

Right-wing Populism in Germany

The AfD and Its Voters ahead of the 2017 Federal Election

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Since Donald Trump's election as president of the United States, many observers have been talking of a new "age of populism." They predict a populist future for the liberal representative democracies of the West. Populism appears to be becoming a defining trait of democracy in the 21st century. But in public discourse, populism is an inexplicit concept: politicians, parties, and voters are described as "populists," "right-wing populists," or "left-wing populists."

So what is "populism"? How can it be empirically measured? And how populist are the people who vote for the party *Alternative for Germany (AfD)*.

Most scholars now agree that the two determining dimensions of populism are *anti-establishment* and *anti-pluralism*. Anti-establishment refers to populist criticism of the people and institutions who constitute the "Establishment" in society, such as established parties, parliaments, and politicians as typical representatives of democracy. Critical attitudes towards the media, the European Union, and the constitutional state also belong to this dimension. Characteristic of the second dimension of populism is an anti-pluralist stance citing an alleged general popular will and rejecting the institutions and procedures of pluralist consensus formation and decision-making.

These two dimensions enable us not only to define but also to measure populist attitudes. The more strongly voters, parties, and politicians adopt anti-establishment and anti-pluralist attitudes and positions, the more populist they are. Populism is primarily neither left-wing nor right-wing. As a substantively empty, "thin" ideology, it understands societal disputation as contention between the "one people" and allegedly corrupt political elites. Populist parties, politicians, and voters can be recognized in party platforms, rhetoric and attitudes by calls to overthrow the prevailing political order so as to give greater influence to the popular will. They demand that the political system be reformed, corruption fought, and popular influence in politics enhanced; and they assert that they alone represent the true will of the people.

The specifics of populism

Such "general populism" can be supplemented by specifically right or left-wing populist attitudes towards political content and programmes. Political (self-) placement on a left/right scale can be used in analysis. Over and above this, right-wing populism is often measured in terms of concrete attitudes against migration, minorities, and gender equality and in favour of a stricter law enforcement. Typical left-wing populists, by contrast, argue in favour of greater redistribution or expropriation of the wealthy, demand more participation for socially disadvantaged sections of the population or call for a general ban on arms exports on pacifist grounds.

Prominent examples of general populist movements that cannot be labelled either left or right in terms of their political programme are Nowoczesna in Poland and Ciudadanos in Spain. On the left-wing populist pattern of many Latin American movements, by contrast, are Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece. Examples of right-wing populism are the Front National in France and the UK

Summary: "Populism" can be defined, conceptualized and measured on the two dimensions antiestablishment and antipluralism. When supplemented by typically left or right wing political items, left and rightwing populism can also be empirically defined and measured. The Alternative for Germany (AfD) shows itself to be a rightwing populist party not only in terms of its platform and at the level of party officials and candidates but also because the majority of AfD voters are rightwing populists. With the AfD, an unambiguously rightwing populist party has established itself also in Germany ahead of the federal parliamentary elections in 2017.

Independence Party (UKIP) in Britain. But (right-wing) populism is also showing itself in Germany. Above all the Alternative for Germany (AfD), founded in 2013, has often been described in public debate and the media as a right-wing populist party.

Quite rightly. Recent studies by the Research Unit Democracy and Democratization show that at the level of candidates and political platform, the AfD is clearly a right-wing populist party in comparison to others. But how right-wing populist are its voters, the some ten per cent of the electorate in Germany who told pollsters that they intended to vote AfD at the federal election in September 2017?

To answer this question, the outcome of a representative survey carried out by Infra test dimap for the Bertelsmann Foundation was analysed. Between 13 and 30 March 2017, a total of 2,371 voters and abstainers in the 2013 federal election were asked about their political attitudes and voting intentions for the 2017 federal election. The sample included 364 AfD voters. How populist AfD voters' attitudes are was measured on the basis of the extent to which respondents agreed ("strongly agree," "mostly agree," "mostly disagree," "strongly disagree") with the following eight general populist statements:

1. Important questions should not be decided by parliament but by popular referendums.
2. The people are often in agreement, but the politicians pursue quite different goals.
3. I would rather be represented by a citizen than by a specialized politician.
4. Political parties only want peoples' votes but do not care about their opinion.
5. The politicians in the German parliament need to follow the will of the people.
6. The people in Germany agree in principle on what should happen politically.
7. The political differences between citizens and politicians are greater than the differences among citizens.
8. What they call "compromise" in politics is really just selling out on one's own principles.

Whereas statements 2, 3, 4, and 7 address the antagonism between the political elite and citizens and thus the anti-establishment dimension of populist attitudes, statements 1, 5, 6, and 8 address the idea of the public as a homogeneous unit and thus reflect the anti-pluralism dimension of populism. Three groups were identified on the basis of agreement with these eight statements: respondents who "strongly agreed" or "mostly agreed" with all eight statements were defined as populist. Respondents who agreed with at least the majority of statements (five out of eight) and also did not strongly disagree with any of the statements were defined as leaning towards populism. All other respondents who mostly agreed with not more than half of the statements and/or strongly disagreed with at least one statement were defined as non-populist.

In order to measure their right-wing orientation, we drew on the self-location of AfD voter respondents on a left/right scale, where they could place themselves from 0 ("left-wing") to 10 ("right-wing") In addition, typical right-wing statements on particular political topics were presented for reaction.

For the empirical location of AfD voters ahead of the 2017 federal election, this analysis produced the following picture: far more than half (56 per cent) are populists as defined and a further third (32 per cent) lean towards populism. This means that nine out of ten AfD voters hold populist attitudes. Far more AfD voters have populist views than the average for the whole electorate. The proportion of populists among AfD voters is approximately twice as great as in the whole electorate (29 per cent). Vice versa, the proportion of non-populists in the electorate (41 per cent) is more than three times greater than among AfD voters (12 per cent). The comparison between parties, too, shows that the AfD has by far the most voters with strong populist views. While 56 per cent of AfD voters are populist, the figures for the other parties are 29 per cent for the SPD, 23 for Die Linke (Left Party), 22 for the FDP, 14 per cent for the CDU/CSU, and 10 per cent



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for the Greens. By contrast, the proportion of non-populist voters who opted for the AfD, only just under 12 per cent, is far lower than that for the Greens (57 per cent), the CDU/CSU (56 per cent), the FDP (43 per cent), the SPD (38 per cent), and Die Linke (36 per cent).

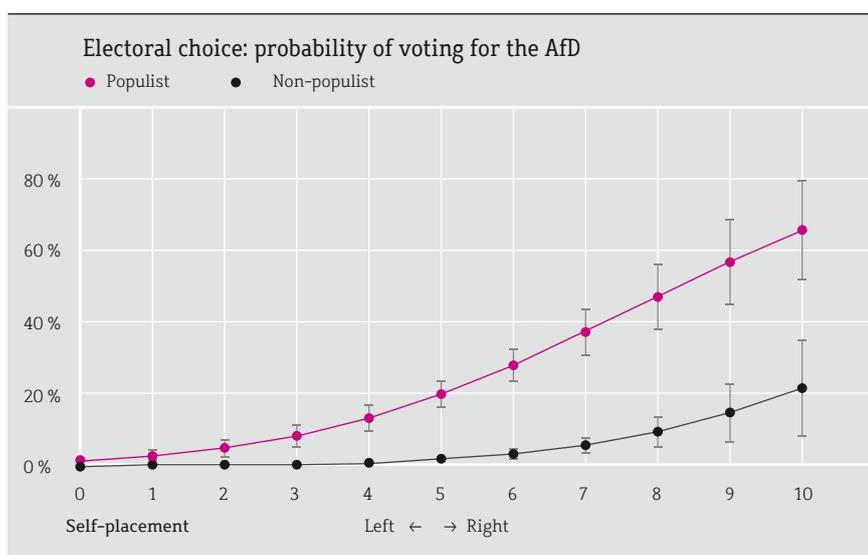
The situation is similar when it comes to self-placement of AfD voters on the left-wing/right-wing scale (0 = “left-wing” and 10 = “right-wing”). More than two thirds (67 per cent placed themselves right of centre, one quarter even on the far right (8 to 10 on the scale). Another 42 per cent see themselves within the centre-right spectrum (6 - 7).

By comparison, only four of ten FDP voters and only every third CDU/CSU voter place themselves right-of-centre, and only 7 per cent of FDP voters and the same proportion of CDU/CSU voters on the far right. The average position for AfD voters on the left/right spectrum is 6.6, far to the right of that for the FDP (5.5), CDU/CSU (5.3), SPD (4.2), Greens (3.4), and Linke (2,2).

The findings on typically right-wing attitudes on specific political issues also confirm this result: 85 per cent of AfD voters far more frequently agree fully with the statement “Immigrants should be required to adapt to German culture” than the average of all voters (55 per cent). Almost as frequently (84 per cent), AfD voters totally agree that “People who break the law should be more severely punished,” while only 64 per cent of all voters take this view. Still more marked are the differences on the statement “Germany should accept no more refugees from crisis areas”: almost three quarters of all AfD voter strongly agree with this compared to 30 per cent of all voters.

In sum, almost nine out of ten AfD voters have populist attitudes and more than two-thirds place themselves right of centre. The probability of voters opting for the AfD increases with the degree of their right-wing orientation and their sympathy for populism from almost zero among left-wing non-populists to more than 60 per cent among strongly right-wing populists (see figure). A typical right-wing populist is therefore more than six times more likely to vote AfD than the average of all voters. Vice versa, the typical AfD voter is a right-wing populist and, as regards its constituency, the AfD is also clearly a right-wing populist party.

But “right-wing populist” as defined does not necessarily mean “right-wing extremist” or someone “hostile to democracy” in principle. What proportion of AfD voters are right-wing extremist was not explicitly addressed by the measurement concept applied. Moreover, more than eight out of ten AfD voters strongly agreed (37 per cent) or at least “agreed” (47 per cent) with the statement “Democ-



Source: Infratest dimap for the Bertelsmann Foundation (March 2017), calculation Vehrkamp/Wratil (2017).

racy is – all in all – the best political system.” Only 14 per cent “mostly agreed” and no more than 2 per cent “strongly agreed” with the statement. The vast majority of largely right-wing populist AfD voters are thus no enemies of democracy, but much more frequently adopt right-wing positions on policy and political issues and are, above all, much more populist in their assessment of the functioning of democracy, its institutions, and those who currently exercise political responsibility. What we have established for AfD candidates and the party platform thus also applies to those who vote AfD: the brand essence of the AfD is right-wing populism. Before the 2017 federal election, a right-wing populist party, indisputably so also in the empirical preferences of its voters, has thus established itself in the German party landscape: the AfD.

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