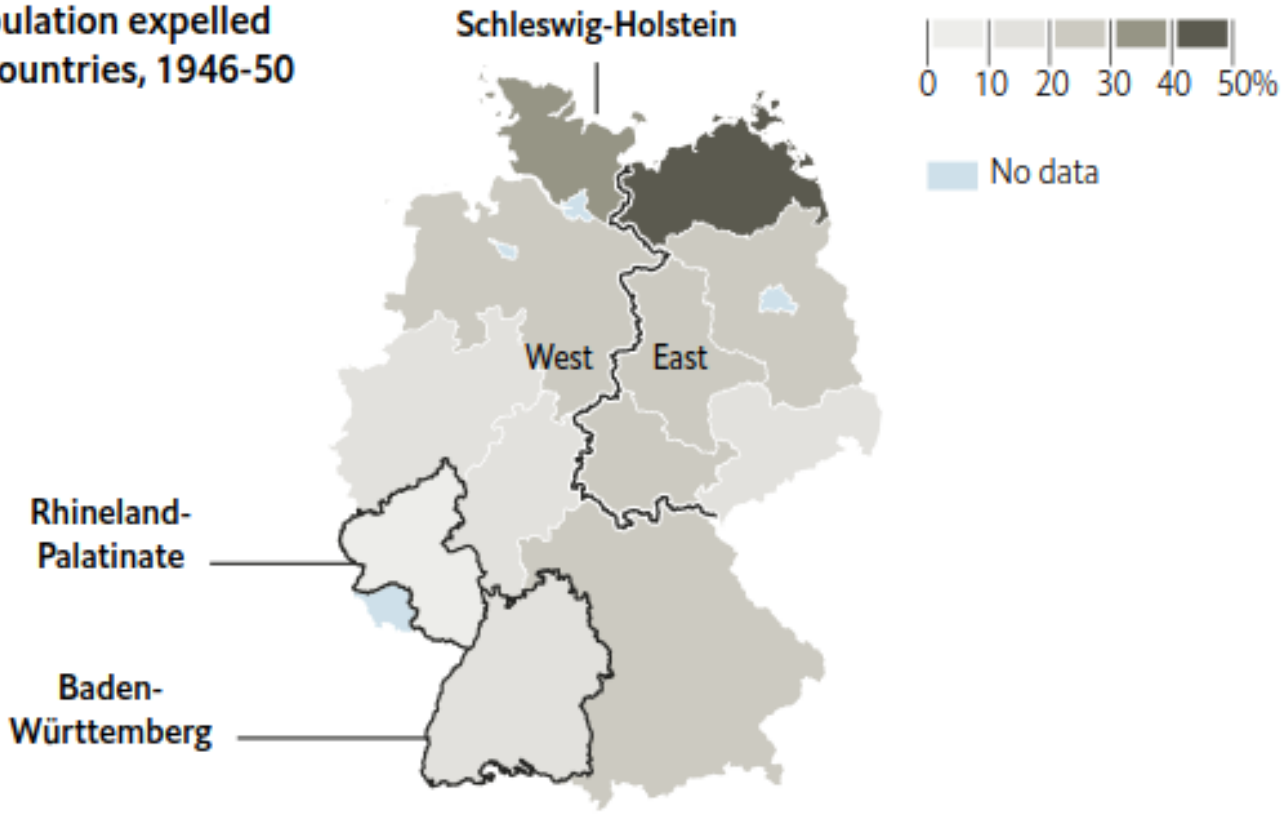
The AfD rejects the "extremist" label. People seen giving Nazi salutes have "nothing to do with our party", said Beatrix von Storch, its deputy leader. And it goes without saying that the AfD's agenda, though distasteful to liberals, is not remotely similar to that of the Third Reich.

But a new paper finds an uncomfortable overlap between the parts of Germany that support the AfD and those that voted for the Nazis in 1933. At first glance, the link is invisible. The Nazis fared well in northern states like Schleswig-Holstein; the AfD did best in the former East Germany.

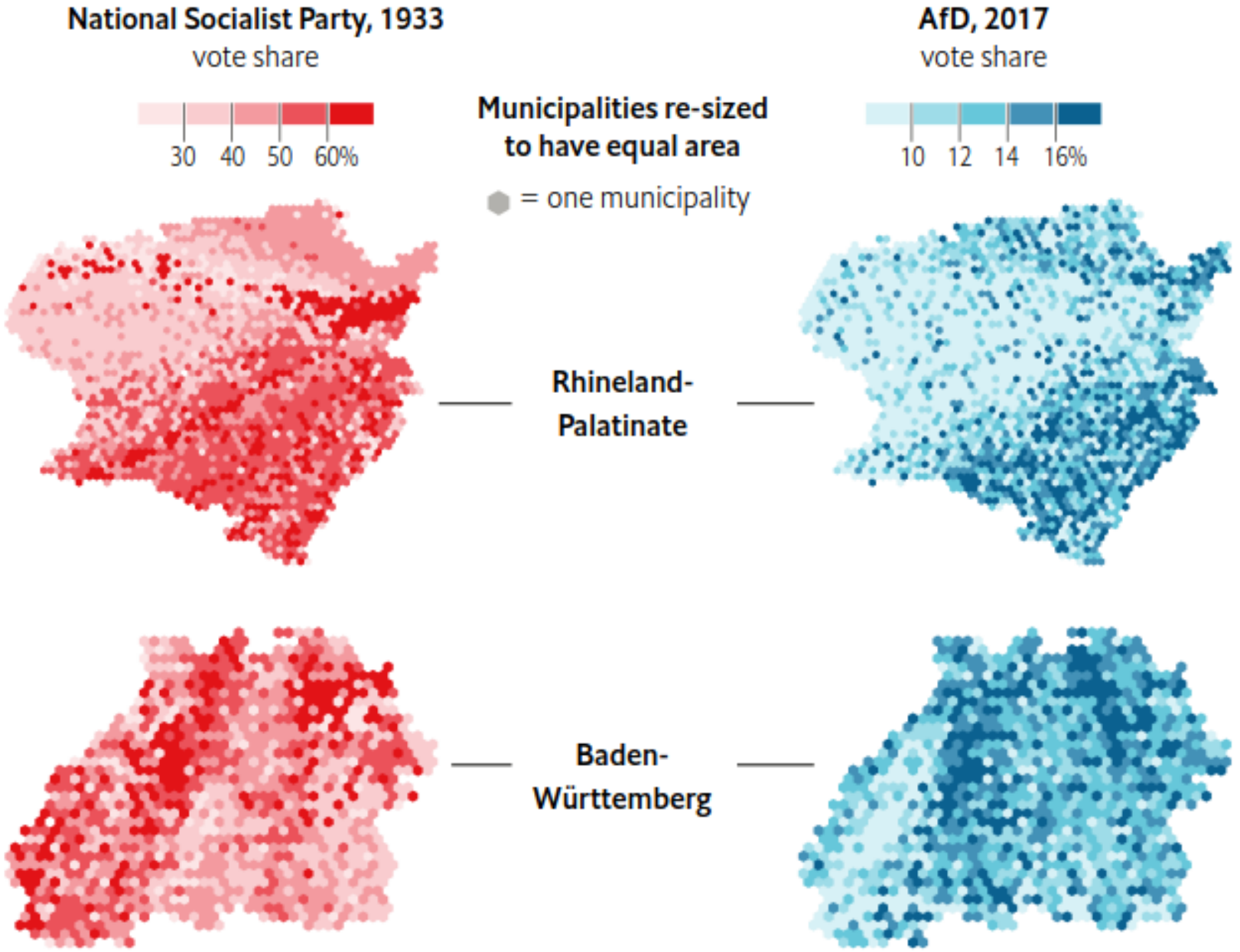
However, northern Germany has changed a lot. After the war, 12m ethnic Germans living in territory ceded to other countries fled to Germany. They flocked to northern states—by 1950 "expellees" made up 36% of Schleswig-Holstein—but mostly avoided the south-west. These transfers reshuffled Germany's political map.

Post-war population transfers changed politics across Germany.
But few migrants settled in the south-west, preserving pre-war demographics

Share of population expelled from other countries, 1946-50



Within the south-western states that received few migrants, AfD did best in municipalities that had voted for the Nazis



It is only in areas where pre-war demographics still persist that electoral maps show strong echoes of the past. Parts of the south-west that backed the Nazis in 1933 also embraced the AfD, and those that shunned Hitler rejected it. Overall, the paper's authors found that among municipalities with average far-right support but few expellees, a 1% increase in the Nazis' vote share in 1933 was associated with an extra 0.3-0.5% gain for the AfD from 2013-17.

These findings should be understood in a modern context. The Nazis are not coming back. But it seems that modern German nationalism has deep historic roots.

Sources: "Persistence and Activation of Right-Wing Political Ideology", by D. Cantoni, F. Hagemeister, M. Westcott and E. Bogucka, 2019; Manifesto Project

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