

SOCIAL CONTAGION IN RIGHT-WING POPULIST VOTING: Evidence from Germany

Extensive media coverage of the election outcomes of *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) makes other voters more willing to express their support for the right-wing populist party. What's more, once support for a nationalist party exceeds a specific threshold, vote shares constantly keep growing.

These are among the findings of research by **Lena Gerling** and **Kim Leonie Kellermann**, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Manchester in August 2019. Their study concludes that people adopting other voters' party choices instead of forming their own reflected opinion pose a risk to democratic functionality.

Electoral behaviour is shaped by a desire for social compliance. Trying to avoid social rejection when openly supporting unpopular political ideas, people observe and follow their fellow voters' electoral decisions. In that sense, increasing support for right-wing populist parties may encourage citizens also to report a higher populist preference.

The researchers provide a first, innovative test of this hypothesis, using data on AfD. They show that positive shocks in aggregate AfD support, revealed by high vote shares in German state elections, increase the likelihood of self-reporting an AfD preference by three percentage points. In contrast, weak AfD performances have no impact, pointing to a hysteresis effect of right-wing populist voting.

Understanding rising nationalist support is a crucial challenge for established democracies. Europe and the United States have been rattled by the fast-growing success of right-wing populist platforms, for example, in the Brexit referendum or the 2016 US presidential elections. In both instances, key political figures stimulated public advocacy for nationalist ideas, often with the help of social media.

In Germany, the rise of the right-wing populist AfD gained momentum in state elections held between 2013 and 2017. In 2017, the party entered the federal parliament with a vote share of 12.6%, being the first outright nationalist platform in the *Bundestag* since the end of World War II. This upward trend was accompanied by controversial debates about the acceptability of their nationalist and xenophobic manifesto.

Voters are hesitant to openly support these ideas, fearing reputational losses. But a higher aggregate AfD support can serve as a signal of an improved public party standing. This reduces the so-called social desirability bias, implying that people purposely falsify their opinion if they perceive it to be socially unaccepted.

The German federal system provides a well-suited set-up to test this mechanism. Voters used AfD vote shares in the staggered state elections as sources of new information about general AfD support.

Strikingly, pre-election polls had pronounced difficulties in correctly predicting AfD vote shares, underestimating them by up to 35%. State election results thus provide *election information shocks*, defined as the deviation of AfD vote shares from previous opinion polls.

Using a sample of 20,861 individuals from the German *Politbarometer* survey, this study compares the likelihood of reporting an AfD preference for individuals interviewed right after a state election, and thus affected by the shock, to those interviewed right before the election.

The results show that larger-than expected AfD vote shares in a state election raise reported vote intentions in *other* states by roughly three percentage points or 60% of the party's average vote share. These effects are particularly strong after elections in East Germany where the AfD has been most successful in mobilising voters. Interestingly, negative election information shocks do not affect reported vote intentions. Also, there are no similar effects for other non-populist parties.

These results bear a number of policy implications. First, the findings suggest a hysteresis effect of right-wing populist party support. Once support for a nationalist party exceeds a specific threshold, vote shares constantly keep growing. People adopting other voters' party choices instead of forming their own reflected opinion pose a risk to democratic functionality.

Policy-makers are challenged to investigate and address the concerns of voters turning towards populist movements. Furthermore, political education is called to foster the process of individual opinion-forming. In that respect, media outlets should reflect on their role in shaping public opinion since extensive media coverage of the AfD election outcomes is found to increase the stimulating effect on self-reported vote intentions.

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'The impact of election information shocks on populist party preferences: Evidence from Germany'

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