Right-Wing Populist Parties in Europe: The Rise of Alternative für Deutschland and its Relations to Front National in France

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Abstract

In the immediate years following the European debt crisis, it appeared that Germany would emerge largely politically unscathed. Unlike other EU member states, the impact of right-wing populist movements on elections seemed to be limited. This was true until 2013. Shortly after the second bailout package was given to Greece, Bernd Lucke founded what would become the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which is now polling at 15% and poised to become the third most powerful political party in the German parliament. This paper analyzes the rise of the AfD in both the German context and in comparison to Front National, the right-wing populist political party in France. First, the paper surveys the development of the AfD from a reactionary movement into a populist political party. The AfD initially posed a Eurosceptic “alternative” for German voters to the of firm backing for the EU and Eurozone policies demonstrated by Chancellor Merkel. Since then, the AfD garnered significant support from other right-leaning populist movements, including the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West, or PEGIDA, movement, and has continued to adopt party stances that are anti-immigration and anti-Islam. Second, the paper explores why the AfD shows similar success to Front National and is now represented in 10 out of 16 state parliaments despite being a political newcomer and without a nationalist party platform. Finally, the strong performance of the AfD raises questions of what larger impacts this party could have in the future political landscape. Whether this trend towards the populist right is a brief reactionist phenomenon, or a larger rejection of European integration and immigration, the Alternative für Deutschland is indicative of palpable political shifts in Germany and Europe.

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Introduction

At the point of the second bailout to Greece, most European Union member states had operational populist political parties that were gaining traction in their respective political systems, but this was not the case in Germany. For decades, right-wing populist parties in Germany failed to gain any real electoral success, and any small victories fizzled out before the parties could organize or solidify support. This remained true until the height of the Eurozone crisis in 2012, when several politicians and academics joined together to form a new Eurosceptic party: the *Alternative für Deutschland*. This party gained significant attention for its quick success in German politics, and for its transformation from a soft Eurosceptic party into a right-wing populist party.

Before the emergence of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), individuals in academia, such as Piero Ignazi and Simon Bornschier, wrote about why Germany did not have a successful right-wing populist party and why it seemed unlikely that one would gain success in the near future. The reason most authors settled upon for the best explanation was Germany’s infamous history with nationalism. In light of the AfD’s electoral successes over the past four years, this assumption is clearly not entirely accurate, but it is also not completely false. The rise of the AfD is unlike other populist parties in Europe, and is particularly unusual when compared to populist parties in countries that are the most situationally similar to Germany, like the case of *Front National* in France. Compared to *Front National*, the *Alternative für Deutschland* is not only a much younger party, but a much more restrained party. It is evident when exploring these differences that the AfD is constrained by Germany’s National Socialist past, and to a larger extent, that Germany’s political system is still tinged by this legacy, even as this becomes less obvious throughout the passing decades.
Understanding this, the materialization of a successful right-wing party in Germany is indicative of the strength of the populist movement spreading throughout the Western World. It appears that populism finds a way to pervade even the societies that were previously believed to be the most immune. Germany’s first electorally successful right-wing populist party in decades evolved out of a “soft” Eurosceptic party with very few ideological beliefs. With this framework, it is clear that the rise of Alternative für Deutschland is meaningful in both the German context and the wider European context.

A Successful German Right-Wing Party

The Alternative für Deutschland was initially established out of dissatisfaction with the establishment center-right party, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of Germany, and the unyielding support that it provided to the Eurozone. It was born out of the unsuccessful political protest organization Electoral Alternative 2013 (Wahlalternative 2013), founded in 2012 by Bernd Lucke, Alexander Gauland, Gerd Robanus, and Konrad Adam. They came together largely as a reaction to Chancellor Merkel’s claim in 2011 that EU bailouts were necessary for Germany because there was not an “alternative” option (Grimm, 2015, p. 266-267). Initially, the group was skeptical of the Euro currency and the supposed economic consequences of remaining within the Eurozone. The founding members, as well as individuals that supported their manifesto, were primarily members of the elite, especially academics, economists, and journalists. This initial group was not a political party, only guiding support behind other candidates that shared their values (Grimm, 2015).

Their status as a group not seeking election did not last long, and the Electoral Alternative 2013 leadership decided to hold an open convention in order to run in the 2013 election. They renamed themselves the “Alternative für Deutschland.” The first platform
included a call to end the Eurozone, claiming that the monetary and borrowing policies employed by the European Central Bank were likely to cause high inflation of the Euro rather than stabilize the European economy. It also built off of works published by founder Bernd Lucke, who claimed that the bailouts were creating “donor” and “debtor” countries within the European Union, where Northern member states are more often paying in and Southern member states are receiving more pay outs (Grimm, 2015).

The two years for the AfD reflected this heavily academic and economic political reasoning. Observers of the 2013 and 2014 conventions said that many attendees appeared to be of the professional class, including government workers, lawyers, professors, and individuals in business. In the 2014 European Parliament elections, 7 of their 20 candidates were professors and an additional 5 had doctorates (Grimm, 2015, p. 271).

This party branding as fiscally conservative, bourgeois, and academic was vital to the AfD’s popularity in Germany. They are not the sole Eurosceptic, populist party in the country, but they are easily the most successful in recent memory. While the National Democratic Party and the Republicans have been operating for several decades, and both have elements of right wing and populist ideology, neither garners enough popular support to possibly win seats in the Bundestag for 2017. The National Democratic Party (NPD) is far too openly modeled in the likeness of National Socialism, complete with racist, anti-Semitic, and anti-constitutional rhetoric, to appeal to a modern German audience (Kitschelt, 1995). The Republicans, while far less radical than the NPD and simultaneously supportive of a Eurosceptic agenda, are still too openly nationalist for many voters. Their desire in the late 1980s to create a völkisch model of German identity, one based partially on ethno-nationalism, is one such point that made them unpopular to a wider, educated constituency (Ignazi, 2003). Both the NPD and the Republicans

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1 I quote Grimm here instead of Lucke directly because Lucke’s works related to the AfD and his speeches were removed from the AfD website after he left the party.
have also repeatedly experienced issues with party organization and inner conflicts that made even their occasional successes fleeting (Ignazi, 2003; Bornschier, 2011).

Conversely, the AfD initially branded itself as Eurosceptic for fiscal, rather than exclusively nationalist, reasons. It had the public approval of the educated elite and the bourgeois, rather than bitter social outcasts who could not come to terms with Germany’s political legacy. When Frauke Petry assumed leadership of the AfD in summer of 2015, the party had already entered European Parliament with 7 seats and won representation in 5 state legislatures. She called for closer relations with Russia, an emphasis on pride in German culture, and stringent restrictions for asylum seekers, in addition to her belief in a generally “family-oriented” and more traditional party platform (“Programm der AfD – Kurzfassung,” 2017). Petry’s leadership was also responsible for cultivating voters that were mobilized by the Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West (PEGIDA) movement that started in 2014 and other individuals with anti-Islam sentiments. Even with this clear shift to the far-right, the AfD entered five more state parliaments in 2016. They managed to garner as much as 24% of the popular vote in Saxony-Anhalt and beat the out the CDU for second place in Chancellor Merkel’s home state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (“What Germany’s state election results mean for its politics,” 2016). According to polls conducted in January 2017, the AfD was polling as high as 15% for the September election (INSA, 2017) and will likely be the third most powerful party in the Bundestag. From this, it is evident that despite Petry steering the AfD’s ideology much farther right, the image of the party as acceptable to the minds of middle-class voters has already been cemented.

Party Classification
The surge of rightist populism in the United States and Europe has created an issue related to the classification of these movements in both the popular and academic vernacular: Clearly there is something relating all of these parties together, but there is confusion as to what exactly their political beliefs are. Varying media sources have referred to these movements most recently as “populist,” but also as “extreme right,” “far right,” and “alt-right,” among others. In daily speech, allusions to these movements belonging to a larger legacy of fascism is also not uncommon. Therefore, determining where the Alternative für Deutschland falls on the political spectrum, especially outside of these colloquial labels, is an important task for the study of this party and for the purposes of comparison.

The primary issue with singling out its positioning on the political spectrum is that the AfD has had competing ideological factions since its induction into German politics. Just analyzing party positions over the past four years, the AfD often appears to contradict itself and its core beliefs because of these struggling factions. The two factions are best represented by their respective leaders: Frauke Petry has led the socially conservative, populist wing, while Bernd Lucke led the wing of neoliberalism before he left the party in mid-2015. They came together in 2013 over their “soft” Eurosceptic beliefs and a dissatisfaction with the current political system in Germany (Grimm, 2015; Decker, 2016). This German brand of Euroscepticism can be described as “soft” in light of other anti-EU sentiments throughout the continent, because while the AfD has had serious critiques of the EU in terms of sovereignty and the viability of the Euro, the AfD does not seek to destroy the union or even to withdraw from it. Despite this, over the past four years, the party has moved noticeably from this economic political basis to a rightist social ideology more in line with other right-wing populist parties in Europe.
When the AfD first ran in federal elections in 2013, its primary platform was to protest Eurozone policies that all other German political parties supported, including the center-right CDU and classically liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) (Decker, 2016). It was further right than the two establishment conservative choices because it insisted upon a free market, but did not have a particularly socially conservative platform. An interesting point of difference to their current rhetoric can be seen in their call to model Germany’s immigration system after Canada’s (“Das Wahlprogramm der Alternative für Deutschland,” 2013), which places caps for skilled workers but its more flexible with asylum seekers. Similarly, while the AfD’s platform became slightly more right-wing before the 2014 European Parliament elections (“Wahlprogramm zur Landtagswahl 2014,” 2014; “Wahlprogramm 2014 -- AfD Sachsen,” 2014). Lucke declared that if they won seats they would not align themselves with UK Independence Party, nor any “xenophobic parties” like the National Front or the Dutch People’s Party (Marsh, 2014). After the election, the seven representatives won by the AfD joined the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) in European Parliament, which is a group that was mostly comprised of Britain’s Conservative Party (Decker, 2016). From this point, the AfD could easily be defined as right wing, but hardly populist or extreme on principle. Whatever pandering the AfD was engaging in to attract populist inclined citizens was clearly not a part of their official program.

The modern AfD emerged after continuous infighting triggered a vote in July 2015 to determine the party speaker. Frauke Petry and her far right wing won easily over founder Lucke and this success, coupled with the immigration crisis that began in 2014, produced the ideological party seen today. The issue of the Refugee Crisis aided Petry’s efforts to solidify the

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2 I cite a newspaper for this source instead of the direct platform because the original platform has been removed from the party website.
3 I cite two state platforms instead of the AfD’s general EP platform because it has been removed from the party website.
party into something more than simply a Eurozone protest vote, as she played on the same
tensions that led other German right-wing parties to success in the 1980s and -90s (Karapin,
1998). She was able to capitalize upon her initial successes with courting the PEGIDA
movement and build a stronger party united in an anti-immigration standpoint. She was also
integral to shifting her party to the right based on her willingness to partner with the Freedom
Party of Austria (FPÖ), a far-right nationalist party that was first established by a former Nazi
member and SS officer. This event prompted the ECR to exclude the AfD from their membership
in parliament, due to the extreme positions of the FPÖ. This moment can be easily identified as
the point in which AfD moves from any classification as conservative to far right.

Understanding this, it is important to distinguish whether the *Alternative für Deutschland*
is right-wing populist or right-wing extremist in its beliefs, as this is the major division for anti-
establishment, right parties (Wolf, 2016). This is also vital for purposes of comparison to other
far-right parties in Europe that have gained traction in recent years. It is the opinion of this paper
that the current AfD position is one that is closely aligned to its right-wing populist image,
propagated both by the media and by itself. Like other populists, they characterize themselves as
outsiders to the political system. This might not be wholly authentic messaging, as many of their
current elected officials are former members of other parties, but they do oppose large tenants of
modern German policy with their attacks on the Eurozone. Still, they are not entirely against the
political system or even the European Union (“Wahlprogramm für die Wahl zum Deutschen
Bundestag,” 2017) so they are not a radical party in this sense. On that account, the AfD is in
favor of more, not less, democracy, as long as it takes place on the national level and not the
European level. If there was any doubt about the leadership’s position on democracy, which
would be reasonable in light of Germany’s record with populism and nationalism, they state on
page six of their platform that they “want to preserve the sovereign, democratic nation state!” (“Wir wollen den souveränen, demokratischen Nationalstaat erhalten!”) (“Wahlprogramm,” 2017). Another major factor for identifying them as populist is due to their appeal: the AfD has a fairly wide base of voters and sympathizers, ranging from educated and middle-class individuals to the working class, and even young people (Knight, 2016; Grimm, 2015). In some respect, the AfD is inherently a populist party because it has ridden the wave of a “populist movement” in Germany, and to a larger extent, Europe (Goodwyn, 1976). This also includes a “populist rhetorical style,” which primarily entails telling the audience what they want to hear and then incorporating these points in the party platform (Wolf, 2016, p. 153). The AfD wedged itself into the German political scene by riding the tide of discontent with Eurozone policies, but then cemented its support in 2015 by capitalizing on discontent over the Refugee Crisis. Each time a new issue gains traction in the European populist circuit, the AfD has found a way to make it relevant to the German situation, and then integrated it into their program.

A final determining factor in the AfD’s status as populist rather than extremist can be found in their intensity of nationalism. The AfD certainly flirts with extremist rhetoric on occasion, for example, when Petry commented in an interview with the newspaper Mannheimer Morgen in January 2016 that police should have the right to shoot refugees at the German border, or a year later when another leader, Björn Höcke, described the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin as a “memorial of shame.” These are both blatantly extremist statements that have deep roots in nationalism. However, the party official position is not nearly as extreme. The AfD’s platform refers to Germans most commonly as “citizens” and leaves room for some heavily restricted immigration, avoiding the pitfalls of völkisch rhetoric in the more extreme right parties in Germany (“Wahlprogramm,” 2017). They also have no stated interest in dismantling the
current government system or in establishing an authoritative system instead. These are all major points that still preclude them from being classified as “extremist.”

While a position as right-wing populists is definitely less radical than if they were more closely right-wing extremists, the AfD is still much farther right than popularly thought to be possible for Germany. The most prominent explanation given as to why a populist right-wing party would not emerge in Germany is the legacy of National Socialism. The modern German public consciousness rejects, for good reason, almost anything associated with this period of their past, including, most notably, nationalism. It is difficult to uphold a right-wing party without a clear sense of nationalism in the party’s ideology. Throughout the Cold War, there was significant ambivalence in the German population(s) to a “German identity,” further complicating the rise of a right-wing party (Weissbrod, 1994, p. 230).

There are also systematic checks that have made a far-right party difficult to materialize since the end of the Second World War. For one, the outlawing of a Nazi-successor party after the war significantly hindered the growth of general far-right movements. Not only does it make engaging in such politics risky for individuals, but it also complicates the traditional way of information sharing in politics: members of the older generation pass along useful information, contacts, and planning to younger members (Kitschelt, 1995). This act increases the likelihood of a party’s success, because then a party is not forced to reinvent effective strategies for basic political operation, such as organization or mobilizing a voter base. Another major obstacle for far-right parties in relation to National Socialism is with the particular brand of nationalism that the party espoused. Whereas Italy’s nationalist movement was protectionist and imperialist, the German counterpart from the same time was nationalist, but also explicitly “racist and ethnocentric” (Kitschelt, 1995). Before the AfD, it has been difficult for far-right parties to
distance themselves from this historical image, and some parties, like the NPD, remain openly racist today. A final factor that comes from this legacy is one that the AfD has easily bypassed. A key party of National Socialism was the vague socialist and protectionist aspect (Kitschelt, 1995). Most right-wing parties in the modern era identify more with neoliberal economic theories along with their socially conservative beliefs, whereas socialist parties are more often left on the political spectrum. This makes finding a modern base difficult for parties sympathetic to Germany’s nationalist past, but it was a fairly easy problem to side-step for the AfD, because their foundational beliefs were neoliberal.

**Comparison with Front National**

While a successful right wing populist party is a shocking development for German politics, a larger view of European politics displays similar trends in other countries. Perhaps most relevant for the purposes of comparison is Front National in bordering France because of the obvious geopolitical similarities between the two countries. Following Germany, France has the largest country population in Europe (“Population on January 1,” 2016). After the United Kingdom officially exits from the European Union, France is expected to have the second largest member state GDP in the collective, again only behind Germany (“GDP at current market prices,” 2016). France and (West) Germany joined together on the side of liberal capitalism during the Cold War divide and today they constitute two of the largest powers in the Europe, largely because of their economic capacities. Ultimately, these two countries have been vital international fixtures in representing liberal values since the end of the Second World War, yet both have been susceptible to populist movements in recent years. It appears that as of now, France’s far-right party, Front National (FN), will likely perform well in the 2017 elections and
is expected to qualify for the second round of presidential voting with its candidate Marine Le Pen.

Unlike *Alternative für Deutschland*, *Front National* has been operating for decades. The National Front for French Unity, or *Front National*, was established in 1972 by Jean-Marie Le Pen as party to bring together the extreme right in France and turn these fringe constituencies into a clear voting block (Ray, 2016). Unfortunately, the party did not fare particularly well in French politics for most of the twentieth century, rarely garnering more than 15 percent of the popular vote even in municipal elections (Ray, 2016). The peak of success for FN under Jean-Marie Le Pen was in the 2002 Presidential Election. Le Pen narrowly beat out the socialist candidate in the first round of voting, but he lost the second round by an unprecedented margin and only managed to garner 17.8% of the popular vote (Ray, 2016). Much of the FN’s lukewarm performance can be attributed to its xenophobic messaging and apologetic stances on Nazism. Le Pen himself has been quoted on many occasions since 1987 as describing Nazi gas chambers used in the Holocaust as only a “detail” in history (Chrisafis, 2016). More generally, FN has notoriously targeted Islam since the 1980s as a threat to France’s secular culture, and has consistently been against a pluralist French identity that could accept non-white individuals as true citizens (Davies, 2012). During Le Pen’s leadership, FN could never attract a competitive constituency because these radical stances were too isolating for the larger French public.

*Front National*’s performance improved dramatically when Le Pen’s daughter, Marine Le Pen, assumed the party’s presidency in 2011. Her strategy has been to move *Front National* from margin to center. She has attempted to soften the party’s extremist image since coming to power by following a policy of *dédiabolisation*, or “de-demonization,” of FN’s image (the Economist). The most obvious example was Marine Le Pen firing her own father from the party
he founded after he reiterated anti-Semitic and racist remarks in 2015 (Chrisafis, 2016). This strategy, along with social conditions favorable to rightist populism, has proved to be a successful one for the party. During the 2012 presidential election, FN managed its best showing in the first round of voting with 17.9% of the vote for Le Pen. Evidently, Le Pen has continued this theme of *dédiabolisation* for the most recent election as well, dropping her family name off of presidential promotional material to simply say “Marine 2017” (Le Pen, 2016). This strategy is a successful one, as she is polling in the lead at 26% for the upcoming presidential election, according to the most recent polls for March (Wisniewska et al., 2017).

Evidently, Front National has been rapidly evolving at the same time as *Alternative für Deutschland*, and only slightly ahead of AfD’s mobilization in terms of popularity. It is interesting that, in contrast, FN has been moving over the past four years to be more mainstream while AfD has shifted increasingly towards the fringe. FN builds upon on the same populist momentum that AfD does, particularly characterizing itself as an object of Paris’ elite scorn and a victim of the establishment political system. Like other populist parties in Europe and particularly the AfD, FN gained significant public support after the onset of the refugee crisis in 2014. It worked particularly well with FN’s longstanding messaging, which has long criticized Islam as an inherently anti-democratic and anti-French institution (Davies, 2012). Both the AfD and FN call for a strengthening of law enforcement in light of the large influx of asylum seekers in Europe, as well as terrorist attacks in their respective countries (Le Pen, 2016; “Wahlprogramm,” 2017). Interestingly, both parties also are strongly in favor of holding parents more accountable for their children’s behavior. Yet despite the similarities in populism and some socially conservative stances, FN and the AfD have notable differences in terms of economic policies. While the AfD wants Germany to pull out of the shared currency, FN goes further and
aims to provide the French public with their own referendum on an EU exit. FN is noticeably more nationalistic in this area, seeing as they also want to introduce protectionist measures for French-produced goods and place a hiring tax on businesses that employ foreign workers (Le Pen, 2016). Conversely, the AfD remains clearly neoliberal in areas related to the market and stays true to this portion of its founding message. From these key differences, it is plain to see that while the AfD and FN converge in areas of populism, riding similar waves of discontent in their respective countries, they have major differences in the intensity of their nationalism. *Front National* has distanced itself from its overtly neo-fascist past over the last five years, but its nationalist base endures.

Whatever differences these two parties have, they have enough similarities to begin working together. Petry’s husband and fellow AfD leader, Marcus Pretzell, arranged a summit in January of this year to bring together right-wing populist parties throughout Europe. They came together in Koblenz, Germany the day after Donald Trump’s inauguration the United States as a symbolic meeting of the international far-right and what they hope is a year of continual electoral successes (Hasselbach, 2017). This event also confirmed the suspicion that the far-right parties would overlook their evident differences and begin working together.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, while the current right-wing party in Germany, *Alternative für Deutschland*, was forced to enter the political arena from a moderate stance and migrate to a more extreme position, this was not true for France. The social dynamics in French society concerning the radical right in politics are far more forgiving to the history of *Front National* than could have ever existed in a German case. It is difficult to imagine, after looking at an analysis of the other German right-wing parties, that another party could have filled the populist position in Germany.
if a new party had not been created. Larger portions of the German public could accept AfD as a legitimate contender in politics particularly because they did not have the unsavory past that the NPD or the Republicans have. Key portions of FN’s platform would likely be too radical for the German public as well, including its protectionist economic policies, as well as its overtly racist past. Going forward, it will be interesting to see whether or not the AfD continues to radicalize, and if it does, what kind of public support it can maintain. It is also worth noting that while the AfD has achieved notable successes thus far, it is not significantly out-performing other German far-right parties when comparing the initial elections following their founding. The federal elections in September of this year will be a greater test of their popularity and their cohesion of a party, and will therefore likely be regarded as a litmus test for whether or not they can transcend their status as merely a protest party.

Even if the AfD’s ultimate vote share in the election is underwhelming, it’s presence is nonetheless important. The AfD managed to break into German politics despite the popular belief in academia that the German social and political climates were too harsh to support a populist right-wing party. This is one example of a right-wing party at least partially stepping out of the shadow of National Socialism in Germany, and could continue to garner support independent of this historical scar. The AfD evolved from a soft Eurosceptic party without many ideological beliefs into a partner with the more extreme Front National in a short four years. The populist, anti-immigrant movement in Germany (and throughout Europe) found a sympathetic outlet in the AfD with Frauke Petry, so much so that it overtook the founding members and steered the party in a different direction. The AfD is one of the most recent additions to the populist political landscape in Europe, yet their emergence is one of the most notable.
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