Why Physical Location Matters to Voter Behavior:
A Study of the German 2017 Federal Elections

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Abstract

The extremist right-wing populist party, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), has been a disruptive force in German politics since its founding following the 2008 global financial crisis. This study investigates the correlation between geographic location and voting behavior. I propose that a voter's location is the primary deciding factor of whether or not s/he will vote for the AfD. I have conducted a study using bivariate and OLS regression analysis of the 2017 German federal elections as a case study to examine the correlation between voter environment and tendency to vote for the AfD. Population density, votes for the AfD, and three additional independent variables reflecting socio-economic conditions at the electoral district level, constitute the scope of quantitative data used. First, I test whether rural or peripheral areas correlate to higher AfD voting percentages than are seen in urban areas. Secondly, I investigate what insights the statistical analysis offers and what research can be done from here to further develop the literature. The rise of the AfD in Germany provides an opportunity for researchers to better understand the relationship between physical location and why it matters to voting behavior. The results unveil a correlation between physical location and voting behavior, with particular significance coming from interaction with migrant populations. Ultimately, these results provide a launching point for further research on the universal theories on the motivating factors of voting behavior.

Keywords: Voter Behavior, Populism, Quantitative Statistical Analysis

1. Introduction

The extremist right-wing populist party, the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), has been a disruptive force in German politics since its founding, following the 2008 global financial crisis. AfD voters demand increasingly insular policies relating to trade and migration, in particular. Researchers note that fear of changes in existing cultural norms motivates many AfD voters, however the needs and concerns of AfD voters have yet to be addressed because there is little understanding of how their environments shape their political attitudes and voting patterns. I suggest that a voter's location is the primary deciding factor of whether or not he will vote for the AfD. This claim is based on the body of existing research on human migration patterns, sociological studies of activity spaces, and emerging studies on the phenomenon of populism. I employ statistical analysis of the 2017 German federal elections to examine the correlation between voter environment and tendency to vote for the AfD. First, I test the differences between rural and urban electoral districts and their AfD voting. Secondly, I present a series of three tests of demographic factors and AfD voting percentages. I hypothesize that peripheral zones that are neither urban nor rural emerge from this particular set of social demographics, thereby suggesting that the highest concentration of AfD votes occur just outside of metropolitan areas, in accordance with various disciplines' understanding of voter behavior and populism. My findings falsify the null hypothesis: lower population densities do not correlate to high percentages of votes for the

AfD. Furthermore, the testing of three independent variables reflecting socio-economic conditions at the electoral district level reveals that interaction with migrant populations is negatively correlated with votes for the AfD.

Globalization has resulted in changing political, economic, and social norms for all states in the international system. While many neo-liberal scholars would argue that the benefits of globalization far surpass the downsides, many individuals living in the West perceive that they have been victims of a globalist agenda that does not promote their political, economic, or social interests.[1] Extremist right-wing populism has given these individuals a platform to retaliate against the elites and governing bodies that they feel have left them behind. Furthermore, this brand of populism has disrupted elections in a number of western democracies, calling into question party legitimacy and the attention with which populist fervor must be addressed. Supporters of the right-wing populist agenda are a part of a complex network made up of multiple socio-economic groups ranging from political insiders to those who are severely disadvantaged. Scholars have begun to examine the unifying elements of such movements by analyzing how right-wing populist parties initially form and their key issues. Geography offers insight into community networks, homogeneity of the population, and many other social factors, influences, and attitudes. Since the reunification of Germany, the country as a whole has become a global leader of industry and innovation. Individuals living in urban versus rural setting are likely to have differing political priorities and affiliations, based on their personal experiences.[2] Those living within or close to urban areas are likelihood to engage with complex global phenomena in different ways than those living in rural areas would.

2. Literature Review

German politics dominate much of the discussion surrounding the European Union. Germany's indispensable leadership within the union faces resistance from citizens at home who question the organization's ability to delegate burden-sharing and facilitate policy objectives. The review of the literature presents a look at the evolution of German political identities, why the AfD was able to gain power, and what draws supporters into its realm.

2.1 Evolution of German Political Identities

Scholars have examined the notion of Germany as a leader within the European Union by analyzing the present discourse on Germany's European identity present in media and politics.[3] This subset of research offers insight into the roots of Euroscepticism and its political ramifications with the context of the construction of German political identity.

2.1.1 the introduction of ordoliberalism

Charlotte Galpin investigates how Germany's response to a potential Grexit is telling of the evolution of European identity. Galpin claims that European identity has been redefined under the influence of German ordoliberalism, which demands accountability, stability, and solidarity. Her research suggests that Germany had to embrace the European ideals of the late 1940s in order to reenter society with any chance of rebuilding and regaining influence on the world stage. In the following century Germany successfully used its reclaimed dominance to revitalize European identity, as a leader of the European Union.

Galpin and Decker's works both mark the Euro crisis as a turning point and "window of opportunity" for the AfD's brand of populism to debut and flourish.[4] Decker notes that the AfD was, in part, able to succeed because it drew on "an already existing network of social and political structures".[5] Gianfranco Baldini and Silvia Bolgherini emphasize Decker's point. They state that originally, "the AfD was seen as a party built up by economics professors and entrepreneurs mainly drawn from the CDU's ranks".[6] They contrast this group with those that founded the Piraten Partei, a left-wing populist party, formed by young and politically inexperienced individuals seeking to use widespread internet access to revolutionize the political order. By examining political attitudes and identities in the context of German history, researchers today can use the same control variables of population density, education level, and unemployment to see how those factors have driven voter behavior over time.

2.1.2. redefining German identity in the 20th century

In order to understand how Germany adopted a European identity and then grew powerful enough to restructure the ideals of what it means to be European, it is important to consider the historical context that prompted Germany to

adopt a European identity in the first place. In different lights, both Galpin and Decker's pieces discussed the legacy of the Holocaust and its ramifications for modern German identity. Galpin suggests that "Germany's Nazi past in fact provided a constitutive 'other' for European identity construction with the result that Germany linked its national identity closely to Europe, and its national policy interests consistently with European ones in order to deal with the past".[7] In Decker's analysis of where the AfD falls within the German political spectrum, he explains how crises, such as the recent migrant crisis challenges the AfD to rally support from those who feel threatened by the influx of migrants, while remaining legitimate. For AfD party leaders, "the 'main problem' can be found in the stigmatization of right-wing extremism as a result of the Nazi legacy".[8]

Galpin and Decker examine Germany's identity in the European context. As a result of financial collapse in southern Europe, states such as, Greece and Italy do not live up to the "good European" values of solidarity and accountability, thereby acting as "counterpart to a supposedly virtuous Germany".[9] Because Germany currently leads much of the European Union's policy agenda, many Germans feel a direct stake in the challenges faced by the E.U. Stresses such as the stability of the Eurozone, following the 2008 financial crisis, affect domestic sentiments surrounding social and economic security. These stresses and stakes in European matters are the direct results of increasing global interconnectedness. Often, those who do not feel that they have benefitted from increased interconnectedness turn inward, in favor if insular foreign policy.

Existing scholarship provides a base for understanding the nuanced notion of German identity. Their overlap revealed various facets of German history, post-World War II, that account for Germany's strong desire to be a part of a unified and competitive Europe. Scholars notes that "men and young voters are somewhat overrepresented… concerning education and income, AfD voters occupy lower status segments of the population…".[10] Furthermore, Simon T. Franzmann investigates whether "the AfD's Euroscepticism is the result of a right-wing populist attitude or a more technocratic economist view".[11] Research analyzes press releases and strategic statements that have been released by the AfD since its founding. Franzmann emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between the party's tactical and strategic agendas. By investigating the development of the party's strategic advantage, the research suggests a split in direction. Many economists who initially backed the AfD left after the intra-party defeat of Bernd Lucke in 2015.[12] This facet is particularly important is understanding fractionalizing within the party.

2.1.3. "a thin-centered ideology"

Mudde's work defines thin-centered ideology as having, "a restricted morphology, which necessarily appears attached to—and sometimes is even assimilated into—other ideologies…" and consequently it "can offer neither complex nor comprehensive answers to the political questions that modern societies generate".[13] After 2015, many economists disassociated with the party as a result of the direction, rooted in a thin-centered ideology. He attributes the AfD's founding to a discontentment among conservatives as a result of the CDU's "programmatic turn" under Merkel's leadership.[14] The idea that the AfD utilizes thin-centered ideology provides a starting place for understanding what issues that AfD targets and how voters interpret their environments. Further research testing the relationship between voters' locations and corresponding votes for the Alternative für Deutschland would benefit from this understanding of the AfD's ideology so that additional control variables can be considered.

A number of scholars examining the AfD's rise have examined the shift in the CDU's policy agenda under Merkel's leadership and have sought to determine if there is a relationship between voters' perceptions of the economy and their readiness to vote break party allegiance in upcoming elections. Some scholars analyze voting patterns in the 2009 federal elections to see to what degree the economy affected election outcomes. The research identifies punishment and partisan as two different ways of how the economy impacts the vote.[15] It considers regional differences in votes and the respective unemployment rates of those regions.

Other scholars have considered the difference in policy preferences between various German regions, in an effort to understand the regional breakdown, remarking that the Bundestag is realistically capable to accommodating the ideological preferences of East and West Germany.[16] The authors note that their research suggests that "it is useful to complement voters' individual assessments of the economic situation with contextual variable to reveal dimensions of economic voting".[17] As such, idea that voters' perceptions of the economy matter as much as the economic reality does.

Often the perception of an unsteady economic future results in a fear of losing power. Jörg Michael Dostal's article, "The Pegida Movement and German Political Culture: Is Right-Wing Populism Here to Stay?," makes the important distinction that supporters of the Pegida Movement (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West) are not political outsiders and that they "lack confidence in the ability of the political system to secure future prosperity…" because "large sections of the middle class are overwhelmed by socio-economic and cultural change".[18] He goes on

to explain, these individuals are the 'modernization losers'.[19] Their fear and uncertainty cause them to respond negatively, even violently at times, to immigrants who become the scapegoats for domestic issues resulting from underlying questions of what it means to be German and European.[20] Dostal insists that their focus on Islam must "be read as a symbolic expression of a larger crisis in German politics".[21] Additionally, Dostal's research expresses concern for the long-term future standing of the 'modernization losers'. He asks to what extent will they "permanently disengage from the centre-right".[22]

The existing literature provides a comprehensive understanding of how German political attitudes and identities have evolved and the factors that have contributed to the shaping of those identities. Since the reunification of Germany, the country as a whole, has becoming increasingly urbanized. Those living within or close to urban areas are likelihood to engage with complex global phenomena in different ways than those living in rural areas would. The migration flows that came in 2015 have shown a deep divide in German political consensus. Furthermore, existing fear and feelings of insecurity have been exacerbated by the crisis. There is little research available on where exactly this divide exists. To say that it is purely a socio-economic or education divide is far too simple of an answer because it fails to acknowledge trends in how Germans vote when grouped at the level of electoral district. The sociological impacts of activity spaces have remained unexamined or underestimated all together. Examining votes for the AfD in urban and rural electoral districts has the potential to reveal a relationship between voter location and preference for the AfD. An analysis of this nature could contribute to a greater understanding of why physical location matters to voter behavior, in an effort to form a universal model that can used to explain phenomena globally.

3. Methodology

Hypothesizing that rural electoral districts correlate to higher AfD voting percentages, statistical analysis is best suited for determining whether the claim can be verified or falsified. Statistical analysis provides a clear way of identifying whether or not a relationship is present, and then also allows the researcher to posit control variables in further data tests to potentially gain a greater understanding of the causal mechanism behind the rural tendency for higher AfD votes.

Using population density as a proxy for measuring a voter's proximity to an urban area, constituencies can be categorized as either urban or rural. German electoral districts will serve as the universe of cases for this research. The German government does not have an official definition of what constitutes rural, however the German Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs, and Spatial Development utilizes BBSR, a spatial monitoring system, as one way to classify urban and rural typologies. Using BBSR, within urban areas, "agglomerated counties" contain more than 150 inhabitants/km^2 and "rural counties" contain fewer than 150 inhabitants/km^2.[23] These metrics were used to classify German electoral districts as urban if they contain greater than 150 inhabitant/km^2 or rural if they have fewer than 150 inhabitants/km^2. The dichotomist variables of rural and urban were coded as zeros and ones, respectively.

The dependent variable, votes for the AfD, was measured as percentages per electoral district from the 2017 federal Bundestag election. All figures for electoral votes and populations density were taken from the Federal Returning Officer database of the German federal government. After measuring the independent and dependent variables, all constituencies coded as rural (0) and those coded as urban (1) will be grouped respectively. From there, the mean AfD vote percentage will be derived for each grouping.

Germany contains 16 federal lands, which contain a total of 299 electoral districts. The federal lands of Bayern and Nordrhein-Westfalen both include metropolitan areas with highly densely populated electoral districts such as, München and Köln, respectively. Additionally, both federal lands include a number of electoral districts with low population densities. Initial proposals suggested the selection of these two federal lands for the creation of the necessary variation amongst cases necessary to establish a set of rural constituencies (0) and urban ones (1). Furthermore, Bayern and Nordrhein-Westfalen share several qualitative attributes that optimize the comparison of their data. For example, if there were to be an initial correlation shown and a number of runs with control variables were to be carried out, both regions share similar religious backgrounds. These factors are advantageous because they are likely to influence a trend if there is indeed one amongst the control variables. However, the final study includes all of the electoral districts in Germany, in an effort to create a more universal model.

Using SPSS, Pearson's R values and linear bivariate correlation tests were run to determine whether there was a relationship present between areas with low population densities and high voting percentages for the AfD.
If the relationship were to exist, the correlational analysis in SPSS would result in a correlation coefficient closer to 1 or greater than 1, because the hypotheses predicts rural cases correlate to higher AfD votes, therefore establishing a positive relationship between the two variables. If the empirical evidence had suggested that there is a relationship,

then the control variables would have been introduced individually to determine if there is a particular driving force for rural AfD voters.

The results would reject the hypothesis if a correlational analysis yield a correlation coefficient either at or close to 0 or with a sign that is different than the direction of the relationship posited in the hypothesis. This being said, if rural voters do not have a greater tendency than urban voters to vote for the AfD, then testing additional independent variables could analyze of the qualities of voters' environments, where the AfD vote is high, to examine what common qualities unite these voters in their political motivations.

By positing each electoral district's percentage of votes for the AfD and coding and grouping urban and rural areas, respectively, the research sought to first determine if there is correlation between voter location and inclination to vote for the AfD. Secondly, the process sought to identify the driving forces behind votes for the AfD. Determining whether or not a relationship exists is essential to building a greater political and philosophical understanding of the factors that motivate reactionary political decisions and thin-centered ideology.[24] It has already been established that the AfD preys on the social, political, and economic anxieties of Germans. This study uses election data to analyze the relationship with the introduction of control variables, this study can generate an understanding of whether or not this sense of economic insecurity exists and if so, where exactly it does. Furthermore, because scholars recognize economic insecurity as a factor that contributes to support for extremist right-wing populism, a broader understanding of where the phenomenon exists will help to better understanding the needs and concerns of communities that are vulnerable to the simple solutions offered by the AfD. A second stage of OLS regression tests of three additional independent variables shows the degree of correlation between the various social conditions and an individual's tendency to vote for the AfD. The three explanatory independent variables chosen include unemployment rate, percentage of population with university acceptance qualification, and percentage of population by migrant background.

The results of the bivariate linear tests only show whether or not there is a correlation between rural cases and higher AfD voting percentages. If there is a relationship, then further statistical analysis can be used to try to determine which, if any, of the control variables appear to be causal mechanisms for the propensity to vote for the AfD. Statistical analysis will not reveal the motivations of voters in their own words. However, this may not be detrimental. Additional tests using percentage of electoral district of migrant background, for example, could show underlying sentiments that voters may not be inclined to share in an ethnographic study of political motivations. The statistical analysis removes bias and the difficulty of discussing the concerns of voters and still presents the figures for what they actually are. However, statistical analysis is not full proof; it does not guarantee that the relationship exists, particularly because of the limited data and figures available.

The study proposed that all 299 electoral districts would be examined. The complete set was selected in an attempt to reflect Germany as a whole, in testing the hypothesis. One set of data runs was completed excluding Berlin for reasons outlined in the next section. However, ultimately, little information was garnered from viewing the data without the federal land of Berlin.

In the process of testing the relationship between voter location and votes for the AfD, potential issues may include a lack of variation amongst the classified urban and rural electoral districts, due to the cutoff classification statistic chosen, 150 inhabitants/km^2. Additionally, if a correlation were to be found, once control variables are introduced, it may be difficult to evaluate whether there is one main driving force or a combination of the control variables driving the votes. The statistical analysis would need to be extending to comprehensively explain how the variables are at play. Moreover, it would be advisable to use case studies to explain how these variables influence the voters' environment. The greatest potential difficulty would arise if the initial statistical analysis shows little to no correlation between the variables. If assembling the data set to include more cases does not influence the correlational coefficient, then other data or methodology would need to be employed to examine the phenomenon. One possible alternative would be to continue using statistical analysis but alter the figures for classifying the electoral districts as urban or rural. This option is only possible because Germany does not have one official means of classifying urban and rural typographies. The figure could be moved upward to reflect what is currently the median population density, 230 inhabitants/km^2.[25] However, utilizing this figure may not produce the most accurate results possible because the current system of defining electoral districts may already account for the current means of classifying urban and rural. If selecting a different figure only marginally changes how electoral districts are classified, then perhaps statistically analysis is not the appropriate means of examining the phenomenon.

4. Analysis

4.1. Bivariate Linear Tests

The first set of tests tested the bivariate linear correlation between the population density and the percentage of votes for the AfD. The first test included all 299 German electoral districts. Subsequently, a test was run excluding figures for Berlin. Berlin was excluded because the population density figures are so high compared to the rest of Germany, the data would sway the model and the result so much that the model may not be truly representative of the nation as a whole. Figure 4.1.2 presents the correlation between the independent and dependent variables.

Table 1: Bivariate Linear Correlation Between Population Density And Votes For The AfD

Percentage of votes for AfD	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.341**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0
Population density	Pearson Correlation	-0.341**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0	

The results show a significant correlation with nearly 99% accuracy that the low population densities do correlate to high percentages of votes for the AfD. The negative correlation is seen in the Pearson Correlation. The test excluding the electoral districts within Berlin did not yield results significantly different than the initial test including all 299 electoral districts. The Pearson Correlation was -0.345**. The bivariate linear tests reject the null hypothesis: lower population densities do not correlate to high percentages of votes for the AfD. Next, the study presents an OLS regression test of multivariate explanatory variables. Figure 4.2.2 presents the results.

Table 2: OLS Regression Test

	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficients Beta	Sig.
	B	Standard Error		
(Constant)	20.27	1.226		0.000
Percentage of votes for AfD	-0.55	0.737	-0.044	0.456
Population by Migrant Background	-0.315	0.034	-0.524	0.000
With University Entrance Qualification	-0.152	0.042	-0.205	0.000
Unemployment	0.524	0.108	0.245	0.000

The R Square value for this test is 0.392. The correlations are all significant. Votes for the AfD remains the dependent variable. Unemployment increases 0.524 units as one unit for percentage of votes for the AfD increases. This positive correlation is expected. The negative correlation between an increase in votes for the AfD and university entrance acceptance is also verified, as university acceptance qualification decreases 0.152 units as votes for the AfD increase by 1 unit. Lastly, the negative relationship between population by migrant background and votes for the AfD is verified. As population by migrant background decreases 0.315 units, votes for the AfD increase by 1 unit. When accounting for standardization, the column titled "Standardization Coefficients Beta" provides the figures within the same scale and units.

4.2 The Impact Of Population By Migrant Background

The regression test shows that the independent variable with the most movement along with the rate of votes for the AfD is population by migrant background. These findings support the notion that the urban rural divide is too simple of an indicator for who is most likely to vote for the AfD. The data suggests that the composition of the voter's environment is influenced by not only employment and education status, but also her exposure to those of migrant backgrounds.

5. Conclusion

The first round of tests does indeed falsify the null hypothesis. There is a statistically significant correlation between population density and votes for the AfD. The second set of tests provided answers as to which variables matter in shaping a voter's environment. Population by migrant background prevails as one of the most influential independent variables in motivating voters to vote or to not vote for the AfD. These findings support the scholarship on why individuals grab hold of thin-centered ideology and support political parties such as the AfD. Testing of additional independent variables may unveil additional correlations between votes for the AfD and other social factors.

An individual's political motivations are shaped by countless experiences, interactions, etc., and thus one sole motivating factor can never be determined. However, patterns explaining reactionary political behavior are still useful. Various sectors can use these findings to better understand which populations are most likely to fall prey to the rhetoric of alternative political parties and movements.

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