Two Moments of Far-Right Populism:
Examining the Success of the Alternative for Germany Party and the Failure of Die Republikaner

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Acknowledgments
Introduction

Right-wing populism is on the rise in Germany.

Since the terrorist attacks on 9/11, and then seven years later the advent of the Great Recession, European citizens have increasingly aligned with political ideologies on the far right—ideologies that stand in opposition to continued membership to the European Union and also preach anti-immigrant rhetoric. To answer this demand, a wave of far-right populist parties across Europe have formed and realigned to capitalize on the political opportunities that these increasingly normalized ideologies offer. The success of this wave is best seen in the successes of far-right parties; the UK Independence Party, the FNP in France, the True Finns in Finland, the Denmark People’s Party, and more in Northern Europe have all seen significant increases in far-right electoral results and legislative victories. Most of these parties hold platforms promising to provide more for the “native” residents of each nation—whether that means denying immigrants, restricting social programs to citizens, or leaving the EU entirely.

But up until 2013, Germany had resisted this trend of euroscepticism and anti-immigrant sentiment at the national party level. No electoral seats had been won by any parties espousing these kinds of views. But something rapidly changed leading up to the 2013 election. Five months before voting opened on September 22, 2013, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party announced its formation. The AfD announced a platform of anti-Euro economic policy and anti-immigration policy and managed to win 4.7% of the vote in the national election (bundeswahlleiter.de). Though the 4.7% was not enough to win any seats, the AfD continued its upward trajectory into the 2017 federal elections. The official German Bundestag website reports that on Saturday, September 23, 2017, the AfD won 13.3% of the national vote, gaining 94 seats in the German national legislative body. In four years, the AfD nearly tripled its votes at the
national level. The AfD, whose leadership have “called on Germany to stop apologizing for — and indeed to ‘be proud of’ — its Nazi past” (Schuetz), have now become the third most popular political party in Germany in a span of less than five years.

This is surprising because Germany is one of the last places one would expect for right wing populism to find footing in Europe today. Not only is the German economy doing exceptionally well compared to other EU nations, but its history of Nazism necessitated the construction of cultural and institutional boundaries to far-right populism. This new rise of right-wing populism is also puzzling because there have been prior expressions of post-war right-wing populism in Germany that have born no fruit. Three decades ago, Germany struggled with cultural, economic, and structural factors that theory would deem rich soil for the incubation and growth of a far right-wing populist movement. In this environment, talk-show host and former Waffen-SS Nazi Franz Schoenhuber formed the Republikaner, a right-wing populist party with a Germany first platform (Betz). Despite its promising results at local and European elections, the Republikaner stumbled in the 1992 national elections receiving only 2.1% of the vote and failed to gain any seats in the German Bundestag (Betz). No other national political party espousing eurosceptic ideals and anti-immigrant policy was able to gain seats in the Bundestag. Germany demonstrated in the early 90s that, despite economic hardships and ideological divisions, there was no place for the extreme right-wing in legitimate national political roles.

The German case shows that anti-immigrant and isolationist politics can take hold even in the most unlikely of places. The research puzzle I seek to solve is this: why is right-wing populism popular in Germany now, and why did previous post-war expressions of right-wing populism fail to garner the same support?
At this moment, I have three working hypotheses to explain this political phenomenon. The first is the mobilization of a cultural fear in the context of mass migration. The second is economic insecurity and the search to scapegoat those economic fears. The third is a hypothesis that borrows from the literature on the contagion and diffusion effect to suggest that regional pressures could be responsible for this new rise of right-wing populism in Germany. To date, my preliminary research suggests that the German case is a combination of these three hypotheses.

*Mobilization of Cultural Fears*

Germans are unwilling to accept particular kinds of immigration - especially with immigrants originating from the Middle East. Though Germany has a historical trend of mass migration from Turkey, in the 80s and 90s, a good portion of immigration into Germany came from white Eastern European nations. These immigrants moved into Western Europe during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union or gained entry into Germany through official worker programs. Now we see a surge of non-white, irregular immigration from the Middle East and more specifically Syria. According to the International Organization for Migration, Germany became the “largest single recipient of first-time individual asylum claims globally” (IOM), giving Germany a leading role in damage control during the Syrian Refugee Crisis. These immigrants are seeing unprecedented pushback from the German people; this could be a product of security concerns with the rise of ISIS, or lingering islamophobic attitudes from 9/11 and the bombings in 2007. The anti-Islamic immigration discourse has also created a space for anti-euro immigration.

*Economic insecurity*

Germany’s relatively recent position as the economic powerhouse of the European Union has caused resentment in its populous. In the 1980s and 90s when the Republikaner made its
attempt at power, Germany was economically reliant on its neighboring European nations; isolationism was not appealing. But now it has had to bail several neighboring nations out in light of the Eurozone Crisis. The AfD has had the advantage of playing up the EU as a burden on the strong German economy. On top of this, rising costs have made it easier for a party like the AfD to attempt to restrict social programs to citizens.

*Regional Pressure*

The third possibility I will explore is that external pressure from the rise of right-wing populism in Europe could be a normalizing factor. There is a school of thought called the contagion and diffusion effect that suggests that political movements and phenomena can spread in waves. This theory has been used to explain political violence, war, and democratization. But I believe it could be used to examine the spread of far right populism. The rise of the FNP in France, UKIP in the UK, Jobbik in Hungary, and the Finns Party in Finland, it is possible that the success of the AfD in Germany is just part of the populist wave sweeping through Europe.

The literature on populism has evolved greatly out of its beginnings in the study of Latin American politics – that body of literature concerns itself primarily with left-wing populism based on clientelism. Though I will engage with classical populist scholars, I will primarily focus on modern populism theorists and neopopulism theorists as they have worked to extract populism from its regional eccentricities in Latin America to create a more general framework for populism in the rest of the world (Mudde, Kaltwasser, de Koster, Cannon). I will pay close attention to those who write specifically on right-wing populism (Georg-Betz, Boyte).

Euroscepticism is a region-specific form of economic skepticism that will be crucial to study for my research. It is especially relevant to far right politics as it is typically accompanied by nationalist rhetoric and policy. The AfD is largely defined by its euroscepticism, as it
originally formed on a platform of euroscepticism. Scholars in this field of study debate whether euroscepticism is more driven by economic motivations or nationalism and xenophobia (Hobolt, Bouard, Weldon, Schmitt, Jolly, Hooghe, Topaloff, Espada). The Contagion and Confusion Effect is a political wave theory that argues for the possibility of political phenomena spreading across borders and cultures with sustained momentum (Starr, Lindborg, Hill, Rothchild, Strang, Elkins, Li, Thompson). Given that Europe has seen a rise in right-wing populism and euroscepticism, this body of scholarship will provide a potential explanation for why this phenomenon seems to be spreading.

For this research project, I will engage with scholars who write about populist theory, euroscepticism and nationalism, and contagion and diffusion theory. I will use the single case model of Germany and will compare the Alternative for Germany Party in 2013-2017 to the Republican Party in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I recognize the limitations in using only a single case, but I believe that comparing two moments in in Germany will allow me to isolate cultural, economic, and political variables that have led to this rise of right wing populism, and will also help to map the trajectory of populism in Western Europe over the course of several decades. The German case is a least likely place for right-wing populism to arise, yet we see it nonetheless. Studying Germany closely will illuminate the way populism gains traction in adverse environments.
Literature Review

There is a wealth of scholarship on populism. Early populist theory focused on defining populism and defending the validity of its study, but as the post-WWII geopolitical landscape has developed, so too has the way scholars approach populism study. The scholarship has evolved as populism has manifested so differently dependent on political setting and region. It has come in waves following waves of populism across the world and across modern history. In this literature review, I will focus on what populist theorists point to as the conditions which make radical right-wing populist parties possible, attractive, and successful. For the sake of this interview I will define populism as a discursive form of politics which pits a group perceived as the morally pure people against the corrupt elite (Mudde, 543). I will focus on right-wing populism as a reaction to crises both domestic and international. I will then explore contagion and diffusion theory to consider the possibility that right-wing populism can spread across borders. This may shed some light on the recent rise of right-wing populism in Western Europe.

Populism Rises Due to Economic Crises

Though populism operates at the state level, several populist scholars assert that the rise of populism must be considered in the global political economic context. Populist theorists are in a constant conversation about how economic crises and dynamics contribute to or allow for the rise and sustainability of populism. Though it is almost uniformly agreed on that an economic element is necessary for the success of both left and right populism, there are several schools of thought about the way that the populous and parties interact with the economy to create fertile ground for populism.
In his chapter, “Populism and Latin America: context, causes, characteristics, and consequences,” Barry Cannon contrasts modern populism with classical populism and claims that “Populism as a political system…cannot be solely identified with a specific set of economic policies but must be seen in the context of international economic norms and must be set within a wider geopolitical context” (Cannon, 20). The global context for the allowance of populism is crucial, as Cannon asserts that populism can thrive “in a variety of economic and political situations” (20). In this light, populism is less dependent on the function of domestic institutions, and more dependent on the global context. Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser expands on this concept, using American politics as an example. He writes, “the appearance of the Tea Party in the United states is directly related to the impact of the current economic crisis on the electorate” (Kaltwasser, 195) and that the global crisis has opened the electorate up to the appeals of populist leadership. In “Populist Social Movements of the Great Recession, Paris Aslandis blends social movement theory and populist theory to examine the varying populist movements that have emerged specifically due to the Great recession (Aslandis, 301). Though Kaltwasser points to the current dearth of literature discussing populism in the light of global economic crises, it may prove to be an emerging field of analysis in light of the Great Recession.

Walter Baier adds to this contemporary analysis of the rise of right-wing populism by examining the means by which right-wing populist parties organize politically around economic crises. He concludes that an economic crisis like the Great Recession benefits right-wing populists over left-wing populists in that it affects the less-educated working class disproportionately. Joining him in this camp that analyzes economic crises at the party mobilization level are a number of scholars (Betzelt, Bode, Hooghe, Kozo).
Other scholars examine the effectiveness of scapegoating economic insecurities on big, complicated targets (Jolly, Espada, Hobolt, Lifland, Sutcliffe, Topaloff, Weldon, Kipfer). They look specifically at how right-wing populist parties scapegoated the European economic crisis during the Great Recession on the EU. This dynamic of right-wing populism is limited to regions that participate in supranational government or have major trade agreements – specifically Europe and the US. Parties seeking to exploit an economic crisis often point at supranational organizations as being responsible for economic failings as they can be perceived as overly complicated by the populous and many voters are unaware of the mechanisms by which they function.

**Right-Wing Populism Rises as a Response to Slow Bureaucracy and Corruption**

Right-wing populist groups often find themselves in opposition with what they perceive to be the elite – this is typically the government or “establishment.” Some scholars stress that the presence of a large, slow bureaucracy creates fertile ground for populism. In his book *Everyday Politics*, Harry C. Boyte uses the American context as an example for populism in response to big government. When examining Ronald Reagan’s appeals to populism, Boyte cites a speech in which Reagan calls for the “end of giantism” and a “return of power to the people” (Boyte, 33). In Reagan’s speech we see the creation of two agonistic groups who are pitted against each other in the political space. Boyte stresses that right-wing populists will target not only government elitism, but intellectual elitism as well. He uses the example of George W. Bush appealing to the people by targeting Al Gore’s use of technical language.

In their book, *Populism, A Very Short Introduction*, Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser echo this assertion about big government’s effects on populism. They write that “For
any political actor to be successful, there must be a demand for her message,” (Mudde et al, 99) and that this demand is often created by very mainstream messages. They write, “…many people think that the (political) establishment is dishonest and self-serving, makes corrupt deals behind closed doors, and does not care about the opinions of the majority…Many people believe that ‘the people’ should take the most important decisions…” (Mudde et al, 99). These ideas remain mainstream until populist groups see an ability to capitalize – this opportunity usually comes amidst crisis. Mudde writes, “This is why major policy failures…and, above all, disclosures of cases of systematic corruption can work as a catalyst for populist attitudes among the population” (Mudde, 100), providing context for when opportunistic populists have the opportunity to act.

Some scholars argue that populism can arise attached to a charismatic leader (Cannon, Knight). With a charismatic leader, Barry Cannon argues, who ‘the people’ are and who ‘the corrupt elite’ are depends on the discourse of the leader (Cannon, 20). Cannon goes on to argue that for populism to function, it is the responsibility of the leader to define the people (21). These leaders are often considered political outsiders, situating them well within the anti-establishment traditions of populism.

**Right-Wing Populism rises because it is a Pathology of Democracy**

There is a school of thought that argues that the emergence of right-wing populism is inevitable in western democracies, as right-wing populism is based in values fundamentally opposed to western democracy. These scholars include E.g. Herbert Kitschelt, and Anthony McGann, and others who graft psychological analysis onto political systems in Western Europe.
to conclude that right-wing populism in Western Europe essentially comes from paranoia generated by democratic political systems. This explanation, however, is considered outdated. Cas Mudde agrees with Kitschelt and McGann that the nativism and authoritarianism of right-wing populist groups are anti-democratic, but insists that the reason for their rise is not to be found in this dynamic. He insists that, though the ideas of right-wing populist groups are undemocratic, they “are not alien to the mainstream ideologies of western democracy and populist radical Right attitudes are not just shared by a tiny minority of the European population” (Mudde, 6).

**Populism Rises amidst Nationalist Cultural Crises**

Some scholars argue that populism rises when the ‘the people’ feel threatened by ‘the alien.’ This school of thought is again in line with the larger body of populist literature which defines populism as a politics of division. This school of thought aligns populism with nativism and xenophobia to examine how populist parties are able to define ‘the people’ along lines of race and culture.

In his paper, “The Two Faces of Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe,” Hans-Georg Betz defines a specific kind of right-wing populist party by writing, “National populist parties are primarily working-class parties which espouse a radically xenophobic and authoritarian program” (Betz, 663), which shifts the dynamics of populism from the people vs the elite to the people vs the outsiders. He asserts that “radical right-wing populist parties are a reflection and expression of new political conflicts created by the transition to postindustrial capitalism” (663), pointing to a shift in economic culture as the source of this xenophobic populism. The populist parties themselves capitalize on the cultural clashes by exploiting
“sentiments of anxiety, envy, resentment, and disenchantment, and their appeal to the allegedly superior common sense of the common people against the dominant cultural and political consensus” (664).

This discussion is echoed by Willem de Koster, Peter Achterberg, Jeroen van der Waal, and Lena Bustikova. They explain that the cultural crisis in the Netherlands is that “entitlements to welfare services are for the most part irrespective of one’s origins” (de Koster et al, 5) and that “This has been fiercely criticized by new-rightist parties, which would like to restrict welfare entitlements to the native population” (5). This is in direct response to new immigration into the Netherlands and represents a turning point in national identity for the Netherlands. The new-rightist parties have also used this opportunity as an excuse to promote “the anti-establishment attitudes and the ‘anti-institutional mood’ characteristic of populism” (6).

An extension of these nationalist populist attitudes can be found in Thomas Pettigrew’s scholarship and in Mustafa Aksakal and Kerstin Schmidt-Verkerk’s report “New Migration Trends in Germany” in which they detail the history of immigration into Germany and the current state of immigration. They cite a recent trend of discussion around social benefits not only for new immigrants, but for those deemed “people with migration background” (Aksakal et al, 10). This term has been coined to consider the socioeconomic stratification not only of new immigrants but of “people who moved to the present-day territory of the Federal Republic of Germany after 1949, as well as all foreigners born in Germany and all Germans born in Germany with at least one parent who immigrated or was born as a foreigner in Germany” (10).

Simon Bornschier agrees that populism often succeeds based on the exploitation of cultural divides, but he qualifies that xenophobia and cultural fear is not enough to maintain power once populist seeds have been sewn. He explains that a populist party must continue to
find divides to exploit, whether they be new cultural divides or different economic divides. Other scholars refer to geopolitical variables to explain the success of the exploitation of cultural divides (Casanova, Jens, Knight, Jaschke). They argue that cultural fears often make for richer political soil if they are exploited in areas of closer proximity to the perceived threat. In this school of thought, islamophobia is more easily exploited in areas that are physically closer to Islamic nations. Alan Knight also looks at the way urban proximities are exploited in cases of populism in Latin America.

The Contagion and Diffusion of Political Phenomena

There is a body of literature specifically concerned with the way political ideas and trends cross borders in waves like viral infections. The scholars concerned with this discuss whether the phenomena occurring within state boundaries are able to jump borders and affect surrounding states. Scholars in this field of study typically examine phenomena like violent conflict or democratization – both of which are destabilizing phenomena capable of achieving regime change. Though their studies are not centered around populism, it is possible that this effect could be present in the spread of populism; often populist members of the radical right are perceived as heralding some extent of regime change. I believe the lack of study of populism through this lens has left a sizeable hole in populist theory considering the regional spread of populism. I will borrow from this body of work to examine the ways that populism can spread.

Several scholars that are pro contagion and diffusion are Richard Li and William Thompson, Harvey Starr and Christina Lindborg, David Strang and John Meyer, and Zachary Elkins. In “Coup Contagion Hypothesis,” Li and Thompson gather empirical data from Latin America, Africa, and Southeast Asia to conclude that “some systemic if not overwhelming
support for the coup contagion hypothesis has been found” (Li et al, 80). Their study is specifically concerned with the spread of military coups from neighboring state to neighboring state. They believe this happens because of “behavioral reinforcement processes operating within global and regional communication networks” (63). Starr and Lindborg use a similar data set to test the contagion model against the process of democratization to ask whether neighboring countries achieving democracy increases the likelihood that others will. They find that there is a “sustained trend toward the growth of [free] states in the system and positive transitions towards democracy” (Starr et al, 515). They also emphasize that this effect can be seen not just in democratization but in general regime transition (515). This broadens the scope of the contagion effect. Strang and Meyer argue that the political phenomena that tend to diffuse through borders are those considered to be “modern” (Strang et al, 506). They conclude, “We see such cultural factors as adding to relational understandings of diffusion, as pointing to distinctively patterned outcomes, and as suggesting alternative designs for diffusion analyses” (506). Lastly, Zachary Elkin writes of the contagion of democratization as it pertains to new nations founded after WWII. He argues, “that the initial constitutions of such countries are largely democratic has much to do with the momentum implicit in a wave of democracy” (Elkin, 59). He does qualify, however, that more precise empirical tests are necessary as the study of contagion theory develops (59).

Opposing those who accept the contagion and diffusion theory are Stuart Hill and Donald Rothchild, and Peter Leeson and Andrea Dean. Though they do not deny the existence of the contagion effect, these scholars believe that the effect is much less significant than it was previously thought. Hill and Rothchild produced a report in which they tested 130 countries over the past century and a half and found that “Countries ‘catch’ only about 11% of their average
geographic neighbors’ changes in democracy” (Hill et al, 546). This result would suggest that, while political phenomena can spread over borders, it doesn’t spread with the same wave-like momentum that other scholars saw. They warn that “foreign policy should not pretend that democratic increases in one country will lead…to a ‘democratic revolution’ in the larger region…” (547). In “Contagion of Political Conflict,” Leeson and Dean argue that the contagion effect is only relevant if the catching nation demonstrates “a recent history of domestic strife and will increase if a society is polarized among a few contending groups” (Leeson et al, Dean).

This spectrum of study on populism paints a broad picture of trends and possibilities for the rise of populism across the globe. Though all of the above arguments have legitimacy within the geopolitical regions with which they engage, it is my goal to look specifically at which of these are the primary contributors in Germany to join the conversation about populist growth in Western Europe.
Chapter 1: Right-Wing Opportunism in Relation to Cultural Fear

My first chapter focuses on the mobilization of cultural fears in the face of mass migration as a possible explanation for the success of the Alternative for Germany Party, and the failure of the Republican Party. Though the post-WWII narrative of German immigration is one of consistently high immigration levels, the way that each party used immigration to fuel their platforms varies. In addition, the two moments that the parties were operating in experienced different varieties of immigration. These differences could be a major explanation for the success of the AfD and the failure of the Republicans.

On the surface, the stories of the formation and political goals of the Alternative for Germany Party of the 2010s and the Republican Party of the 1980s and 90s are very similar. They both formed as fractures formed when more extreme members of mainstream parties decided they had had enough and wanted to drill down on specific, pressing issues. Just the same, the stories of immigration being told in these two eras appear similar, on the surface; a Germany in the midst of accepting foreigners for the sake of asylum and economic growth. The right-wing rhetoric about these immigrants was just as vitriolic in either case. Given these seeming similarities, how could it be that immigration could be the factor responsible for the failure of the Republican Party and the recent success of the Alternative for Germany Party?

To evaluate this question, I will first establish the historical timeline of major periods of immigration in post-World War II German history. I will then engage with the literature written about far-right populists and immigration to investigate the nuances of these two distinct moments of immigration history. I will incorporate both the domestic and international reporting on the parties’ stances on immigration along with the parties’ own literature on immigration to
establish a clearer picture about how each party attempted to leverage the nature of the immigration in their respective moments. From this point, we can evaluate whether each party’s use of cultural fear in light of mass migration was a major determining factor in the success or failure of their platform.

**Post WWII German Immigration**

My understanding of the post-WWII history of German immigration is largely informed by the work of the Documentation Centre and Museum of Migration in Germany. They a deep archive of immigration documents from this time period, and the following summary is synthesized from their work.

Post WWII West Germany was marked by a major economic issue: the lack of a labor force. To combat this and rebuild Germany, the West German government negotiated a series of foreign worker agreements between the years of 1955 and 1968 with the countries of – in order of agreement date - Italy, Greece, Spain, Turkey, Morocco, Portugal, Tunisia, and Yugoslavia (DOMiD.org). These guest workers proved a massive boon to the German economy and resulted in the German unemployment rate shrinking from eleven-percent to one-percent in the years between 1950 and 1961, according to the Documentation Centre and Museum of Migration in Germany. It was the German populace’s understanding that these arrangements would be temporary. This will become very important. The guest workers represented opportunity to the German population, as the guests typically filled the lower-paying jobs that Germans did not want to do and gave the Germans access to more favorable positions.
According to DOMiD, the economic crisis that Germany suffered in 1966-67 represented the first time that Germans began to point fingers at the foreign worker population as a curse, and not a blessing. In 1974, attitudes toward foreign workers resulted in the blockage of entry of guest workers from outside the European Economic Community, essentially banning the non-white guest workers from Morocco, Tunisia, and Turkey, along with those guest workers from Yugoslavia.

The fall of the Soviet Union and Reunification brought new challenges of immigration as governments crumbled, civil war raged in former Yugoslavia, and a human rights crisis in Turkey brought an influx of asylum seekers to Germany. At certain points in the 90s, immigration rates exceeded the rates during the recruitment of guest workers. This coincided with acts of violence towards remaining guest workers and new asylum seekers. Germany sought to limit the influx of refugees by making it illegal for asylum seekers to enter Germany by land, which is how most had previously arrived.

9/11 changed the attitudes toward immigrants across the globe, and in Germany with its relatively large Muslim population, these effects were magnified. According to a German Socioeconomic Panel study called “The Effects of 9/11 on Attitudes Toward Immigration and the Moderating Role of Education,” the 9/11 terror attacks had a measurable effect in reducing German’s post-Nazi anxieties about publicly expressing xenophobic sentiment (Schueller, 11). This increase in public tolerance of xenophobia coincided with the most massive shift in migration policy since the guest worker programs. The Immigration Act of 2005, or Gesetz zur Steuerung und Begrenzung der Zuwanderung und zur Regelung des Aufenthalts und der Integration von Unionsbürgern und Ausländern, made cultural integration of those seeking citizenship or asylum a legal duty instead of an encouraged option (DOMiD). German cultural
and language classes became mandatory, and in 2008 a naturalization test was introduced as a requirement for citizenship.

This was the established German position on immigration in place when the Syrian Civil War began in 2011 and asylum seekers came knocking on Germany’s door in droves. Since then, Germany has had to reconsider its position in the world as a safe haven for asylum seekers. According to the International Organization for Migration, Germany became the “largest single recipient of first-time individual asylum claims globally” in 2015 (IOM). This is at the center of the German political mindset.

**Nationalism at the Center of Party Policy**

For my argument about the mobilization of cultural fears to be relevant, it is essential that it is grounded in the existing theory pertaining to populism and the far right. Populism is a political force that feeds on fear, crisis, and division. And scholars who study right-wing populism agree that one of the major kinds of crisis that right-wing populists capitalize on are cultural.

In his pan-European study on right-wing populism, Simon Bornschier defines right-wing populists by several factors: their rejection of the established socio-cultural and sociopolitical system, their pronounced advocacy of individual achievement, the rejection of individual and social equality, their opposition to the social integration of marginalized groups and the extension of democratic rights to them, and their promotion of xenophobia, if not overt racism (Bornschier, 664). This collection of traits grafts perfectly onto the rhetoric and agenda of both the Alternative for Germany Party and the Republican Party.
When writing on the trajectory of the Republican Party, Cas Mudde states, “The primary ideological feature of the party literature is and always has been nationalism…” (Mudde, 41). Another central trait to populism is an Us vs Them mentality, which, in the case of right-wing populism, tends to manifest itself as enthrno-nationalism. At the time of its relative popularity in the late 1980s, the Republican Party’s official stance was of “…restricting German nationality to foreigners that are genuinely prepared to dedicate themselves to the German nation ‘as if it was their own’” (Mudde, 42). This platform is a clear example of “if you’re not with us, you’re against us” politics which establish cultural “others” as threats to the normative culture of a society. One of the Republican Party’s slogans, in fact, was “Deutschland den Deutschen,” meaning Germany for the Germans (Mudde, 43).

The AfD, in its “Manifesto for Germany,” sees its core duties as to “Preserve German Culture, Language, and Identity,” maintain “German as Predominant Culture instead of Multiculturalism,” and to evaluate “Islam and its Tense Relationship with our Value System” (AfD, 2). This manifesto establishes opposition to non-traditionally German cultures as central to the platform of the AfD. These tendencies of fostering otherness and exploiting cultural fears were employed by the Republicans 3 decades earlier, but to little or no avail. So why is it working now?

Perhaps the most effective way of observing the differences between the cases of the AfD and the Republicans is to look at the nature of the mass migration which each of them sought to address. Both parties functioned during times of great turbulence in immigration. In both cases, massive conflict and political strife precipitated the displacement of millions of people, and Germany’s post-WWII position made it a prime recipient for asylum seekers.
The late 80s and early 90s was a period of massive displacement and immigration in Europe. Though there was the stream of regular immigration from approved European nations through the still intact worker programs, there were also several new streams of mass migration into Germany. As the Soviet Union crumbled and nations were destabilized, new sources of asylum seekers emerged to take refuge in Germany. The Yugoslavian civil war brought Serbian refugees across the border. On top of this was the problem of the remaining guest workers from the guest worker agreements of the 1950s and 1960s. According to an article in Der Spiegel by Matthias Bartsch, there was an assumption that “…the ‘guest workers’ would return home one day…” (Bartsch) when the German people originally backed the government’s guest worker policies.

Clearly, this was not the case. All the sudden, it was the 1990s and the vast majority of the guest workers were still in the country. Many of them had children who were German citizens because they had been born on German soil. The Turkish population represented a problem for Germans with nationalist leanings. Bartsch writes that a study conducted by the Berlin Institute for Population and Development concluded that the population of 3 million Turkish immigrants were less well-integrated than any other immigrant population within Germany (Bartsch). There had originally been the intention of a rotation clause within the guest worker agreements that would cycle out workers every two years to avoid permanent residence, but “pressure from German industry, which was loath to pay the costs of constantly training new workers” (Bartsch) saw to the end of that clause. Repeated military coups and slow economic growth discouraged Turkish immigrants from returning home to Turkey.

The Republicans sought to be the answer to German anxiety over the new immigrants along with those remaining from the worker programs. A key tenet of the Republican Party was
that “Germany is not allowed to become an immigration country” (Mudde, 43). They would reject a society that fostered multiculturalism and there would be strict rules surrounding admission of immigrants and the duration of stay. Guest workers would also not be allowed to bring family members, reducing the risk of children being born within the German borders and granting them citizenship (Mudde, 43). It was also the party’s official stance that “the fall of communism had made European asylum seekers impossible and…refugees should be received in their own cultural environment” (Mudde, 43), meaning that it was the duty of culturally similar nations to accept asylum seekers.

When the fight was lost to eliminate all forms of asylum-seeking, the Republicans attempted to focus strictly on Islamic immigration and asylum seekers. In 1992, near the end of their relevance, the Republicans demanded that those wishing to integrate into the German community must be “…giving up exaggerated national-religious behavior, which disturbs the peaceful living together within our society” (Mudde, 47). This final, unsuccessful attempt at pursuing enthno-nationalist goals is reflective of Simon Bornschier’s writing on the failure of right-wing populism in Germany. Bornschier explains that xenophobic sentiment and cultural fears can be successfully exploited by populist politicians only so long as the issues remain relevant (Bornschier, 136). In 1992, immigration and asylum seekers were not the focus of most Germans. Though immigration rates were high, the most successful parties were those focused on post-Reunification efforts. While the CDU focused on rebuilding Germany, the Republicans appeared to be banging the same old tired drum.

The AfD, on the other hand, struck while the iron was hot. The party began as an anti-euro, Eurosceptic party in 2013 at the height of Europe’s debt crisis (France 24). On this platform it managed to earn 4.7% of the national vote (bundeswahlleiter.de), which was enough
to make a splash, but not enough to win any seats in the Bundestag. When the Syrian refugee crisis became a real issue for German voters, the rhetoric around the party changed. According to France 24, its rise in popularity can be attributed to its switch to a primarily anti-immigrant party (France 24). In the 2017 election, the AfD won 13.3% of the national vote, took 94 seats and became the third most powerful party in Germany (bundeswahlleiter.de). This is a far cry from the fleeting influence of the Republican Party. What is it about the modern moment of immigration that has allowed the AfD to be so successful compared to the Republican Party?

One possibility is the nature of the immigration. Whereas in the 80s and 90s immigration into Germany was split between foreign workers, white Yugoslavian asylum seekers, and those displaced during the fall of the Soviet Union, the modern moment of immigration is defined overwhelmingly by asylum seekers from the Syrian civil war. The international rhetoric surrounding the refugees from Syria has been dominated by discussions of international and national security. Because of the rise of ISIS, there is a different kind of fear about Syrian refugees than there ever was about Turkish refugees. The discourse revolves around violent terrorists who may seek access to Western nations by disguising themselves as refugees and inflicting massive amounts of damage through acts of terror.

The AfD has capitalized on this fear. One needs look no further than the AfD official manifesto to see how blatantly they broadcast their anti-Islamic message. Though the AfD claims to pledge “…its unconditional support to the freedom of faith, worship and conscience” (AfD, 47), it “firmly opposes Islamic practice which is directed against our liberal-democratic constitutional order, our laws, and the Judeo-Christian and Humanist foundations of our culture” (AfD), seeming to only support the practice of Islam if it conforms to a Judeo-Christian value system. In fact, despite its alleged support of the freedom to worship as one chooses, the AfD’s
official stance is that it sees the “expansion and ever-increasing number of Muslims in the country…as a danger to our state, our society, and our values” (AfD, 48). On top of this, the AfD agenda also proposes that “Imams who want to preach in Germany need to obtain the government’s authorization…Without exception, they have to pledge themselves to our constitutional order and must preach in German…” (AfD, 48). All of these policies are direct obstacles to the increased influence of Islam within Germany, and to those Germans who harbor strong fears about the growth of Islam, they can now see that there is a party seeking to concretely address those fears.

The irony in the Islamophobic support of the AfD is that the clear majority of the AfD’s voting base live in areas where Syrian asylum seekers have not been housed. The two images below show where asylum seekers are being accepted (left) and the AfD vote share (right).

As can be clearly seen, the areas that voted in the highest numbers for the AfD were the areas that accepted the least asylum seekers. The truth of the matter is that those voting for the AfD along anti-Islamic lines would have very little interaction with Syrian refugees to begin
with. Those who do have the proximity to Syrian refugees do not seem to be interested in voting for an anti-Islamic party.

Another possibility for why the AfD was able to much more effectively leverage mass migration than the Republicans is due to the fact that the AfD is operating in a post-9/11 setting. Though 9/11 was an attack on American soil, it represented an attack on the West to the international community. Schueller’s study, “The Effects of 9/11 on Attitudes Toward Immigration and the Moderating Role of Education” is the first to establish a link between the terror attacks on 9/11 and an overall increase in xenophobic and Islamophobic sentiment in Germany. Schueller claims that her study finds a “…shift to more negative attitudes toward immigration among German residents as a result of the 9/11 terror attacks” (Schueller, 3). Her study finds that anti-immigrant sentiment in Germany increased by 38 to 44 percent after 9/11, and that tolerance for xenophobia increased by 29 to 36 percent (Schueller, 13).

This could establish 9/11 as a watershed moment for German immigration policy. Part of Germany’s lack of tolerance for a far-right populist party prior to 9/11 is its relative proximity to Nazism and the xenophobia central to that ideology. It was unfavorable to promote xenophobic sentiment in the public sphere in Germany before 9/11, and even at the peak of its popularity, the Republican party scraped by with just over two-percent of the national vote. However, after 9/11 we saw substantial immigration policy changes that could be seen as a reaction to 9/11. The previously discussed Immigration Act of 2005 was a deliberate attempt to more quickly integrate immigrants into German society. But this push for integration has echoes of the AfD’s German language and culture requirements. On top of the Immigration Act came the introduction of naturalization tests which functioned as confirmation that those seeking residence in Germany were invested in German culture and society.
It could very well be the case that Germany set the stage for the AfD’s success with its post-9/11 willingness to prioritize German culture in law and policy. Where the Republican Party lacked the backing of established policies for German cultural prioritization, the AfD formed on fertile ground and capitalized quickly enough on the fears of mass migration during the Syrian Refugee Crisis to be more than a flash in the pan. The fears that the Republicans’ supporters experienced were cultural. The fears of AfD supporters are that of violence and invasion. These fears have been made all the more legitimate by the terrorist acts of 9/11 and the rise of Isis during the Syrian Refugee Crisis.

When viewed through the lens of the mobilization of cultural fears for political gain, the AfD and the Republican Party look very similar. They employed similar tactics and had nearly identical official rhetoric spelling out the desire to enact anti-immigrant policy at the national level to protect and maintain the culture of the German state. Though this political tactic floundered in the early 1990s and ultimately lead to the demise of the Republican Party, it has represented a winning strategy for the newly founded AfD. The AfD’s existence in a post-9/11 world where cultural fears have turned to fears of violence and annihilation has made its anti-immigrant, anti-Islamic platform all the more appealing to defensive Germans in rural and non-integrated areas.
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