



Gutenberg School of Management and Economics
& Research Unit “Interdisciplinary Public Policy”

Discussion Paper Series

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populism and unequal turnout*

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September 01, 2023

Discussion paper number 2312

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Who mobilises non-voters? Right-wing populism and unequal turnout

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This paper examines the relationship between the election performance of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and voter turnout in the German federal elections. It analyses data from a variety of sources, including data from the 299 constituencies, data from 979 neighbourhoods in 30 cities, and two individual-level datasets, including panel data and the post-election cross-section of the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES). The paper finds that the AfD was successful in mobilising former non-voters in the 2017 federal election, but there was no further mobilisation in the 2021 election. The conclusion is that populist parties are unlikely to succeed in increasing voter turnout in the long run.

1. Introduction

Voting is the most fundamental form of political participation. In a democracy, it is the prerogative of citizens to elect or remove governments, with the aim of steering policy towards the preferences of the majority. However, in most countries and elections, voter participation is unequal: Poorer citizens and those with less formal education participate less often. In contrast, the voice of the better off is heard loud and clear in elections. If governments are to be responsive to citizens' demands, this task becomes more difficult if only certain segments of the citizenry express their preferences through voting and other forms of political participation. Unequal participation, Lijphart (1997) famously argued, is the “unsolved problem” of democracy. It is therefore important to understand not only the reasons for non-voting, but also whether and which parties are able to mobilise former non-voters.

So when unequal voter turnout moved up the political agenda in Germany for a brief moment in 2015, it seemed like good news. The then leader of the SPD, Sigmar Gabriel, and the party's secretary general, Yasmin Fahimi, had discovered the issue for themselves and were convinced that a higher and thus less unequal turnout would benefit the SPD. Increasing voter turnout

seemed as positive for democracy as it was for their own party. But just one year later, the issue had lost its relevance for the SPD. Not only had the AfD made spectacular gains in some state elections in eastern Germany, but voter turnout had also risen sharply there. If higher voter turnout pays off for the wrong parties, it also seems less desirable in terms of democratic politics. But is it true that it is mainly the Alternative for Germany that can mobilise non-voters? Or has this only been the case in exceptional circumstances, without a general pattern emerging? These are the questions I would like to explore in this paper.

The subject of voter turnout has also experienced a number of ups and downs in professional discussion over the past thirty years. After sharp changes in voter turnout, political science regularly turns its attention to the issue, but once a new equilibrium has been reached, interest wanes. The social patterns of non-voting are no longer controversial. Numerous studies have confirmed the “law of dispersion” formulated in the 1930s by Tingsten (1975), according to which low turnout is unequal turnout (see, for example, Kohler 2006). What is less clear is whether the emergence and electoral success of populist parties is changing this pattern. Since disappointment and dissatisfaction are reasons for individuals to abstain from voting, populist parties could mobilise former non-voters. After all, the trademark of these parties is to claim to be the voice of the unrepresented and to oppose established parties. If abstention and protest voting are “two sides of the same coin” (Falter and Schumann 1993), an increase in protest voting could also increase voter turnout. However, the few existing studies on this question do not clearly confirm this assumption (see section 2).

In the following, I will therefore first summarise the state of research and then outline the data and analysis strategy. In the fourth part, I will present the results of the analysis, which show that although the AfD succeeded in mobilising non-voters in 2017, there was no further increase in

2021. Voter turnout remained at a similar level and the turnout gap was not significantly reduced. The analyses raise the question of whether it was the novelty of the AfD or the special situation after the 2015 immigration debate that had a mobilising effect, rather than the presence of a right-wing populist party as such.

2. Do populist parties increase turnout

Many observers now agree that populism is characterised by the opposition of “the people” and “the elite”, with the people being characterised as homogeneous and uncorrupted, and the elite as corrupt and out of touch (Mudde 2004: 541). This opposition leads to an anti-pluralist attitude of populist parties, as there is hardly any room for different views or legitimate differences of interest (Müller 2016). If what is right is obvious and clearly recognised by the people, but is not implemented by politics, this can only be due to the malice of the elite. Against this elite—in other parties, in public broadcasting or in academia—populist parties agitate, claiming to speak for the deceived people. Populists pretend to be the mouthpiece of the groups neglected by other parties (Weyland 2001: 14; Mény and Surel 2002: 11; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 51).

This self-description resonates with some citizens because of their distance from mainstream parties and their dissatisfaction with the way democracy works. The feeling of not being well represented is one of the driving forces behind voting for right-wing populist parties and is more common among people who would otherwise be more likely not to vote (Droste 2021; Hense and Schäfer 2022). Populist parties formulate “representative claims” (Saward 2006) that are accepted by part of the target group. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the electoral success of these parties could have a positive effect on voter turnout.

However, the empirical evidence on the effect of populist parties on voter turnout is inconclusive. In an analysis of 19 Latin American countries, Houle and Kenny (2018) fail to find any effect of populist parties on voter turnout. Similarly, Huber and Ruth (2017) find no positive effect on turnout for 31 European countries over the period 1990-2014, but show that right-wing populist parties reduce turnout inequality. For the period from 1960 to 2018, Althoff (2022) also finds no effect of the electoral success of populist parties on voter turnout in 31 European countries. There is also no statistically significant correlation across all 33 European countries examined, as the effects are contradictory in Western and Eastern Europe (Immerzeel and Pickup 2015). The success of right-wing populist parties in Eastern Europe has a demobilising effect on younger age groups and those with positive attitudes towards migration, while in Western Europe the rise of right-wing populist parties increases turnout among the better educated—although it is unclear whether this is the result of mobilisation or counter-mobilisation (see also Spittler 2018).¹ However, based on a longer time series, Leininger and Meijers (2020) come to somewhat different conclusions. They show that the presence of populist parties in parliaments in Eastern Europe has a positive effect on voter turnout, while no such effect is observed in Western Europe. The results of these comparative studies thus vary depending on the period under study, the region and also the way in which the explanatory variable and the variable to be explained are operationalised.

For Germany, previous findings suggest that the AfD was only partially able to increase voter turnout. Haußner and Leininger (2018) examine all elections in which the AfD participated up to and including 2017. The overall picture shows only a weak correlation between the AfD's

¹ At the individual level, neither Zaslove *et al.* (2021) nor Anduiza *et al.* (2019) find a positive correlation between populist attitudes and voting.

performance and voter turnout. In some state elections there is a positive correlation between the AfD's performance and the change in voter turnout (Saxony-Anhalt and Berlin 2016), but in others there is no correlation at all or even a negative one. In contrast, at the constituency level, the two authors find a significant positive correlation between the AfD result and the change in turnout in the 2017 federal election (Haußner and Leininger 2018: 87-88). This finding is confirmed by Martin (2019) using the same data. The dependent variable here is the party result, and the question is whether there is a correlation with the increase in turnout since 2013. For the Alternative for Germany, the coefficient is positive and statistically significant: the greater the increase in voter turnout, the better the AfD did.

It is not clear from previous research whether the electoral success of populist parties (permanently) increases voter turnout. Although there are examples where this seems to be the case, there are also counterexamples. In the following, I examine whether the positive correlation between the AfD's performance and voter turnout that was established for the 2017 federal election can also be established for the 2021 election.

The arguments for the mobilising effects of populist parties apply to both left-wing and right-wing populist parties. Nevertheless, in this paper I will focus on the Alternative for Germany because the extent to which the Left Party is populist is disputed. While the Left is classified as populist in the PopuList (Rooduijn *et al.* 2019), it lacks the feature of anti-pluralism, which is a necessary condition for classifying parties as populist, at least for Müller (2016). Not every form of elite criticism is populist if it is not linked to the claim to represent a homogeneous people against the corrupt elite. In the Left Party, on the other hand, it is widely accepted that there are legitimate reasons for holding different political views and pursuing different goals. In this respect, it does not, in my view, fulfil all the characteristics of a populist party. Nevertheless, the

following analyses include information on all parties represented in the Bundestag, so that it can also be examined whether the Left Party was able to mobilise previous non-voters.

3. Data sources

In the following section, I evaluate three sources of data on the relationship between populism and voter turnout. First, I will use constituency-level data from 2013 to 2021 to see if there is a macro-level correlation between the Alternative for Germany's performance and turnout.²

Second, I use data at the level of city districts to examine this correlation. These are much smaller spatial units than constituencies, which allows for more precise analysis. The disadvantage, however, is that only large cities are considered. Finally, I analyse panel data from the *German Longitudinal Election Study* to find out whether non-voters in the 2017 federal election disproportionately voted for the AfD four years later.

The use of three data sources is necessary because each has specific disadvantages. Spatial data contains highly aggregated information, averaged over many people, and does not allow direct conclusions to be drawn about individuals. For example, if in a constituency high AfD vote gains are accompanied by an increase in voter turnout, it is not possible to say whether former non-voters have increasingly voted for the AfD. It could be that it was mainly AfD opponents who were mobilised and voted to strengthen another party.

On the other hand, information from surveys allows us to study the motives of voters and non-voters. But even here there are several disadvantages. Not only is it often the case—especially in the case of voter turnout—that socially desirable answers are given (Bernstein *et al.* 2001), but

² This data is available on the Federal Returning Office's website. See <https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/bundestagswahlen/2021/ergebnisse/bund-99.html>.

there is also the risk that certain social groups—especially those with little political interest—are less well reached by a survey (Lahtinen *et al.* 2019). Both effects together mean that few respondents claim not to have voted. How representative the self-declared non-voters are for this group as a whole is difficult to assess.

By evaluating different sources of data, I hope to draw more reliable conclusions than would be possible by relying on only one type of data. Nevertheless, the limitations mentioned here should be taken into account in any analysis.

4. Analyses

In their discussion of the possible effects of populism on democracy, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012: 21) cite the mobilisation of excluded groups as a potentially positive effect. If populist parties succeed in appealing to people who otherwise stay away from politics and tend not to vote, this could have a positive effect on political equality, but the extent to which this succeeds is debatable.

In Germany, the Alternative for Germany has emerged as a party that meets the criteria of right-wing populism since at least 2015 (Schmitt-Beck *et al.* 2017; Rosenfelder 2017; Bieber *et al.* 2018; Arzheimer and Berning 2019). The AfD is represented in parliaments across Germany and could even become the strongest party in some state elections in the near future. In several elections, the AfD's electoral successes have been accompanied by high increases in voter turnout, giving the impression that it is mobilising a particularly large number of non-voters. For the 2017 federal election, empirical analyses confirm this assumption (Martin 2019)—but this is not the case for other elections (Haußner and Leininger 2018). In this section, I examine whether the AfD has again mobilised non-voters for the 2021 federal election.

4.1 Changes at the level of constituencies

In a first step, I examine the relationship between the AfD election and voter turnout using data from the 299 Bundestag constituencies provided by the Federal Returning Office. In addition to information on parties' results, voter turnout and socio-economic data are also provided. As these data are available over a longer period of time, changes from one election to the next can also be evaluated. Of particular relevance to the question pursued here is whether the AfD's gains and losses at the constituency level correlate with an increase or decrease in voter turnout.

Before looking at the changes, Table 1 shows the correlation between turnout and party performance using Pearson's correlation coefficient. For the Left Party, the SPD, but also the AfD, it is true that they perform better in constituencies with low voter turnout.³ The opposite is true for Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, FDP and CDU/CSU. These parties do better in constituencies with higher turnout. The table also shows that there is a strong negative correlation between the election results of the CDU/CSU and the Left Party on the one hand, and the Greens and the AfD on the other—where the first party does particularly well, the second performs particularly badly, and *vice versa*. The spatial patterns shown in Table 1 at least raise the possibility that the AfD is mobilising citizens in areas where many otherwise stay away from the ballot box.

³ For the Left Party and the AfD, this is partly explained by the fact that they do better in eastern Germany, where voter turnout is lower on average.

Table 1: Correlation of turnout and party results

Voter turnout	Linke	SPD	Gruene	FDP	Union	AfD	
	-0.35***	-0.46***	0.35***	0.38***	0.4***	-0.37***	Voter turnout
		-0.04	-0.02	-0.44***	-0.76***	0.48***	Linke
			-0.09	-0.25***	-0.29***	-0.19***	SPD
				0.24***	-0.22***	-0.71***	Gruene
					0.22***	-0.27***	FDP
						-0.3***	Union

To explore this in more detail, I now look at the correlation between the changes between 2013 and 2017, and then between 2017 and 2021. In the top part of Figure 1, the correlation between the change in the AfD’s vote share between 2013 and 2017 and the change in voter turnout over the same period is shown separately for eastern and western German constituencies. In both parts of the country there is a positive correlation, with the AfD’s gains being particularly large in eastern German constituencies, but turnout rising particularly sharply in some western German constituencies. Nevertheless, it is confirmed that where the AfD made particularly large gains, voter turnout rose more sharply (Martin 2019). However, this pattern was not repeated in the 2021 federal election. The AfD’s vote gains compared to the previous election were not systematically associated with changes in turnout in 2021, as the bottom subgraph in Figure 1 shows. In most constituencies, turnout remained at similar levels to 2017—regardless of the AfD’s performance. Compared to the previous election, the AfD received fewer votes in many (West German) constituencies than four years earlier, without this having a (negative) impact on turnout.

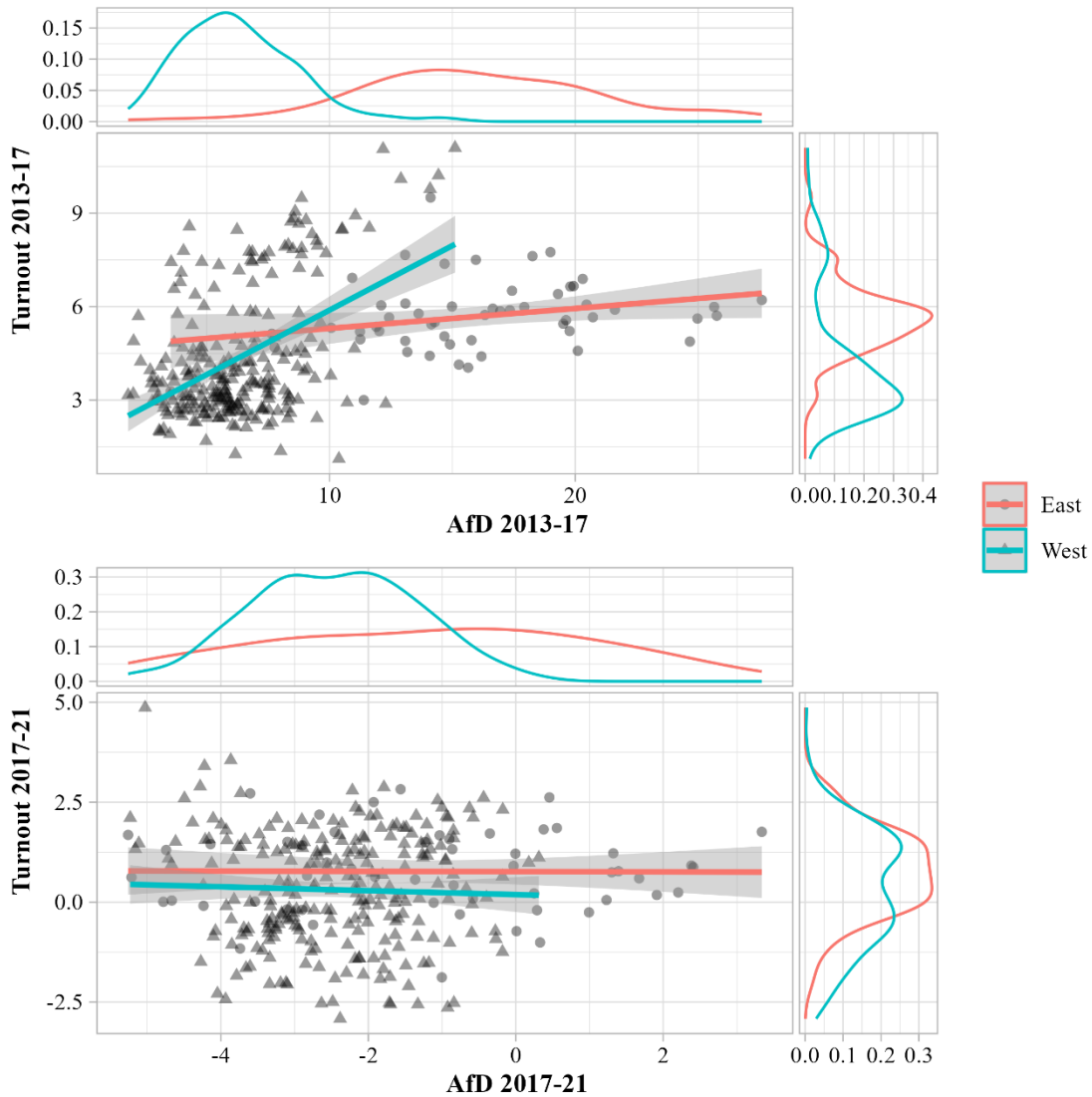


Figure 1: Scatter plots of AfD results and voter turnout change. Data: Bundeswahlleiter.

In order to examine the relationship between AfD election results and voter turnout more systematically, a multivariate regression model is estimated in the third step, which takes into account further explanatory factors for voter turnout. First, the level of turnout and then the change in turnout from 2017 to 2021 are used as explanatory variables. The first model in Table 2 shows that there is a negative correlation between the AfD’s election results and the level of voter turnout—the AfD performs better in constituencies with low voter turnout than in those with high

voter turnout, as the bivariate analyses have already shown. There is a positive correlation between the average income of a constituency, the share of of citizens with higher education and population density on the one hand and voter turnout on the other. In contrast, voter turnout is lower in constituencies where the unemployment rate and the proportion of non-Germans are higher.⁴ In the second column of Table 2, the dependent variable is the change in voter turnout. The AfD's share of the vote is not statistically significantly related to this.

In the third and fourth columns of Table 2, the AfD's gains or losses are used as explanatory variables. The statistically significant negative coefficient in the third column indicates that AfD gains tended to occur in low turnout constituencies, while losses occurred in high turnout constituencies. Particularly relevant to the question of this paper is whether *changes* in the AfD's performance are correlated with *changes* in turnout. However, as the fourth column of Table 2 shows, this is not the case. For the last federal election, there is no significant correlation between these two variables, and the sign of the coefficient is negative. In contrast to the analyses for 2017 (Martin 2019), no further mobilisation effect can be detected for 2021.

⁴ Although people without German citizenship are not allowed to vote, this variable can serve as an approximation for the proportion of eligible citizens with a family history of migration.

Table 2: Regression coefficients and standard errors for the 2021 election.

	WBT (%)	Δ WBT	WBT (%)	Δ WBT
AfD (%)	-0.117*	0.002		
	(0.051)	(0.028)		
Δ AfD			-0.539***	-0.081
			(0.112)	(0.063)
Einkommen / 1000	0.301***	0.100*	0.265**	0.095*
	(0.085)	(0.047)	(0.083)	(0.047)
Hochschulreife (%)	0.132***	0.005	0.150***	0.004
	(0.025)	(0.014)	(0.022)	(0.013)
Bevölkerungsdichte	0.001***	0.000**	0.001***	0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)	(0.000)
Arbeitslosigkeit (%)	-1.009***	-0.077	-1.016***	-0.074
	(0.106)	(0.058)	(0.102)	(0.058)
Ausländer (%)	-0.215***	-0.097***	-0.281***	-0.107***
	(0.043)	(0.023)	(0.043)	(0.025)
Westdeutschland	1.004	-0.163	2.380***	-0.192
	(0.787)	(0.433)	(0.466)	(0.264)
Konstante	73.809***	-0.565	71.217***	-0.429
	(2.551)	(1.404)	(2.080)	(1.176)
Num.Obs.	299	299	299	299
R2	0.595	0.121	0.618	0.126

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

4.2 Turnout in city quarters

Having looked at electoral districts in the last section, we now turn to smaller-scale data for analysis. The dataset contains information on election results and voter turnout in the last two federal elections for districts in 30 cities.⁵ Using this data, it is possible to examine both the correlation between voter turnout and party performance on the one hand, and changes in both on the other. For the 2009 and 2013 federal elections, it has already been shown that socio-economic indicators are highly correlated with voter turnout (Schäfer *et al.* 2013) and that the decline in

⁵ I would like to thank Larissa Böckmann, Larissa Henkst and Timo Sprang very much for compiling and conscientiously checking the data.

voter turnout has a negative impact on the performance of centre-left parties (Schäfer 2013).

However, these analyses were conducted before the emergence and establishment of Alternative for Germany, so it is unclear how the patterns have changed since then.

The top subgraph in Figure 2 shows that for the AfD there is a negative correlation between voter turnout and election results: It achieves its best election results in districts with low voter turnout - a pattern already shown for constituencies in the previous section. Now, this might suggest that it has managed to win over voters in former non-voting strongholds. But the lower subgraph in Figure 2 does not support this conclusion. There is a very weak correlation between the change in AfD vote share and the change in voter turnout. With very few exceptions (in 4 the AfD improved its election result, in 896 districts the AfD also lost support compared to the previous Bundestag election, while turnout increased in 62 districts. If there were a close correlation between these two variables, turnout should have fallen where the AfD's share of the vote fell.

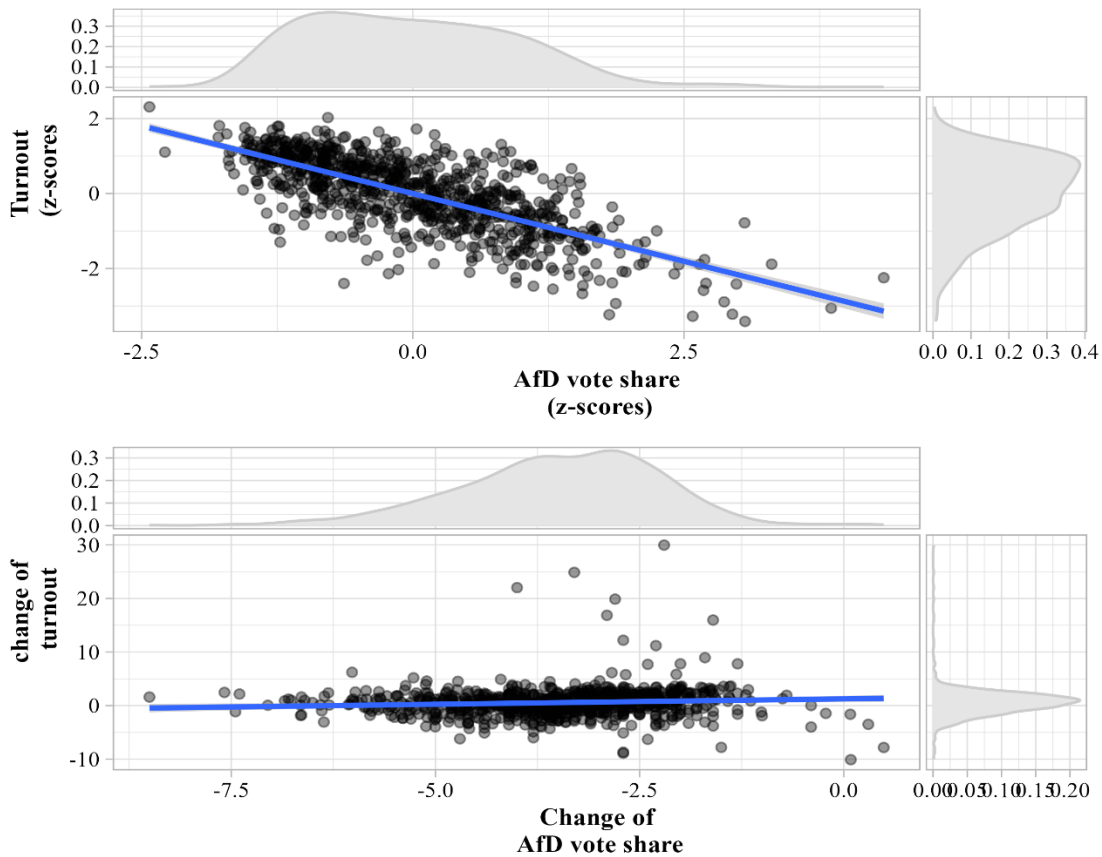


Figure 2: Correlation of AfD results and turnout changes at the district level. Data: Own compilation.

The patterns become even clearer when we include the performance of the other parties in the analysis. Table 3 shows, for the six parliamentary parties represented in the Bundestag, the correlation between their election results and voter turnout.⁶ While there is only a moderate negative correlation for the Left Party, it is more pronounced for the SPD, but lower than for the AfD. The SPD and AfD systematically performed better in 2021 in low turnout districts than in high turnout districts. The opposite is true for the CDU/CSU, the Greens and the FDP: they

⁶ The values are z-transformed for each city, i.e. the mean is set to “0” and the standard deviation to “1”.

achieved their best results where many eligible voters turned out.⁷ In terms of the spatial distribution of voters, the Alternative for Germany is more similar to the centre-left than to the ‘bourgeois’ parties, which also include the Greens.

Table 3: Correlation of turnout and party results at the level of urban quarters.

	Linke	SPD	Gruene	FDP	Union	AfD
WBT	-0.27***	-0.55***	0.44***	0.57***	0.3***	-0.72***
Linke		-0.26***	0.6***	-0.57***	-0.83***	-0.24***
SPD			-0.69***	-0.41***	0.08*	0.69***
Gruene				-0.02	-0.55***	-0.82***
FDP					0.6***	-0.32***
Union						0.14***

For the purposes of this paper, it is more important whether party gains or losses are associated with increases or decreases in turnout. Table 4 therefore shows the correlation coefficients for the change in party performance and turnout. Overall, the values of the correlation coefficient “r” are low. For the Left Party, SPD, FDP and CDU/CSU there is a weak negative correlation between their gains and losses and changes in turnout. Gains in vote share for these parties were more likely to occur in districts where voter turnout decreased compared to 2017. For the AfD, on the other hand, there is a positive correlation—but again, it is weak. The clearest pattern is for the Greens. Their gains and losses are more strongly correlated with a rise or fall in turnout, although again the correlation is not high.

⁷ The strongly negative, statistically significant correlation between the results of Bündnis 90/Die Grünen on the one hand and the AfD on the other points to the different bases of these parties. The same applies to the Left Party and the CDU/CSU.

Table 4: Turnout change and party result change.

	△ Linke	△ SPD	△ Grüne	△ FDP	△ Union	△ AfD
△ WBT	-0.19***	-0.07*	0.27***	-0.11***	-0.11***	0.09**
△ Linke		-0.14***	-0.39***	-0.3***	0.22***	-0.01
△ SPD			-0.57***	0.42***	-0.34***	-0.43***
△ Grüne				-0.38***	-0.3***	0.46***
△ FDP					-0.36***	-0.47***
△ Union						-0.12***

The correlations are generally higher when we look at how the gains and losses of the parties correlate with each other. For example, there is a significant negative correlation between the change in the vote share of the Greens and the SPD or the FDP and the AfD. Somewhat surprisingly, changes in the Greens' share of the vote are positively correlated with changes in the AfD's share of the vote. Where the Greens made particularly large gains, the AfD's decline was less pronounced than in other districts—although here too the AfD's starting level was particularly low. This correlation is due to the fact that the Greens and the AfD have their strongholds in completely different parts of the city.

Even at the level city districts, it cannot be confirmed that the Alternative for Germany has increased turnout in the 2021 federal election. While the AfD—like the SPD and the Left Party—does better in low-turnout districts, its gains are unlikely to increase turnout. If the AfD had a mobilisation effect in 2017, it seems to have exhausted its potential among non-voters. A further mobilisation did not take place in 2021, we can conclude so far.

4.3 Vote switch and the determinants of non-voting

Because of the problems mentioned in the third section, there is a lack of reliable information on non-voters at the individual level. In all surveys, many more people claim to have voted than actually did. This is no different in the GLES panel study (GLES 2021): Only 5.6 per cent of

respondents who were still part of the panel in 2021 said they had not voted in the 2017 general election. However, as this is a large dataset, it is still possible to analyse the subsequent voting behaviour of 378 previous nonvoters.⁸

Figure 3 shows which party respondents had chosen in 2017 and which party they voted for in 2021. It also shows how former non-voters voted in the 2021 general election. For all parties, as well as for non-voters, the majority of respondents in 2021 repeated their behaviour from 2017. However, there are interesting differences. SPD and Green voters show the greatest continuity. Around two-thirds of voters in 2017 voted for these parties in 2021. For the CDU/CSU and AfD the figure is 56 per cent each, for the FDP and the Left Party it is 43 per cent. A high proportion (61 per cent) of non-voters in 2017 also decided not to vote in 2021.⁹

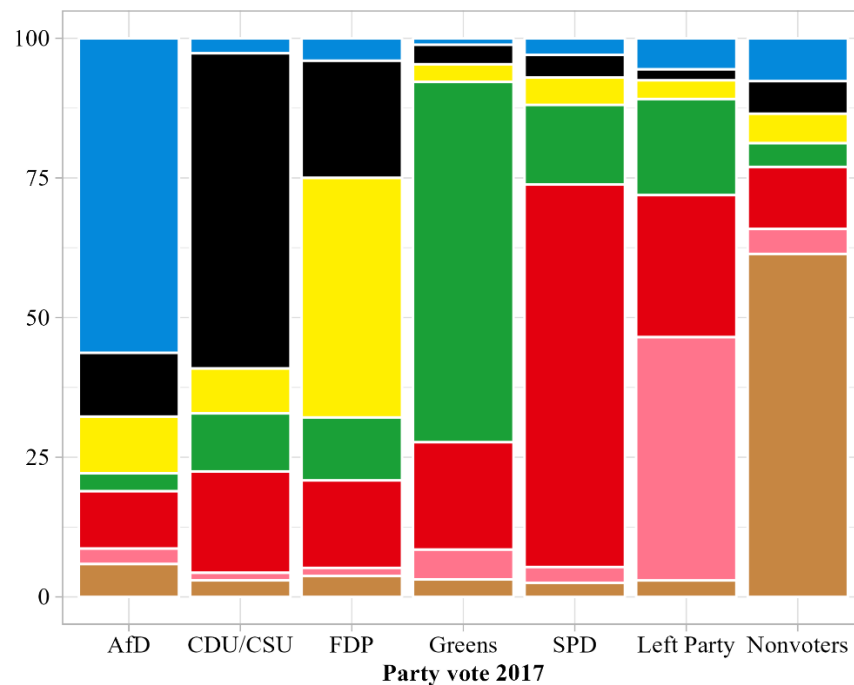


Figure 3: Voter movement from 2017 to 2021. Data: Gles (2021).

⁸ Many thanks to Nils Steiner, who provided me with an edited version of the dataset for analysis.

⁹ If this percentage applied to the entire population, more than nine million citizens would have chosen not to vote in two consecutive federal elections.

Of the remaining 39 per cent of former non-voters, the majority switched to the SPD, followed by the Alternative for Germany. At the same time, however, the data shows that a disproportionate number of former AfD voters became non-voters in 2021. The balance of both movements is *negative* for the AfD, as it lost more people to the non-voter camp than it gained from it. Only for the SPD is the balance positive, if we take into account the switching of votes from and to the non-voters. On the basis of these shifts, it is not possible to conclude that the AfD was not able to mobilise former non-voters in the 2021 federal election.

To further examine how past voting behaviour is related to participation in the 2021 election, I now draw on the GLES post-election survey (GLES 2022). While recall of the last federal election is certainly subject to memory lapses, numerous other variables relevant to voting behaviour can be included in the model. A *multinomial* model is estimated that calculates the party choice, including the non-election in 2021, by taking into account past voting behaviour. In this way, it can be determined whether former non-voters are more likely to have voted for the AfD than for other parties, and what other voter migrations have taken place. In addition to past voting behaviour, I include age, age squared, gender, education, income, residence in East Germany, political interest, party identification, and an index of whether respondents think the election outcome makes a difference.

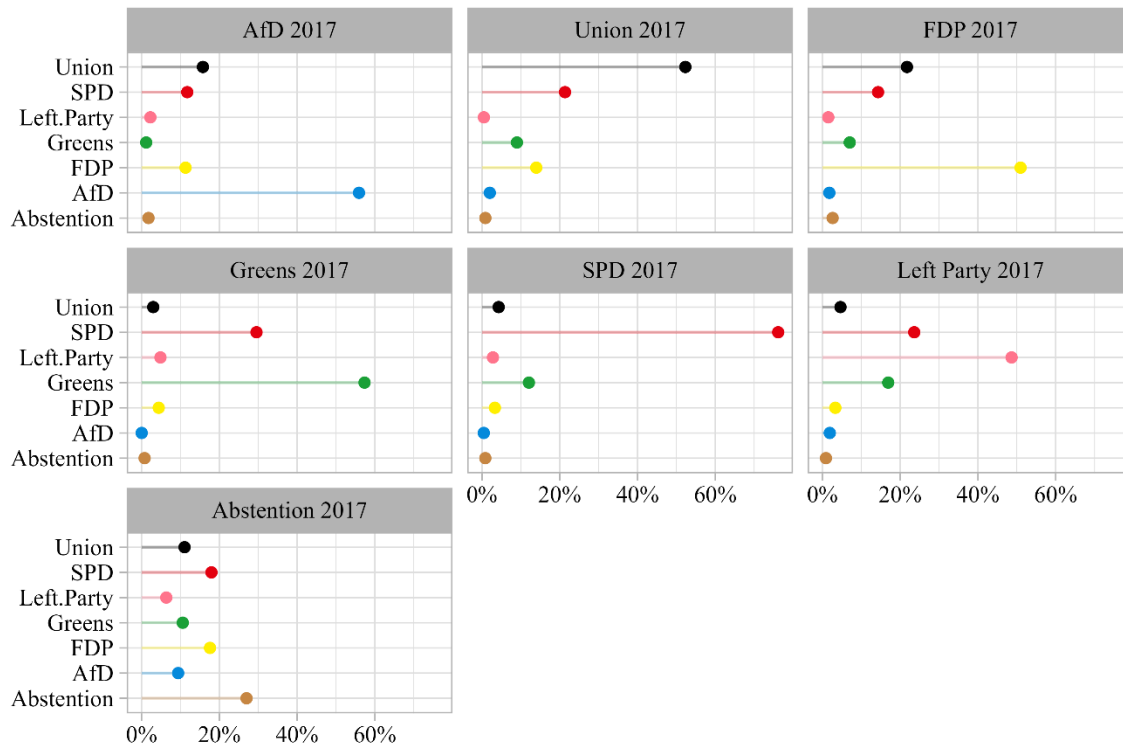


Figure 4: Voting behaviour in 2017 as an explanation for voting behaviour in 2021. Data: Gles (2022).

Figure 4 shows the likelihood of former voters and non-voters to have chosen a party or not to vote in 2021.¹⁰ As in Figure 3, it is clear that most people have repeated their earlier voting behaviour, although there are clear differences between the parties. Once again, the SPD stands out as the party that has lost the least number of former voters: Almost 80 per cent of those who voted for them in 2017 did so again in 2021. The stability is lower for all the other parties. Among former non-voters, there was a particularly large movement from one election to the next—but it is by no means the AfD that won the majority of new voters. Instead, this group was particularly likely to vote for either the SPD or the FDP. The AfD, the Greens and the CDU/CSU, on the other hand, were almost equally likely, while the Left Party fared worse among former

¹⁰ The complete coefficients of the model can be found in the appendix.

non-voters. Overall, the data do not point to a mobilisation of non-voters by the AfD between the last and the penultimate Bundestag election.

In the last step of this section, we show the factors on which electoral participation depends.

Analyses of previous federal elections have shown significant differences in voter turnout between social groups (e.g. Faas 2010; Schäfer 2015; Schäfer *et al.* 2016). A higher turnout than in 2009 and 2013 could mean that factors such as income and education are less important for voter turnout—although Steinbrecher (2021) already showed significant socio-economic differences in participation for the 2017 federal election.

In the following model, I include the same variables as before and the dependent variable is voter participation in the 2021 federal election. Since the variable to be explained has only two values, I run a logistic regression. To simplify the interpretation, Figure 5 displays the odds ratios, while the appendix contains the logit coefficients. Significant differences are present when the confidence interval does not intersect the vertical zero line.

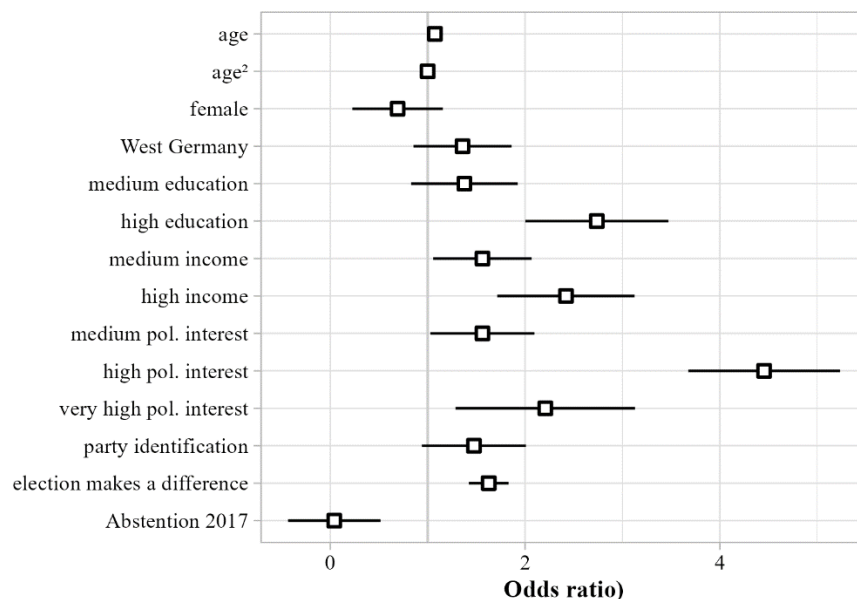


Figure 5: Determinants of individual participation in the 2021 elections. Data: Gles (2022).

Figure 5 shows that, controlling for other variables, age, gender and place of residence do not have a statistically significant effect on turnout. However, there are clearly significant effects for political interest and the perception that voting makes a difference. Party identification has a positive sign, but does not reach the usual level of significance. On the other hand, having not voted in the past has a negative effect on current participation, even after controlling for other explanatory factors. Finally, those with higher education are more likely to have voted than those with lower education and those with medium or high income are more likely to have voted than those with low income. For the 2021 federal election, too, there is no levelling of individual voter turnout.

5. Conclusion

Compared to the exceptionally high turnout in the 1970s, it is now much lower. After a low of just under 71 per cent in 2009, turnout was 76 per cent in 2017 and 2021. This is a medium level by international standards. From the perspective of democratic equality, it is not so much the absolute level of turnout that matters, but rather the *inequality* of turnout. Not all social groups stay away from the ballot box to the same extent. For example, low-income voters are much more likely to abstain than high-income voters, even after controlling for other explanatory factors. Large differences can also be seen at the spatial level. There were more than 20 percentage points between the constituency with the highest and lowest turnout in the 2021 federal election. The differences are even greater when we look at city districts. In Bochum the difference between the highest and lowest turnout was 21 points, in Braunschweig 26 points, in Leipzig 30 points, in Cologne 46 points and in Bremen 56 points. In all cases, the lowest values were found in the

poorest neighbourhoods and the highest in the richest.¹¹ These patterns have been known for a long time, are regularly discussed in public shortly before and after elections, but do not lead to political initiatives to change them.

In this paper, against the background of known voter turnout patterns, I have examined whether the Alternative for Germany has succeeded in mobilising former non-voters. Since populist parties claim to be the voice of those who are ignored by other parties, this assumption has a certain plausibility. Indeed, this correlation has been demonstrated in previous studies for the 2017 federal election. In some state elections, too, the AfD's electoral success was accompanied by an increase in voter turnout. However, this was not the case in all state elections, nor was this pattern evident in the European elections. International comparative studies also paint a mixed picture. Few studies find a consistent positive correlation between populist party success and voter turnout, although this may vary regionally and over time.

For the 2021 federal election, I used three data sources to investigate whether the AfD influences voter turnout. First, I analysed data from the Federal Election Office at the constituency level. Although the AfD (as well as the Left Party and the SPD) performs better where voter turnout is low, there is no positive correlation between the change in the AfD's vote share and the change in voter turnout. In the majority of constituencies, the AfD achieved a lower share of the vote than in 2017, without this leading to a decline in turnout. The same pattern emerges if we look at 979 urban quarters in 30 cities. The lower the turnout in a district, the better the AfD performs, but the correlation between changes in these two variables is only very weakly positive. Instead, the closest correlation is found for Bündnis 90/Die Grünen. Finally, I used two individual data sets to

¹¹ Those looking for an exclusive neighbourhood need to know nothing more about a neighbourhood than its voter turnout.

answer the question of this paper. However, neither the panel data nor the post-election cross-section of the GLES suggest that the AfD was particularly successful in mobilising non-voters.

A comparison of the last two federal elections shows that the AfD was successful in mobilising former non-voters in 2017, but no further mobilisation took place in 2021. Most of those who did not vote in the past did not vote in 2021 either, and if they did vote, they did not vote disproportionately for the AfD. The non-voters are too heterogeneous to be seen as an untapped potential for populist parties. The interplay between the AfD's electoral success and the increase in voter turnout in 2016 and 2017 can perhaps be better explained by the first appearance of a right-wing populist party (which was uncontroversial at the time) and the special situation following the influx of many refugees in the wake of the Syrian war. Neither the international comparison nor the analyses presented here suggest that populist parties will succeed in increasing voter turnout in the long term.

6. References

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