A societal shift to the right or the political mobilisation of a shrinking minority: Explaining rise and radicalisation of the AfD in Germany

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A societal shift to the right or the political mobilisation of a shrinking minority? Explaining rise and radicalisation of the AfD in Germany

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Abstract: This paper discusses whether the swift rise and radicalisation of the AfD as the first electorally successful far-right party in Germany in decades was caused by a general societal shift to the right. It first operationalises the concept of a shift towards the (far) right with references to Norberto Bobbio and Cas Mudde. Then it discusses whether such a shift has taken place on four levels: public policy, political behaviour, individual attitudes, and public discourse. The picture is heterogeneous but offers no compelling evidence for a societal shift to the right. As an alternative explanation, the paper argues that the rise and radicalisation of the AfD should rather be understood as the formation of a far-right project in reaction to an ambivalent process of liberalisation – a process of liberalisation that can itself be endangered by this far-right formation.

Keywords: far right; alternative for germany; alternative für Deuschland; AfD; populist radical right; extreme right; right-wing extremism; German politics; normalisation; mainstreaming of far-right parties.

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Biographical notes: Floris Biskamp is a Political Scientist and Sociologist and currently heads a research group studying the changing boundaries of sayability in political discourse in Germany at University of Tübingen. He is also a Post-Doctoral researcher in the Graduate Program Right-Wing Populist Social Policy and Exclusive Solidarity. His work focuses on political theory, political economy, political education, the far right, and racism.

1 Introduction

In 2017, the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland, AfD) became the first party since 1961 to enter the German Bundestag to the right of the conservative CDU/CSU and the liberal FDP, easily clearing the 5% threshold with 12.6%. In 2021, the party was able to repeat this success with only minor losses down to 10.3%. And not only does the AfD sit to the right of conservatives and liberals, it can also be classified as a

party of the far right, the populist radical right or even extreme right. While such a categorisation was doubtful in its early years from 2013 to 2015 (Lewandowsky, 2015), the party underwent a continuous radicalisation process leading it from an ordoliberal populism open to far-right elements via positions of the populist radical right towards the extreme right [Pfahl-Traughber, 2019; Quent, (2019), pp.40–43]. Thus, one can hardly be surprised that the party's continued successes have caused alarm in the German public. The impression of fundamental crisis and change was aggravated by the international context, most notably by Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential election, the result of the Brexit referendum in the same year and the various successes of far-right parties in democracies all over the world.

In this context, various authors put forward the thesis that the rise and radicalisation of the AfD is based on a 'Rechtsruck' in German society, i.e., a sudden societal shift to the right (e.g., Butterwegge, 2018; Häusler, 2018; Metz and Seesslen, 2018). In public discourse, this assessment is then quickly generalised and serves as an interpretative frame for all kinds of individual events: every electoral success of the AfD in Germany or of other far-right parties abroad, every racist or sexist statement by a mainstream politician or a public figure, every instance of far-right crime or violence, every restrictive policy on migration or policing is explained by and at the same time serves as further evidence for this supposed shift to the right.

However, the facticity of such a shift to the right is mostly presumed rather than demonstrated. In this paper, I put this presumption to a test and discuss the question whether German society as a whole is shifting towards the far right, concluding that most evidence contradicts this common perception and points towards a different explanation for the rise of the AfD: There is a continued, yet ambivalent process of liberalisation provoking the formation of a far-right project as a counter-reaction. This reactive project mobilises a minority with far-right worldviews and enables the successes of the AfD – a minority that is shrinking and ageing, if one takes a long-term view with a nation-wide scope but which remains stable in specific regions particularly in the East.

In the remainder of the paper, I will first operationalise the notion of a shift to the right (Section 2). Then I discuss whether such a development can be observed on different levels: the level of public policy (Section 3), the level of political behaviour (Section 4), the level of individual attitudes (Section 5), and the level of public discourse (Section 6). After mostly refuting the thesis of a shift towards the far right, I propose an alternative perspective explaining the rise of the AfD as the formation of a far-right project in reaction to an ambivalent liberalisation process (Section 7).

2 What is the (far) right and what would a shift towards the far right look like?

The most widely accepted conceptualisation of the left/right distinction was brought forward by Norbert Bobbio in his 1994 book *Left and Right. The Significance of a Political Distinction*. According to Bobbio, left and right are distinguished by their positions on social equality and inequality: The left views inequality as an artificial phenomenon caused by contingent social processes; hence, left-wing politics aims at promoting equality. The right considers inequality a natural phenomenon that cannot or should not be politically overcome; hence, right-wing politics aims at maintaining

inequality and countering leftist attempts to meddle with nature [Bobbio, (1996), pp.60–71].

Such an abstract definition leaves room for different ways of being right-wing (or left-wing). Bobbio's further differentiation within the right is primarily based on the distinction between a democratic/moderate right and an extreme right, both of which have their mirror images on the left [Bobbio, (1996), pp.5–6, 18–28, 54–55, 72–79]. It is plausible to make such a distinction. However, it comes with the problem of focusing on the intensity of pursuing equality or inequality. This renders the whole conceptualisation one-dimensional, creating the image of a linear spectrum reaching from the extreme left via the moderate left and the moderate right to the extreme right.

However, it is important to understand that there are qualitatively different ways of being right-wing, i.e., of welcoming inequality – and these qualitative differences tend to become invisible if one focuses on intensity. Bobbio explicitly leaves room for such qualitative differentiations. For example, he argues that (economic) liberalism (in the European, not the US-American sense) is an ideology of the right, since it aims to preserve inequality – namely the inequality that is the outcome of market forces at work in the interactions of individuals with equal rights. This way of endorsing inequality and therefore being right-wing is, however, qualitatively different from that of conservative ideologies aiming to preserve certain traditional social hierarchies (between strata or genders, e.g.) for their supposed inherent value [Bobbio, (1996), pp.51–55]. It is not necessarily the case that conservatism is further to the right than liberalism – for example, the inequalities produced by the implementation of a strictly market radical form of liberal ideology could be far greater and require much more violence than the implementation of some forms of conservative traditionalism. Rather than being different in intensity, these forms of being right-wing are different in quality because they aim at preserving different forms of inequality for different reasons using different institutional forms. If one accepts such qualitative differentiation, the political space can no longer be viewed as a one-dimensional spectrum reaching from the extreme left to the extreme right with moderate intermediate stages. This means that the spatial metaphors of left, right, centre right, extreme right, and far right should be used with some degree of caution, because they become misleading if taken too literally.

If one differentiates between different forms of being right-wing, the same applies to the notion of societal shifts to the right. Society could potentially shift towards different kinds of right, and a shift towards one kind of right does not necessarily imply a shift towards another kind of right. If a country implements market liberal reforms, it can be said to shift to the right and it will probably become more unequal. However, this does not necessarily mean that it shifts closer to the political objectives of far-right parties, some of which are decidedly not market liberals.

If the notion of a shift to the right is supposed to explain the rise of far-right parties in general or the AfD in particular, then it should be a shift towards their kind of being right-wing and not a shift towards being right-wing in general. According to Cas Mudde, the far right is defined by the combination of the two core ideologies nativism and authoritarianism. Nativism is an ethnic form of nationalism demanding that the state shall privilege the members of a supposed native community and exclude or discriminate against those that are deemed different [Mudde, (2019), p.27]. Authoritarianism is marked by the 'belief in a strictly ordered society, in which infringements on authority are to be punished severely' [Mudde, (2019), p.29]. The far right is then further differentiated into the radical right and the extreme right. According to Mudde, the

radical right is illiberal due to its nativism and authoritarianism, yet it still supports the institutions of democratic representation, albeit in a populist way. The extreme right is openly anti-democratic [Mudde, (2019), pp.30–31].

When it comes to defining the far right as a party family, such a minimal definition with relatively few core ideologies as criteria is very useful. Yet, it must be noted that there are more ideologies and topics that are typical for the far right [Botsch, (2012), pp.85–86; Mudde, (2019), pp.31–45]. One question of particular importance for the far right in Germany has long been the ideological framing of the National Socialist past. German nationalism in general and the German far right in particular face the challenge that the German state led by a far-right government committed what are widely considered the most hideous crimes in human history. The German far right found different ways of dealing with this challenge. Some far-right actors in post-war Germany actively endorsed National Socialism and the Holocaust; others downplayed its crimes, e.g., by relativising or denying the Holocaust; yet others distanced themselves from National Socialism but downplayed its relevance in German history or framed it as a leftist movement due to the reference to socialism [Botsch, (2012), pp.113–116].

Thus, a shift to the right that could explain the rise of the AfD as a far-right party should be a shift into the direction of the core ideologies of the far right: nativism and authoritarianism; in the German case, one would also expect a shift towards justifying National Socialism or downplaying its crimes. Such a shift could be observed on different levels: On the level of public policy, legislation and executive decisions should increasingly line up with far-right ideologies (Section 3), on the level of political behaviour, the extent or intensity of far-right activism should rise (Section 4); on the level of individual attitudes, worldviews in line with far-right ideologies should become more prevalent (Section 5); and on the level of public discourse, statements in line with these ideologies should become more common or normalised (Section 6).

If the shift is supposed to explain the rise and radicalisation of the AfD in the mid-2010s, it should have taken place between 2005 and 2015. Depending on data availability the following section will at least include data for the years since 2000 but, if possible, also from earlier decades to contextualise the supposed shift.

3 Public policy

One could assume that a societal shift to the far right manifests itself in the domain of public policy. This is not self-evident but rather presupposes that the government is responsive to society – be it to voters and their preferences, to civil society organisations, or to economic interest groups. If one supposes such a responsiveness, then it is plausible that a societal shift to the far right is mirrored in legislation and executive policies increasingly shifting toward far-right positions. When searching for such public policy changes indicative of a societal shift towards the far right, three fields seem most promising: For the core ideology of nativism, the field of immigration and integration is most relevant. Authoritarianism, the other core ideology, can take many forms, one being law-and-order ideology which can best be observed on the field of domestic security and policing, another being the belief in hierarchic norms regarding gender and sexuality which can be observed on the fields of family and gender policy.

Looking at migration policy, there is one aspect where legislation became increasingly repressive and at first glance seems to have shifted towards far-right

nativism: legislation on the access to the right to asylum. Since the 1990s, legislation on this issue mainly aimed at restricting access, thereby undermining the individual right to asylum guaranteed by the German constitution. This is true for the 'asylum compromise' of 1993 as well as the various 'asylum packages' after 2015 and the latest attempts to find new regulations on the European level (Pelzer and Pichl, 2016; Pichl, 2023). However, the interpretation of these policies as a shift towards far-right nativism is contradicted by two factors. First, the increasing legal restrictions are a political reaction to the fact that the practical opportunities for international refugees to come to Germany and apply for asylum have increased significantly since the 1970s due to the dissolution of the socialist block and a general expansion of international travel. In spite of all legal restrictions, the number of refugees coming to Germany and applying for asylum has increased not decreased over the decades – the same is true for the number of immigrants in general [Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, (2023), p.5; Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung, 2023]. One can plausibly argue that the new legal restrictions are normatively wrong and constitute a violation of human rights. But one should not be under the illusion that politics and society Germany were ever unconditionally open to refugees only because the constitutions stated it. There is no anti-racist past in which it would have been considered a self-evident duty to accept hundreds of thousands of refugees from Asian and African countries. The right to asylum was always contested (Poutrus, 2019). Thus, the restrictive legislation cannot plausibly be interpreted as a shift towards nativism. Second, the tightening of asylum law is accompanied by an institutionalisation of integration policy aiming at the social and economic participation of immigrants and their offspring. One can find many aspects of German integration policy problematic. But if one compares today's situation with that of the preceding decades, one must note that there is more openness rather than closure: Today there is a political consensus supported by a broad majority encompassing large sections of the conservative parties CDU and CSU that legally accepted refugees and other legalised migrant groups should be provided with a path to social and political inclusion regardless of their ethnic identity and that some degree of ethnic or cultural diversity should be welcomed. This was not the case in either of the German states in the second half of the 20th century [Oltmer, (2016), pp.55–73]. Therefore, the changes in migration policy do not indicate an increase of nativism, rather they shifted towards a neo-liberal, utilitarian project of managed migration [Forschungsgruppe Staatsprojekt Europa, (2014), pp.65–68, 80–83]. In its early years, the AfD also took such a neoliberal and utilitarian position on immigration [AfD, (2014), pp.10–11]. In its process of radicalisation, however, the party moved on towards clear nativist positions and a fundamental opposition against immigration [AfD, (2021), pp.90–101] – but government policy did not follow this path.

Turning to legislation on domestic security and policing, one can plausibly argue that there was a shift towards authoritarianism as it is promoted by far-right parties. In recent years, several German states passed new police laws strengthening the position of the authorities at the cost of the defensive rights of citizens (Amnesty International and Gesellschaft für Freiheitsrechte, 2019). These reforms (which were hardly ever a relevant topic of public discussion) shift legislation towards the positions endorsed by the AfD [AfD, (2021), pp.76–81].

On the fields of family and gender policy, Germany is still more conservative than most other countries in Western and Northern Europe. Yet, when comparing current policies to those of past decades, German policies have become more liberal, slowly

shifting away from incentivising the male breadwinner model. Notably, many of these policy shifts occurred during Angela Merkel's chancellorship, which means they were pursued by governments led by the Christian conservative CDU (Lenz, 2021; Strohmeier, 2021). Therefore, there is no reason to speak of a shift towards the far right in the field of family policy and gender policy either. Particularly not towards the AfD's positions which are deeply traditionalist even if compared to other European far-right parties (Lang, 2017; Fangen and Lichtenberg, 2021).

If one also includes the field of economic and social policy, which is sometimes named in the shift-to-the-right debates, one could argue that there was such a shift: In the early 2000s the centre-left coalition government pursued a neo-liberal reform project of welfare reform [Steinmüller, (2018), pp.137–182]. As I discuss in Section 7, there is a plausible argument that the effects of these reforms indirectly favoured the establishment of a far-right opposition. However, these reforms themselves do not indicate a shift towards the far right. European far-right parties in general and the AfD in particular, are divided on economic and social policy with some actively opposing neoliberal welfare reforms (Becker, 2018; Otjes et al., 2018; Diermeier, 2020; Biskamp, 2022). Thus, this socio-economic shift to the right (which occurred more than on decade before the rise of the AfD) is not a shift towards the far right but to a qualitatively different kind of right.

In summary, the picture on the level of public policy is ambivalent. While legislation on police and domestic security can indeed be interpreted as a shift towards the direction desired by far-right ideology, this is not true for the other fields.

4 Political behaviour

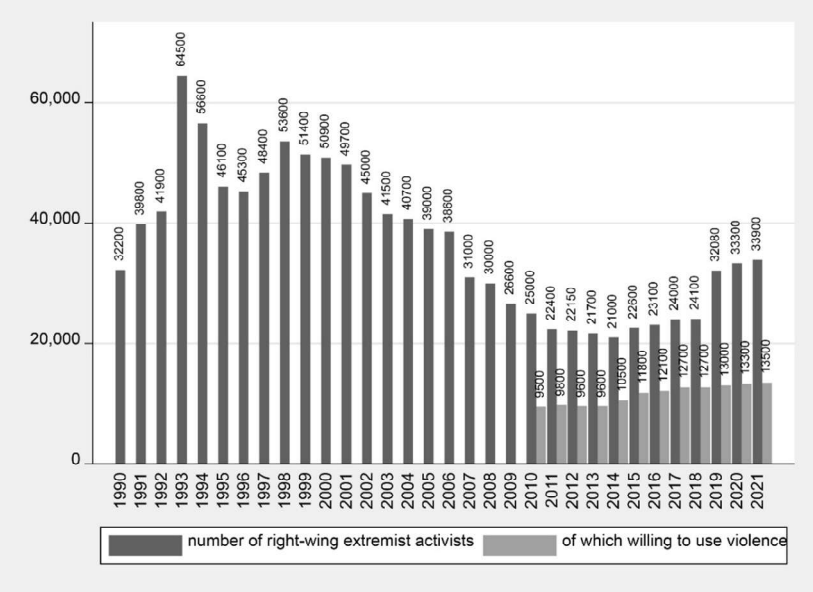
Another level on which one can discuss the question whether there was a shift towards the far right is that of political behaviour. It must be noted, however, that a societal shift towards the far right and an increase in far-right behaviour do not necessarily coincide. On the one hand, one might expect an increase or intensification of behaviour that is in line with far-right ideologies, if society shifted towards the far-right. Not only could one assume that more people would hold far-right convictions, moreover, those who hold such convictions might also feel more inclined to act them out if they increasingly perceive them to be in line with the opinions of the majority and thusly socially acceptable. On the other hand, one could assume an inverse relation: If society as a whole shifts away from the far right, those who hold far-right convictions might be alarmed and frustrated and find it all the more necessary to take action. Finally, an increase of far-right behaviour could also be expected in a society that does not shift in either direction but becomes more polarised, so that actors from all sides are politically activated. Despite these caveats, it seems relevant to assess whether there is an increase in far-right behaviour. The literature names different kinds of far-right behaviour [Stöss, (2010), p.21], four of which will be discussed here: voting behaviour (4.1), street protests (4.2), engagement in political organisations, networks, or Subcultures (4.3), as well as political crime and violence (4.4)

4.1 Voting behaviour

Voting for far-right parties is the kind of political action that is the easiest to measure: Looking at election results, recent years have undoubtedly witnessed an increase of

far-right voting in Germany, which was well below the European average until the rise of the AfD [Spier, (2016), pp.261–264]. Yet, this increase is that which is to be explained by the supposed shift towards the far right. Therefore, it cannot be an indicator for this shift at the same time. Otherwise, the argument would be circular.

Figure 1 Number of right-wing extremist activists in Germany by year as reported by the domestic intelligence agency



Source: Yearly reports of the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz

4.2 Participation in organisations, networks, and subcultures

Secondly one can look at participation in far-right organisations, subcultures, or networks. Taking into account the limited membership numbers of German far-right organisation in the past, it is clear that the AfD with its roughly 30,000 members is the biggest such organisation in decades (Botsch, 2012). Unfortunately, there is no sufficiently reliable data to perform a confident long-term comparison of the total number of people active in far-right organisations, networks, and subcultures over time. The most easily available data is that from the yearly reports of the domestic intelligence agency Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz which names the estimated total number of right-wing extremist activists for each year. These numbers depend heavily on the criteria the agency uses in its categorisation, the decisions it makes for specific organisations, the seriousness with which it observes the far right, and the willingness to share its knowledge with the public. These factors are not fully transparent, and one cannot assume either of them to have remained constant over the last decades. If one nonetheless uses these figures, then they indicate that number of activists reached its peak in 1993 with 64,500. From 1998 when the number was still 53,600, it decreased to a mere 21,000 in 2014 and has since been increasing to 33,900 in 2021. The main contributor to this rise was the AfD itself.

Since 2019, some currents within the party are categorised as right-wing extremist, which is why the number of activists in the statistic rose by 8,000 in that year. Since 2010, the reports also give a number of far-right activists willing to use violence which has continuously risen from 9,500 to 13,500 (Figure 1).[1] The aforementioned caveats in mind, these figures can be taken as a tentative indication that the number of people engaged in far-right organisations, networks, and subcultures has increased over the course of the last ten years but is still far from its peaks in the 1990s. Currently, the agency investigates whether the AfD as a whole should be categorised as a right-wing extremist organisation. If it decides to do so, this will instantly raise the number by more than 20,000 – which also says how heavily these numbers depend on contingent decisions by state authorities.

4.3 Street protests

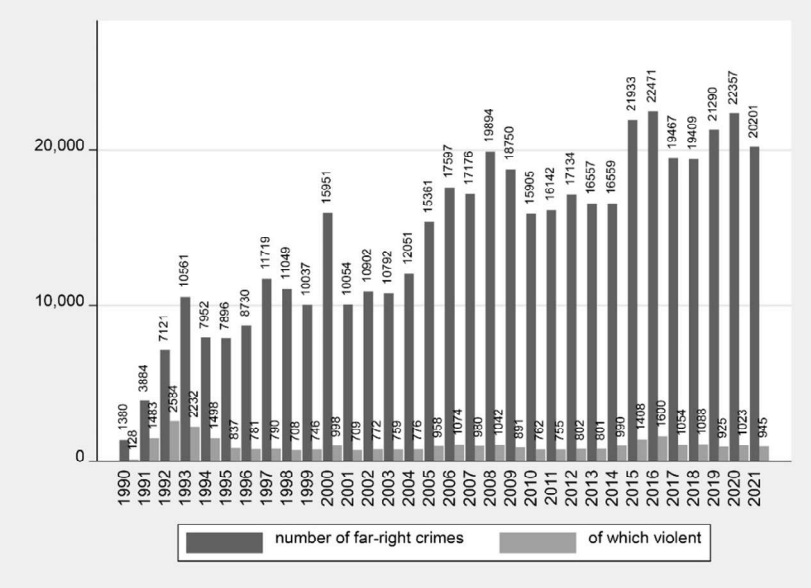
A third kind of far-right behaviour is participation in street protests. There is no readily available data that would offer a basis for systematic long-term comparisons of the extent or intensity of such protest. However, recent years have seen many cases of successful far-right mobilisation on the streets. Some of the clearest examples are the PEGIDA demonstrations in Dresden and affiliated protests in other towns since 2014, the HoGeSa riots in Cologne also in 2014, the demonstrations and riots in Chemnitz after a murder committed by an immigrant in 2018 in which prominent AfD politicians marched side by side with neo-Nazis, a number of demonstrations against the government's pandemic countermeasures between 2020 and 2022 in which a variety of far-right actors including the AfD had a very visible role, and AfD-led protests against the German government's policies vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine and the related energy crisis in fall of 2022 (e.g., Weisskircher and Volk, 2023). Many of these demonstrations had participant numbers in the five-digit range which is much more than far-right actors could mobilise in the preceding decades. Moreover, many of these demonstrations have a different character than earlier far-right protests. Until PEGIDA, participation in far-right demonstrations was mostly limited to a core of extremist activists [Botsch, (2012), pp.110–130; Klare and Sturm, (2016), pp.188–190]. Such demonstrations continue today. However, some far-right actors are now able to mobilise parts of the population that do not see themselves as right-wing extremists while not shying away from participating in protests dominated by such extremists. Thus, it seems that the far-right became more successful in mobilising to street protests over the course of the last years by lowering the threshold between itself and the mainstream.

4.4 Political crime and violence

The fourth and final form of far-right behaviour is the most immediately dangerous one: far-right crime including violence. There has been an accumulation of far-right violence, which the proponents of the shift-to-the-right thesis point to. These include numerous attacks on housing units for refugees – some which were in the stage of preparation, some which were already inhabited. These attacks were most frequent in 2015 and 2016 (Amadeu Antonio Stiftung, 2021). After a decline in the following years, there was a new wave of attacks in 2022 when the number of refugees rose due to the war in Ukraine (Tagesschau, 2023). Moreover, there were some acts of far-right terrorism, such as the massacre at the Olympia Shopping Centre in Munich in 2016, the murder of conservative

politician Walter Lübcke in Wolfhagen in 2019, the attack on a synagogue and a kebab restaurant in Halle in 2019, and the attack on a shisha bar in Hanau in 2020.

Figure 2 Number of right-wing extremist crimes and violence in Germany by year as reported by the police

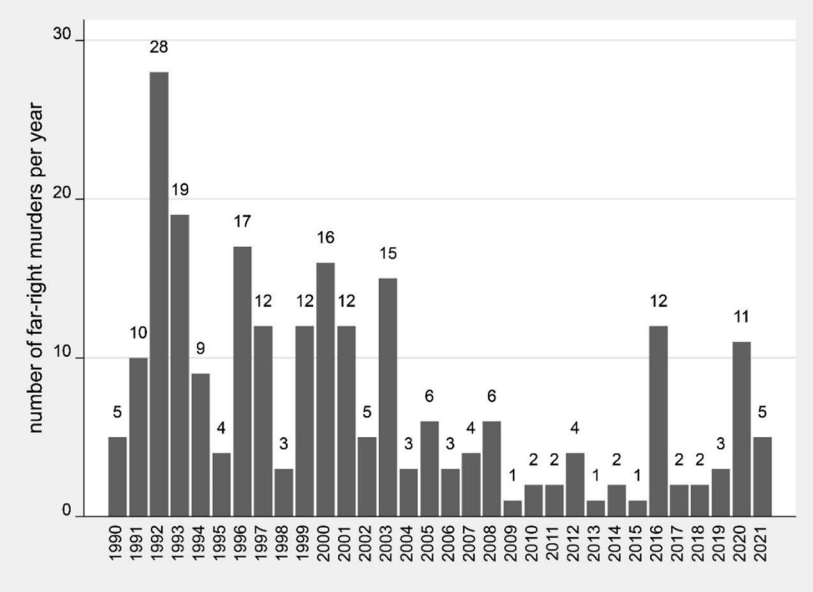


Source: Yearly reports of the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz

This level of far-right violence in Germany is life-threatening for those who are seen as enemies by the perpetrators – and it is much higher than in other European democracies [Küpper et al., (2021), p.76]. However, this high level of far-right violence in Germany has existed for decades and it is not clear at all that in increased in recent years. Once again, it is hard to find reliable data allowing for an assessment of long-term development. The police publish yearly reports on the number of political crimes and divide them by categories, one of them being right-wing extremism. However, these numbers heavily depend on the legal framework deciding which acts are considered criminal at the time, the willingness of victims or witnesses to report such crimes, the willingness of police institutions and individual officers to accept those reports and add them to the statistic, and the criteria used to categorise acts as right-wing extremist. None of these factors can be assumed two have remained constant over the last decades. If one nonetheless uses these figures, the results are once again ambivalent. The number of criminal acts in total which include violent crimes as well as non-violent crime such as hate speech or right-wing extremist propaganda is fluctuating but also shows a rising tendency. It is unclear whether this is due to an actual increase in behaviour or due to an increased willingness by the authorities to record such crime. One could assume that violent crime is less likely to go unnoticed and therefore less affected by such biases. If one looks at the numbers for violent crimes alone, no clear tendency in either direction is visible. The numbers mostly fluctuated around 800 from 1995 to 2007 and around 1,000 since 2005 with a notable peak in the years 2015 and 2016 (1,485 and 1,698 violent

crimes) when the number of refugees was the highest and the issue was the most controversial and salient (Figure 2). Surveys of affected groups could provide a better picture, but they have not been conducted consistently enough to provide data suitable for long-term assessments. Civil society or academic research can examine violence retrospectively based on analyses of media reports. Yet, this also depends on the willingness of the media to report on far-right crime at the time it was committed which cannot be expected to have remained constant.

Figure 3 Number of right-wing extremist murders by year as assessed by civil society activists



Source: Amadeu Antonio Stiftung (2023)

If one only looks at far-right murders, i.e., cases of violent death in which there is sufficient ground to suspect a far-right motive, it is even more probable that the data match reality since murders are more likely to be reported and scrutinised than slurs or battery. There is some disagreement between state authorities, media actors, and civil society organisations which cases exactly should be categorised as far-right murders. The Amadeu Antonio Foundation (2023) offers a very well documented collection of cases since 1990. According to this data, far-right murders were most common in the 1990s and the early 2000s but have mostly declined ever since (Figure 3). There were further peaks in 2016 and 2020. While the high number of victims in the earlier period reflects a high number of individual acts of deadly violence, the numbers of 2016 and 2020 reflect two mass-killing events committed by individual terrorists. All five murders of 2021 were connected to the COVID-19 pandemic. One man shot a cashier at a gas station after being asked to wear a facial mask; another man killed his family and himself motivated by his belief in a Jewish conspiracy behind the vaccination campaign. The number of far-right murders in the two German states before 1990 is not as well documented. However, it is certain that such crimes were committed on both sides of the inner-German border

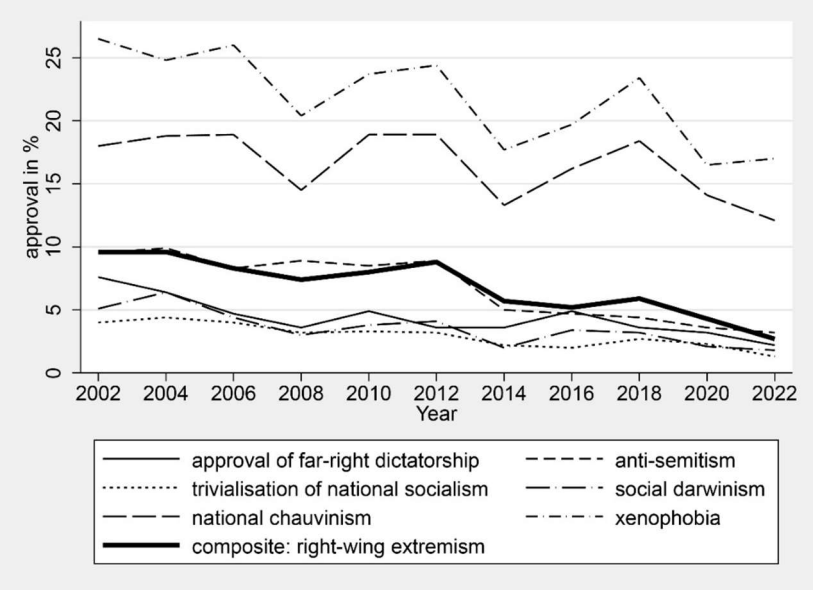
[Quent, (2019), pp.100–106], although almost certainly not to the same extent as in the years immediately following reunification.

If one focuses not on far-right murders in general but on far-right terrorist organisations and paramilitary groups, the picture is similar. Several far-right terrorist groups have been uncovered in recent years. However, the most notable and most deadly of these, the National Socialist Underground (Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund, NSU), committed its murders at the end of the post-reunification wave of far-right violence in the years from 2000 and 2006 – and thus in the period before the supposed shift towards the far right took place. Looking further back, there is also a long list of right-wing terrorist organisations and attacks in the old Federal Republic [Botsch, (2012), pp.81–85; Quent et al., 2019]. One particularly troubling aspect of some of the recently uncovered far-right terrorist groups which is also sometimes named as an indicator of an overall shift to the far right is the role of German state institutions. In the case of the NSU, the police were not only unwilling or unable to even consider let alone investigate a possible racist motive, they also actively engaged in racist discrimination against the victims' families. In addition, there is reason to suspect an active involvement of some officers of the domestic intelligence agency (Aust and Laabs, 2014; Bozay et al., 2016; Quent, 2016). Another recently uncovered organisation, the Hannibal network, was mostly composed of former and active soldiers, police, and intelligence officers – it was revealed before terrorist acts were committed (Kaul et al., 2020). However, such connections between far-right terrorism and state institutions are nothing new in the history of post-war Germany. Most notably, there is a reasonable suspicion that the far-right paramilitary groups of the 1970s and 1980s known as *Wehrsportgruppen* were actively tolerated, if not supported by Western intelligence agencies. After a member of the *Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann*, the most notable of these organisations, committed a massacre at the Oktoberfest in Munich in 1980, the police were unwilling to investigate any far-right involvement [Botsch, (2012), pp.81–85]. Thus, it is not clear that either the activity of far-right terrorist organisations or their connections to state authorities have increased in recent years.

In summary, far-right crime and violence continue to pose a severe threat to the wellbeing and lives of people seen as enemies by the extreme right. However, there is no clear indication that they are increasing. Rather, the most intensive period of far-right violence was the 1990s with a clear focus on Eastern Germany. After that, the intensity of violence decreased and remained on a relatively constant level since the mid-2000s with some fluctuations, a peak in 2015/2016 and some acts of mass-killing in recent years.

The results on the level of political behaviour are once again heterogeneous. Voting for far-right parties has certainly, participation in far-right organisations, networks, and subcultures has possibly, and participation in far-right street protests have probably increased. For crimes in general there is no reliable data and for violence the data does not indicate a clear increase. Therefore, it is plausible to assume that recent years have seen a notable but uneven increase in far-right behaviour. However, as argued above, such an increase does not necessarily indicate a societal shift towards the far-right but might also be a reaction against a societal shift away from the far-right or a result of increased polarisation.

Figure 4 Prevalence of right-wing extremist attitudes in Germany over time



Source: Decker et al. (2022)

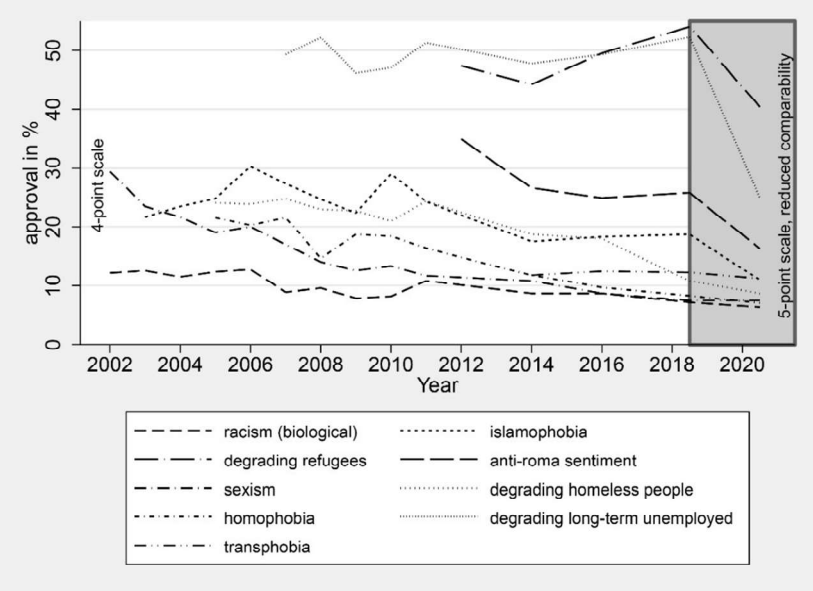
5 Individual attitudes

Research of the far right distinguishes far-right behaviour from far-right attitudes [Stöss, (2010), p.21]. The general idea is that far right attitudes create a potential for far-right behaviour but do not necessarily result in such; they can also remain dormant and not be acted upon. Including the attitudinal level allows for a better interpretation of the increase in far-right behaviour: If society as a whole shifted towards the far right, one would expect that the increase in far-right behaviour is accompanied by an increase of far-right attitudes.

Since the early 2000s, far-right attitudes in Germany are monitored by long-term research projects in Bielefeld (Heitmeyer, 2011; Zick and Küpper, 2021) and Leipzig (Decker et al., 2022). With some caution due to changes in items, scales, sampling, etc., one can use the data provided by these projects to track the prevalence of far-right attitudes over the years. They measure two kinds of attitudes pertaining to the far right. On the one hand, these are *extreme-right attitudes* in a narrow sense. These include support for far-right authoritarian dictatorship, national chauvinism, the trivialisation of National Socialism, anti-Semitism, social Darwinism, and xenophobia – chauvinism and xenophobia being good indicators of nativism (Küpper et al., 2019; Küpper et al., 2021; Decker et al., 2022). On the other hand, there are various forms of *group-based enmity*. This concept developed in the Bielefeld project led by Wilhelm Heitmeyer includes different ideologies of social inequality such as racism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, sexism, homophobia, hatred against the unemployed, etc. (Zick et al., 2019; Zick, 2021). The results (Figures 4 and 5)[2] indicate that both kinds of attitude are firmly established

among a relevant minority of the population. Although the exact values depend on definition and operationalisation and are subject to considerable fluctuation, some general tendencies can be observed with some confidence. As a first approximation it can be stated that over the years, around 5% of the population hold a right-wing extremist worldview, around 20% hold nativist attitudes, and roughly half of the population holds at least some elements of such far-right worldviews. This far-right potential is troubling for democracy, but the numbers do not indicate an increase as one would expect in case of a society shifting towards the far right. Some attitudes such as sexism have declined more consistently than others such as xenophobia.

Figure 5 Prevalence of group-based enmity in Germany over time; limited comparability for 2020/21 due to change from 4-point scale to 5-point scale



Source: Zick et al. (2019) and Zick (2021)

There is a relevant difference between the post-socialist states in Eastern Germany and the Western states. Both right-wing extremism in a narrow sense and group-based enmity are steadily declining in the West. In the East, however, there is mostly inconsistent fluctuation with no clear tendency [Decker et al., (2022), pp.47–54]. This lines up with the consistent finding that far-right attitudes in the West are more prevalent among older generations while younger generations have more open worldviews. In the East, the relation tends to be either non-existent or even inverse with higher prevalence among younger generations.[3] This is also mirrored in AfD voting behaviour by age in East and West. This implies that the overall decline is driven by generational change in Western Germany: Here, older generations with more authoritarian and nativist attitudes (particularly among those socialised during National Socialism) are being replaced with younger generations with more open worldviews. In Eastern Germany, there is no such tendency.

There is no comparable data for the 20th century. The little data that does exist gives no reason to believe that far-right attitudes were less common in the second half of the 20th century. Most notably, the SINUS survey from 1981 concluded that 13% of the population in Western Germany had a closed right-wing extremist worldview – roughly twice or three times as many as today, if one allows for the shaky comparison (SINUS, 1981).

All these figures should be interpreted with some caution because they are most likely distorted by effects such as social desirability that could change over time. However, in case of a general shift towards the far right, one would expect that effects of social desirability decrease rather than increase. If society moved to the far right, individuals should be less afraid of appearing as far right in a survey. Thus, desirability effects cannot explain why the numbers for far-right attitudes would decline in society shifting towards the far right.

In conclusion, attitudinal data offers no support for the hypothesis that German society as a whole shifted towards the far right. Instead, prevalence of far-right attitudes mostly declined over the course of the last 20 years and are most probably also lower than in the second half of the 20th century. Therefore, it seems that the rise of the AfD and the observable increase in some kinds of far-right behaviour is not based on a general societal shift towards the far right but rather on the political mobilisation of a pre-existing but (at least in the West) shrinking minority with far-right attitudes. This potential for far-right mobilisation in the double digits has long existed in Germany. In comparison to other European countries, the prevalence of far-right attitudes was above average while the success of far-right parties was below average [Spier, (2016), p.258]. What did increase was not the attitudinal potential but rather the willingness to act on these attitudes. Concerning voting behaviour, individuals with far-right attitudes were until recently quite evenly distributed among the different parties and non-voters: The relatively few voters of far-right parties had the strongest affinities towards far-right ideologies. But the vast majority of those with such affinities voted for other parties or not at all. Since 2013, however, they have increasingly gathered among the voters of the AfD, mirroring the radicalisation of the party itself. Having far-right and especially nativist attitudes is a much stronger predictor for voting for the AfD than any socio-demographic variable – including living in an Eastern or Western state [Lengfeld, 2017; Heitmeyer, (2018), pp.197–267; Decker et al., (2022), pp.58–59; Arzheimer 2021].

6 Public discourse

The attitudinal level is important to determine the overall far-right potential and helps assessing the question whether society as a whole shifted towards the far right. However, society is not a mere sum of individual consciousnesses or attitudes. Rather, individual attitudes as well as their effects are shaped by super-individual social structures. These super=individual structures include economic and political institutions as well as culture and public discourse. The latter is a suitable measure to assess whether there is a societal shift towards the far right. If society shifted towards the far right, one would expect that public statements aligned with far-right ideology become more frequent and more socially acceptable. Proponents of the shift-to-the-right thesis claim that such a development took place over the course of the last years and is still going on: They assert that the boundaries of the sayable are expanding, shifting further towards the far right,

resulting in a normalisation of far-right ideology (Fischer, 2019; Niehr, 2019; Schulz and Wodak, 2019).

It is certain that the boundaries of what can be legitimately said in public are contested and that far-right parties strategically use these contestations. They consciously look for topics that are salient and controversial and then provoke scandals by making statements that violate social norms while maintaining plausible deniability. Thereby, they can generate attention, push their issues, and pose as victims of an unjust 'cancel culture'. Wodak (2020, p.25) refers to this strategy as a 'right-wing populist perpetuum mobile'. The conscious use of such strategies is well-documented – also for the AfD [Biskamp, (2018), pp.254–255].

However, the fact that this strategy is being deployed does not necessarily mean that the boundaries of the sayable are effectively expanding and shifting towards the far right. Empirically assessing this question is methodologically challenging and would require an extensive long-term analysis of public discourse. No such studies exist for the German case. The following section of this paper cannot perform a systematic analysis for decades of public discourse in Germany – this would require a larger-scale research project.[4] What this section can do, however, is to offer a *provisional* falsification of the hypothesis that the boundaries of public discourse are ever expanding and shifting towards the far right. To do so, it will discuss some prominent 'talk scandals' (Ekström and Johansson, 2019) produced by AfD politicians and demonstrate that very similar statements were made by speakers from the political mainstream in the past. If this is the case, then it does not seem plausible that the boundaries of the sayable have expanded or shifted towards the far right. This argument, of course, is somewhat anecdotal and therefore only provisional. The section focuses on discourses on National Socialism since this is a discursive field in which the AfD regularly causes scandals, and which is named as an example for shifting boundaries (Fischer, 2019).

In 2017, Björn Höcke, the most prominent representative of the right-wing extremist current within the AfD, gave a speech in which he referred to the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas) in Berlin as a 'monument of shame', demanding a '180-degree turn' in the culture or remembrance turning away from a focus on the Shoah and towards positive aspects of German history (Höcke, 2017, translation F.B.). These are well-established talking points of the far right in Germany and they are in direct opposition to the official and established discourse on German history and remembrance. Accordingly, the speech provoked a scandal. In reaction, the party's own leadership initiated expulsion proceedings against Höcke – which were eventually futile. However, it is not evident that this scandal marks a discursive shift towards the far right. Rather, Höcke's speech is eerily similar to another speech that caused a scandal 19 years earlier, before the memorial was even built. In 1998, renowned novelist Martin Walser was awarded with the prestigious Peace Prize of the German Publishers and Booksellers Association. In his acceptance speech, he not only made a similar argument to that of Höcke, he even used almost the exact same formulation when he referred to the memorial (then still in the planning stages) as a 'monumentalisation of shame' (Walser, 1998, translation F.B.). After Walser's speech, too, controversy ensued. One can speculate whether Höcke consciously chose a similar formulation in order to appear more mainstream. Still, it remains noteworthy that the speech in 2017 was given by a representative of the extremist current within a far-right party leading to (failed) expulsion proceedings, when the speech in 1998 was given by a

Peace Prize laureate and was initially met with standing ovation by the great majority of the educated elites in the audience (Vahland, 2017).

A year after Höcke's speech, then-time speaker of the AfD Alexander Gauland's caused another talk scandal. In a speech at a convention of the party's youth organisation he argued:

> "Yes, we acknowledge our responsibility for the 12 years [of National Socialism]. But, dear friends, Hitler and the Nazis are only a bird's shit in our more than 1,000 years of history. And the great figures of the past, from Charlemagne to Charles V and Bismarck, are the yardstick by which we must measure our actions" (Gauland, 2018, translation F.B.).

The tone of this statement is deeply cynical, and the content is once again in direct contradiction to the official culture of remembrance. However, if one looks at earlier decades, one must note that the content of Gauland's statement mirrors the official party line of the CDU in the early 1980s, then led by Helmut Kohl – Gauland himself was a member of the Christian conservative party at the time. The mainstream conservative position on German history at the time was to accept that National Socialism was an evil and that Germany bears responsibility for it but to insist that German history should not be reduced to this episode, that German victims should be mourned as well, that there are other aspects of German history of which Germans can be proud and traditions to which they should adhere [Kohl, (1982), p.6771; Wüstenberg, (2020), pp.79–83; Assmann, (2021), pp.75–76].

Thus, the provisional evidence suggests that mainstream discourse on National Socialism has not shifted towards the far right and its boundaries did not expand. Quite on the contrary: Positions that were part of the mainstream in past decades are now relegated to the far right.

A more extensive discussion would have to include other discursive fields in which statements made by AfD politicians cause scandals. These are mostly instances of group-based enmity. Here too, one could compare today's scandalous statements by AfD politicians with earlier statements from the political mainstream. Once again there is reason to assume that the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable public discourse have not expanded towards the far right but rather contracted. Concerning racism and nativism, many of the clearest examples of racist speech in the past can once again be found in utterances by politicians of the conservative CDU and CSU [e.g., Jäger, (2017), pp.89–90] but jokes that are considered racist, sexist, and homophobic today were also common in rather liberal mainstream comedy formats of the 1990s (e.g., Urban, 2009).

The high frequency of controversies over racist and heterosexist statements today is no clear evidence that discourse is becoming more and more racist and heterosexist or that the boundaries of what can be said are constantly expanding. The opposite is more plausible: Conflict increases because racism and heterosexism can be named, criticised, and scandalised much more effectively today than ever before. This is due to many years of anti-racist and feminist activism as well as the fact that people of colour, women, and queers are much more present in the public today than they were ever before. This is what El-Mafaalani (2020) calls the paradox of integration: The more inclusive society becomes and the more say minorities have, the more intensive and visible contestations over exclusion and discrimination are. In addition, digitalisation in general and social media in particular altered the dynamics of public discourse. There is no evidence that the analogue expressions of far-right ideology in pubs, in schoolyards, at dinner tables, or at

workplaces in the second half of the 20th century were more restrained than they are today in digital media. But the public visibility of such statements and of the critique against them have increased in the latter.

Thus, there is no compelling evidence that public discourse in Germany has shifted towards the far right. On the contrary it seems that statements which are today typical for far-right politicians used to be *more* acceptable and *more* mainstream in past decades. It seems that rather than having widened, the boundaries of public discourse have narrowed when it comes to far-right ideology. However, it must be noted that these provisional findings for the German case cannot be generalised. For other countries there is research indicating a discursive shift towards the far right (Rheindorf and Wodak, 2018; Krzyzanowski, 2020). Moreover, there is no guarantee that Germany will not be affected by similar developments. The findings for other countries could very well foreshadow future developments in Germany. It seems plausible that the AfD's presence will continue to be normalised despite the party's continued radicalisation. This normalisation of the party could then lead to a normalisation of the party's discourse and thereby to a discursive shift towards the far right. However, such a shift would then not be an explanation for the rise and radicalisation of the AfD but rather a result of these processes.

7 Alternative explanation: the formation of a far-right project in the context of ambivalent liberalisation

If German society has not shifted toward the far right, how can the swift rise and radicalisation of a far-right party be explained? As pointed out in Section 5, research of individual attitudes suggests that there has long been a considerable far-right potential among the electorate that remained politically dormant before being activated by the AfD in 2017. The AfD was not the first party to try. What needs to be explained, then, is why the AfD succeeded when the earlier attempts failed. I suggest an explanation with four elements: a societal liberalisation that breeds potential for a far-right backlash (7.1), the waning effectiveness of the stigma on far-right parties caused by the national socialist past (7.2), the dynamics of the East-West divide in Germany (7.3), and the specific opportunity structure at the time (7.4)

7.1 Societal liberalisation and backlash

In Germany as in many countries, society, politics, and culture underwent a process of liberalisation over the course of the last decades. In socioeconomic as well as in socio-cultural issues, the Berlin Republic of the 21st century is more liberal than the old FRG, the GDR, or reunified Germany in the 1990s. Most of the findings presented above are in line with this diagnosis – and the global tendency is clear as well (Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

Such liberalisation processes can provide an opportunity for the formation of a far-right project – for at least two reasons. First, these liberalisation processes are not supported by all parts of society – and those who oppose them can potentially be mobilised by far-right parties. This is mainly true for the opposition to socio-cultural liberalisation which is the direct opposite of far-right ideology. As is reflected in the research on political attitudes, there have always been relevant parts of the population

with illiberal attitudes on socio-cultural issues. Over the course of the last decades, this minority not only witnessed society transforming in a way that they find undesirable. They also saw the party which hitherto represented their preferences (the CDU) actively supporting this transformation: Since the end of the Kohl era and the beginning of the Merkel era in 2000, the CDU adapted positions it strongly opposed before (abolition of compulsory military service, phase-out of nuclear energy, shifting away from male-breadwinner model, legalisation of same-sex marriage, more open migration policy, etc.). In face of the fact that the attitudes of the population are increasingly liberal, this shift was probably strategically rational for the CDU. However, it opens the illiberal minorities to far-right mobilisation. This is true for the supply side with political networks reorganising to form a new right-wing political project around the AfD as well as for the demand side with voters feeling unrepresented and being open to far-right mobilisation. The changing positioning of the CDU between liberalisation and national conservatism has also been an important determinant of far-right mobilisation chances in Germany in past decades [Botsch, (2012), pp.68–69, 89; Jaschke, (2016), pp.118, 127–128]. The general dynamics of far-right mobilisation under conditions of societal liberalisation have been described both internationally (Norris and Inglehart, 2019) and for Germany (Friedrich, 2019; Quent, 2019; Gebhardt, 2020).

Moreover, liberalisation processes can also favour far-right mobilisation in a more indirect way. Such processes are ambivalent because liberalism itself is ambivalent when put into practice (Biskamp, 2021). On the one hand, liberalism normatively places a universalist notion of freedom and equality at the centre; on the other hand, it conceives of freedom and equality in a way that always produces a certain degree of un-freedom and inequality when implemented: First, in order to enforce the liberal rule of law, liberalism requires state power that restricts the freedom of individuals. Second, this state power has so far always been and will for the foreseeable future continue to be organised in a national form with a limited territory and population which systematically produces inequalities between citizens and non-citizens. Third, liberalism is closely linked to the idea of private property and the dynamics caused by private property goes hand in hand with economic inequality. Because of these ambivalences, it is to be expected that liberalisation processes produce new contradictions, conflicts, inequalities, and grievances. The resulting frustrations can estrange parts of the population from established parties creating opportunities for far-right mobilisation. Past research suggests that frustration and protest alone cannot explain voting for the far right – most frustrated voters or 'modernisation losers' do not turn towards the far right. However, frustration and protest can turn voters away from the parties with which they used to identify. Those among these newly unbound voters who have affinities to far-right ideology, are then likely to turn towards the far right. Therefore, it is typically the combination of far-right attitudes with a dissatisfaction of other parties and the current state of democracy that can best explain a decision to vote for far-right parties [Spier, (2016), p.274; Mudde, (2019), pp.99–100].

7.2 The waning relevance of national socialism for far-right mobilisation

While liberalisation processes took place in many countries, another process is more specific to Germany. A major problem for far-right actors diminished over the last couple of years, namely the dilemma resulting from the need to take a position on National Socialism. On the one hand, far right parties had an incentive to take a nostalgic or

relativising stance: Significant parts of their potential voters had nostalgic attitudes about national socialism or at least its army, the Wehrmacht – partly because they were themselves socialised during National Socialism or even involved in its crimes. Thus, many far-right parties pandered to such sentiment. On the other hand, taking such a position always came at significant political cost, namely the dangers of political repression, social stigmatisation, and the estrangement of the less radical parts of potential supporters [Jaschke, (2016), p.121]. In the last couple of years, however, this dilemma lost much of its weight. Due to generational change, the number of people who are nostalgic about National Socialism or the Wehrmacht is declining. Therefore, far right-parties no longer have a strong incentive to pander to them. The AfD could take the far less risky position visible in Gauland's speech cited above without estranging too many voters: national socialism was an evil but only constitutes a minor episode in German history so that Germans can still be proud of their country. This rendered the specific stigma of far-right politics in Germany less effective and allowed the AfD to establish itself.[6]

7.3 East/West-divide

Another specificity of the German case is the East/West divide. Five and a half of the 16 federal states form a post-socialist transformation society while the other ten and a half states made no such experience. In the transformation process, the states of the former socialist GDR were economically and politically incorporated into the FRG which resulted in the deindustrialisation of whole regions and many broken professional biographies. Ever since they form a minority in a nation dominated by the non-post-socialist states in the West.

The AfD is much more successful in the East than it is in the West. The difference was only slight in 2013 when the party was funded and not yet a fully fledged far-right party. Ever since it has increased mirroring the party's radicalisation. In 2023 the AfD polls roughly twice as strong in the East than it does in the West (~30% vs. ~15%, without Berlin) (wahlrecht.de 2023). This is in line with the hypothesis that the AfD vote can be best explained as the mobilisation of voters who hold far-right attitudes and are at the same time dissatisfied with other parties and the current state of democracy. Taken together, these two factors explain most of the differences in AfD successes between East and West (Arzheimer, 2021). However, this explanation begs the question *why* far-right attitudes as well as dissatisfaction with other parties and the current state of democracy are more prevalent in the East than they are in the West. Possible answers to this question lead back to a debate that has been going on since the 1990s. The unification of the two German states in 1990 was accompanied by an upsurge of nationalist sentiment and directly followed by an intensive wave of far-right violence with clear focus on the Eastern states. And while far-right parties were initially *less* successful in the East in the early 1990s, the balance shifted in the late 1990s when they established regional strongholds in some Eastern states and have been electorally more successful there ever since – the AfD's successes are the continuation of this development. In light of these developments, it has been intensely discussed to what extent these differences are caused by a lack of democratic experience before 1990, by the shock of transformation directly following 1990, or by the continued inequalities and marginalisation ever since [Botsch, (2012), pp.100–108; Spier, (2016), pp.261–264; Weisskircher 2020].

For the interpretation of the rise and radicalisation of the AfD presented here, there are two main takeaways: First, looking at the demand-side, the statement that the AfD represents a shrinking and ageing minority with far-right attitudes must be qualified. It is correct, if one takes a long-term view with a nationwide scope. However, the regional specificities must not be overlooked: In the East, this minority is neither shrinking nor ageing but stable and composed of older as well as younger generations. Second, turning towards the supply-side, the East/West divide was a central factor in the party's radicalisation process. The more extremist currents within the party had and continue to have their main strongholds in some Eastern states [Schröder and Weßels, (2023), pp.15–17]. These strongholds enabled them to take over the party as a whole.

7.4 Opportunity structure

These structural conditions favoured the rise and radicalisation of a far-right party. However, structural conditions themselves can never be a sufficient cause for the establishment of a party. Such a process also requires more concrete political opportunities as well as actors who make use of them. Using the example of Vox in Spain, Dennison and Mendes (2019) suggest that the establishment of a new far right party is best possible, when there is a sequence of two different kinds of opportunities. The first is the existence of a highly salient issue that the party can monopolise from the right without appearing as far right. This allows for the party to establish itself as a respected political actor without suffering the full stigmatisation of far-right politics using its founding issue as a 'reputational shield'. Later on, the party can become an established, fully fledged far-right party if a second kind of opportunity arises: an increase in salience of the far right's core issue, migration.

The establishment of the AfD was enabled by such a favourable sequence of opportunities. In 2013, the eurozone crisis was the most salient issue in German politics. The AfD's self-declared mission was to give voice to the (nationalist) opposition against the common currency in general and the Merkel government's approach to the eurozone crisis in particular. Just as Dennison and Mendes suggest, the AfD was able to monopolise an unsatiated right-wing demand; and since the topic was not one of the far right alone and the party was at first dominated by economic liberals rather than right-wing extremists, it was able to become a reputable actor in the public and evaded the stigmatisation far-right parties face. However, from the beginning, the party also tapped into the far-right potential created by the structural opportunities sketched above. It included national conservatives, Christian fundamentalists, and a wider array of other far-right nationalists. Over the course of the next two years, these far-right actors seized power from the economic liberals. In 2015, migration became the most salient issue in the national public and the conservative government led by Merkel was identified with a rather open position on refugee migration. This enabled the AfD to break through as a full-blown far-right party. It was able to mobilise a growing share of the minority in the population that holds far-right attitudes and is frustrated with the established parties [Friedrich, (2019), pp.46–81].

Thus, the rise and radicalisation of the AfD can be explained without clinging to the empirically questionable hypothesis of a societal shift towards the far right. The AfD is not the party of a growing majority shifting towards the far right, but a party that is increasingly successful in its mobilisation of a loud minority that is shrinking and ageing

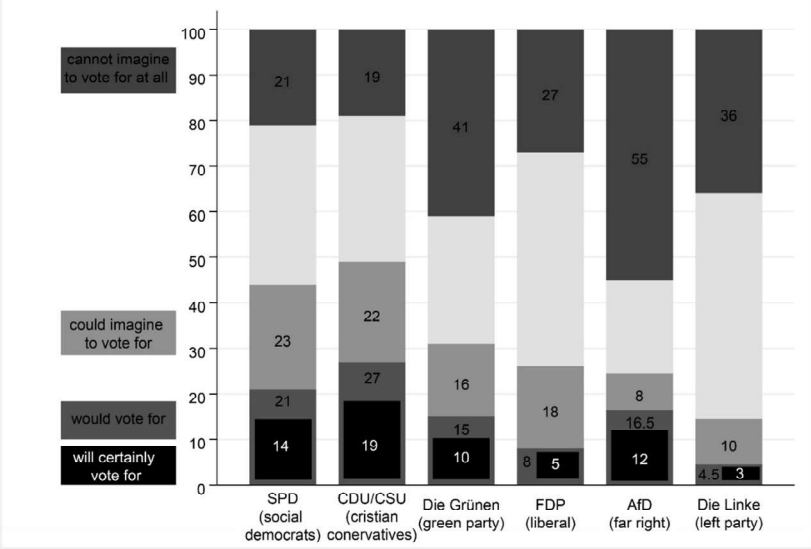
in the West but remains stable and is composed of younger as well as older generations in the East.

8 Conclusions

In conclusion, the research question of this paper must be answered in the negative: There is no sufficient evidence to support the thesis that the rise of the AfD was caused by a societal shift towards the far right. On the contrary most evidence points to a continued but ambivalent and potentially endangered process of liberalisation that left some authoritarian nationalist parts of the population unrepresented creating room for the formation of a far-right project feeding the successes of the AfD.

However, three caveats must be added. First, the findings of this paper are limited to the German case. In other countries – be it India, Japan, Brazil, Hungary, Poland, Austria, France, the USA, Russia, China etc. – the situations are very different.

Figure 6 Insa potential analysis for parties in Germany in May 2023



Source: Insa Consulere (2023)

Second, the results of this paper do not indicate that the rise and radicalisation of the AfD is not dangerous for democracy or that a societal shift towards the far right is impossible in the future. The rise of the AfD grants the far right significant financial and organisational resources. Its chances to influence public discourse, individual attitudes, and policy will increase in the near future. Moreover, there is a chance that the public presence of the party will continue to be normalised as it happened with far-right parties in other countries. One would assume that the AfD's continued radicalisation limits this normalisation. Yet polls show that the stigma is wearing off. The number of voters indicating they would vote the AfD is on the rise but also fluctuating over the years. More importantly, the share of those who reply that they cannot imagine voting for the

AfD is down to only 55% in May 2023 – in the preceding years this number was mostly significantly above 60% and as high as 74%. Among all the major parties in Germany, the AfD is the one with the lowest hanging hard ceiling above – yet, a ceiling that has been slowly rising (Figure 6). The biggest step toward normalisation and further destigmatisation would be integration in a coalition government, probably with CDU and/or FDP in an Eastern state – as it has been foreshadowed in the state of Thuringia September 2023 when CDU, FDP, and AfD formed a parliamentary majority to vote for a real-estate tax reform against the governing minority coalition. The growth potential of the AfD will not only depend on the effectiveness of the far-right stigma but also on the ability of other parties and organisations to integrate the majority of the population in other political projects. If government policies concerning climate change and other crises produce widespread frustration and no other oppositional project can absorb the frustrated parts of the population, the AfD's mobilisation chances might increase.

Third, testing the veracity of the hypothesis is not the only way to address the discourse on a shift to the right. One could also analyse it as a political discourse with practical consequences. Then it must first be noted that alarmism over a catastrophic shift to the right is a cultural tradition of its own in the FRG. It reaches from the student movement fighting the supposed 'fascistisation' ('Faschisierung') of Western Germany in the late 1960s and 1970s via the opposition against the 'spiritual-moral turnaround' ('geistig-moralische Wende') propagated by Kohl in the 1980s and the opposition against reunification due to the supposed dangers of a reawakening of German nationalism, imperialism, and militarism in the early 1990s to today's alarm over a supposed shift towards the far right. In hindsight, it seems obvious that neither of the catastrophic developments against which these past discourses warned took place. But this by itself does not necessarily mean that they were irrelevant mistakes from the start. One could also argue that they were only practically self-defeating by successfully preventing the shifts towards the far right against which they warned (making such a case plausibly seems challenging). Alternatively, one could argue that these alarmist discourses were mistaken from the start but still politically successful by mobilising progressive actors and enabling a progressive transformation. However, one might also assume, that these discourses were practically problematic as well by promoting a defensive posture rather than positive progressive goals and by letting the far right appear as more powerful and vital than it was.

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Notes

1 These numbers are compiled from the yearly reports (Verfassungsschutzbericht) published by the ministry of the interior.

2 The Leipzig authoritarianism survey offers the best long-term comparability for right-wing extremist attitudes while the Bielefeld-based Mitte survey offers the best long-term comparability for group-based enmity. Hence, the data for the figures are taken from the respective sources. The most recent edition of the Bielefeld-based Mitte survey does indeed show a sudden and notable increase of extreme-right attitude between 2020/21 and 2022/23 [Zick and Mokros, (2023), pp.66–90]. Since this data point is in stark contrast to the consistent trends visible in former studies, it remains to be seen whether this indicates a change of social reality or whether it is a statistical outlier. Unfortunately, the most recent edition of the Mitte survey does not offer comparable composite scores for the dimensions of group-based enmity which is why this data cannot be included in the figure.

3 These findings have been quite consistent over the years [Zick and Küpper, (2016), p.99; Decker and Brähler, (2020), p.54]. However, the newest Leipzig authoritarianism survey shows very different results for far-right attitudes in Eastern Germany, contradicting those of most other studies [Decker et al., (2022), p.57].

4 The author will pursue such a larger-scale project on the boundaries of the sayable with a team at University of Tübingen from 2024 until 2026.

5 There are still cases of nostalgia or at least nostalgic dog whistling within the AfD. However, the AfD can officially deem national socialism an evil, without risking to lose many voters.

6 The most recent state-level elections in the two Western states of Bavaria and Hesse make it necessary to add a caveat: contrary to earlier elections in Western Germany, the party was disproportionately successful among younger voters. It remains to be seen whether this will be repeated in future elections.