

Electoral Support for the Far Right in Germany: Associations between Weimar Era Nazi Support and Contemporary Election Outcomes

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Abstract

Germany is currently witnessing a resurgence of ethno-national ideology and support for far right politics. Analyses of voting behavior tend to focus on contemporary factors or, at most, post-1945 history. Recent scholarship on historical legacies, however, suggests that political attitudes and behavior may in part still be shaped by political regimes and ideologies that lie much further back in the past. In this paper, I analyze associations between election data from the 1933 federal elections and the 2017 federal parliamentary elections on the county level. Using GIS tools for the data preparation and linear regression models for the data analysis, I find a positive and significant association between 1933 and 2017 electoral support for the far right. This association is driven by counties in the former West of the country, while the former East shows no such relationship between pre-war and contemporary voting patterns. The study has implications for better understanding sources of far right electoral support as well as the ways in which the layering of different historical legacies may shape contemporary outcomes.

Introduction

When the German federal election results were announced in September 2017 and quickly mapped, one geographic trend was immediately apparent: The new far right party AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) had garnered much stronger support in the former East of the country than in the former West. Differences between the two parts of the country, both historical and contemporary, are manifold and continue to be analyzed as possible causes of this divergence. Forty years of authoritarian socialist governance of what was then called the German Democratic Republic (GDR), from 1949-1989, shaped not only the economy but also left its imprint on commonly held norms and attitudes (see e.g. Alesina & Fuchs-Schündeln, 2007). Beyond this difference between East and West, however, we see significant variation also within East and West (see Figure 1). How can we explain regional variation in support for the AfD that goes beyond differences between the former East and former West of the country? Why do some regions of Germany show higher levels of support for this new far right party than others? Can historical differences serve as an explanation here as well?

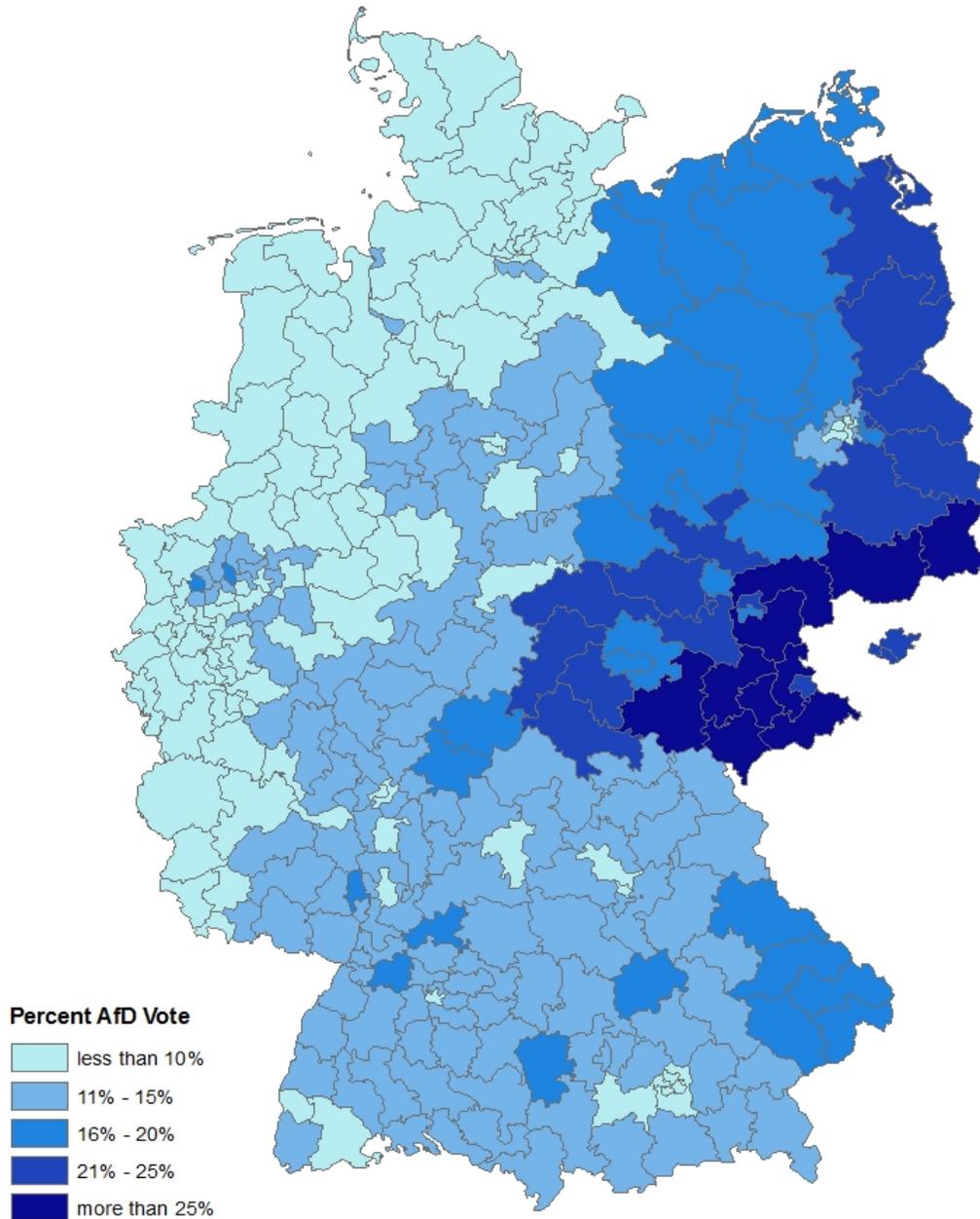


Figure 1: AfD Results in German Federal Election 2017; Sources: Election data and GIS data from the Office of the Federal Returning Officer (*Bundeswahlleiter*)

In a recent study, Goerres et al (2018) analyzed a number of individual-level and contextual factors associated with AfD support in the 2017 federal elections. Of all contextual factors, when controlling for individual-level factors, only one was a relevant predictor: the district-level 1994 election results of the radical right party *Die*

Republikaner. Previous local electoral support for the radical right was positively and highly significantly related to AfD support in 2017, even for those survey respondents who had not been eligible to vote yet in the 1994 elections. Neither economic factors (how well a region is doing comparatively) nor the share of foreigners or asylum seekers nor the unemployment rate had such predictive power. Notably, these latter factors are all explanations commonly put forward for regional variation in support for the far right. Instead, Goerres et al (2018) demonstrate that the local support for a radical right party twenty-three years earlier serves as one of the best predictors beyond individual-level factors such as gender (identifying as male being the most relevant characteristic associated with AfD support) and political attitudes. Those attitudes include welfare chauvinism, lack of support for political asylum, and low trust in political institutions, i.e. attitudes well known to be held by supporters of the far right across Europe.

Goerres et al's (2018) finding resonates with a growing body of work on historical legacies. Rather than focusing only on contemporary or recent factors in the analysis of political and economic outcomes, this literature has demonstrated the long-lasting effects of political regimes, rules, and action in shaping attitudes and behaviors even hundreds of years later (see e.g. Acharya et al, 2018, Charnysh 2015, Voigtländer & Voth, 2012, Rink & Hilbig, forthcoming, Grzymala-Busse, 2014, Kotkin & Beissinger, 2014, Ekiert & Ziblatt, 2013, Becker et al, 2014; Grosfeld & Zhuravskaya, 2015, Nunn & Wantchekon, 2011).

These literatures on the far right and on historical legacies lead us to the following question: Does county-level support for the AfD in the 2017 parliamentary elections (*Bundestagswahl*) correlate with electoral support for the NSDAP in the late Weimar

Republic when the Nazis began to enter parliament and elections were still free? And does this pattern differ between the East and the West of the country? I am expecting to find an overall pattern of continuity. Accounting for the East-West divide, I am expecting the continuity to be stronger within the West than within the East since the West did not experience the forty years of authoritarian post-war governance that may have overridden some of the pre-war continuities.

Analyzing county-level 1933 electoral support for the NSDAP (the Nazi party) and 2017 electoral support for the AfD, I find a positive and significant relationship. One percentage point increase in the 1933 NSDAP county-level vote share is associated with a 0.06 percentage point increase in the 2017 AfD county-level vote share. The relationship remains positive and significant when controlling for state (*Bundesland*). When subsetting the data for East and West, the relationship between 1933 NSDAP support and 2017 AfD support is negative yet not significant in the former East, while it is positive and significant for the former West. While the size of the coefficients is overall small, the results suggest that there is an overall association between pre-war and present-day support for the far right on the county level, which is driven by this association in the counties of the former West.

When analyzing regional variation in support for the AfD, attention is often turned to former East Germany and the effect that its authoritarian past may have on current voting behavior. The findings from this study suggest that it is worthwhile also looking at historical legacies in the former West where pre-war support for the Nazi party is associated with higher levels of support for the far right AfD party today.

Theoretical Background

Scholars have built a rich literature around the question of what drives support for far right movements and parties. Theories about causes of far right support can be grouped into four broad categories, according to Winkler (1996): personality, social and economic structure, social integration, and political culture. Theories belonging to the first category were very prominent in the post-war literature, such as the concept of an authoritarian personality. In recent decades, however, there has been a turn away from personality-focused explanations and a greater emphasis has been placed on contextual factors (Blee & Creasap, 2010). Two growing research agendas in the study of the far right include focusing on small geographic units of analysis, and analyzing the role of historical legacies in shaping contemporary political outcomes.

Local conditions and sub-national variation

There has been a move toward focusing on local conditions and sub-national variation of far right support as opposed to cross-national comparisons. Kai Arzheimer (2017) for example calls for studies on the effect of local contexts on far right voting. He writes, “After all, social, political, and economic conditions vary massively at the sub-national, e.g. across provinces, districts, towns and even neighborhoods. It stands to reason that citizens rely on these local conditions, which have a massive impact on their daily lives, to evaluate politicians, parties and policies at the national level” (Arzheimer, 2017, p. 287). In Arzheimer (2018), he states: “Studies in small(ish) areas are currently one of the most promising avenues of research into the radical right vote, be it on the level of subnational political units or in even smaller tracts” (p. 159). Golder (2016) similarly encourages a stronger look at the role of what he calls political geography. He argues that

“national-level support for the far right hides significant subnational variation” (p. 491) and that this variation is often so local that it necessitates analyses that go even below the regional level. The importance of the local context for far right support relates to the role of historical continuities.

Continuities and historical legacies

As mentioned above, there has been a renewed interest in historical determinants of contemporary political and economic outcomes. For understanding support for the far right, a focus on continuities and historical legacies can entail looking at cross-national differences in histories of colonization as Rydgren (2007) suggested. Chin et al (2010) for example debunk the myth of 1945 in Germany as the “zero hour” and instead demonstrate how ideas about the nation and about difference continued to shape post-war Germany. A focus on historical legacies can also mean zooming in and looking at continuities on the local level. Already in the postwar era, Klaus Liepelt (1967) found that despite the massive destruction and population movements that the war had entailed, he was still able to find a clear spatial association between pre-war votes for the NSDAP and post-war votes for the new far right party, the NPD in what was then West Germany. In a similar vein, Veugelers and Menard (2018) suggest studying micro milieus as “carriers of collective memory” for better understanding how “affinities toward the radical right are transmitted” (p. 299).

Cultural Opportunity Structures

A focus on subnational variation and the role of historical legacies in shaping varying degrees of support for the far right, ties to the role of (local) political culture, one of the major categories of explanations for the success of the far right. This literature includes

both studies focusing on specific cultural dimensions, such as music, fashion, religion, and symbols, as well as studies more broadly concerned with cultural opportunity structures and the role of mainstream political ideology in facilitating more extreme political movements and parties (see e.g. Miller-Idriss, 2018; Zubrzycki 2006; Zubrzycki 2016; Berezin, 1997).

Mudde (2017) argues that rather than understanding far right voting as a pathology, we gain more insight by understanding it as a “pathological normalcy”. Far right ideology – marked by its embrace of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism – is not as much an aberration as it is a radicalization of mainstream attitudes and ideologies (p. 434). Widespread support for putting the nation first and exhibiting skepticism toward immigrants and minorities provide a foundation on which the far right can build more extreme versions of that ideology. Rydgren (2007), in line with this, mentions the role of “popular xenophobia” in enabling the success of far right parties.

Winkler (1996, p. 41) argues that political culture is largely underestimated in its effect on far right extremism and argues that it is relevant in two ways: (1) political culture shapes the political socialization of children and youth, and (2) political culture creates a “cultural opportunity structure” that creates a framework for the kinds of remarks that can be made openly as well as for the options for political decision-making that are on the table. Cultural opportunity structures are relevant both at the national as well as at the local level and may in part help explain within-country variation in support for the right, which theories focused on political opportunity structures are not always able to. Rather than only analyzing national-level political culture, this approach encourages us to also consider political micro-milieus.

Connecting the dots

Bringing these ideas together, it appears that cultural opportunity structures may in part be shaped by historical legacies, such as past support for far right parties, which new far right parties can then tap into. Given that historical voting patterns vary sub-nationally, it appears crucial to have more fine-grained analyses of continuities and discontinuities in voting behavior, which would then in a subsequent step allow for a more focused analysis of the mechanisms driving the persistence of opportunity structures for far right support in some places and not others.

This paper contributes to the first step, namely to analyze continuity in electoral support for the far right in Germany on the county level. It follows Cantoni et al (2019) who just published their results of a similar analysis on the municipal level. I will discuss the similarities and differences in the results.

Data and Methods

Building on Cantoni et al (2019), I estimate the correlation between the NSDAP results in the 1933 federal election (*Reichtagswahl*) and the AfD results in the 2017 federal election (*Bundestagswahl*). I do so on the county-level (*Kreis*). Election data from the Weimar Republic were assembled and digitized by Falter & Hänisch (1990). These data are available through the GESIS online data archive, filed under the code ZA8013. The election data for 2017 are provided by the Office of the Federal Returning Officer (*Bundeswahlleiter*).

While the election data from both years are easily accessible, county boundaries were redrawn multiple times between 1933 and 2017, which inhibits a straightforward

one-to-one comparison. To understand the extent of differences in boundaries, it is helpful to visualize them. Figure 2 shows the differences on the federal level between 1933 (yellow) and 2017 (blue lines). Figure 3 is a close-up of the Ruhr (*Ruhrgebiet*), a densely populated region that underwent substantial redistricting both during and after the Weimar Republic.

County (Kreis) Boundaries 1933 (beige) vs 2017 (blue)

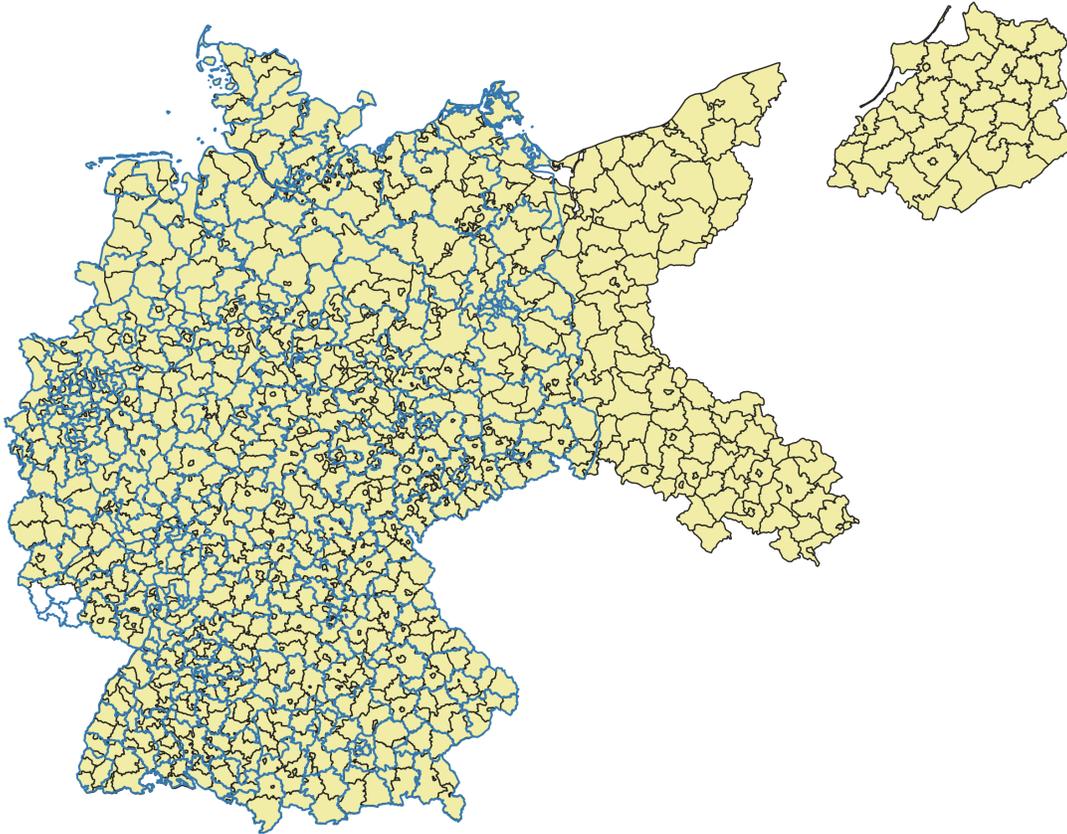


Figure 2: Differences in county boundaries between 1933 and 2017

Differences in County (Kreis) Boundaries in the Ruhr (1933 vs 2017)

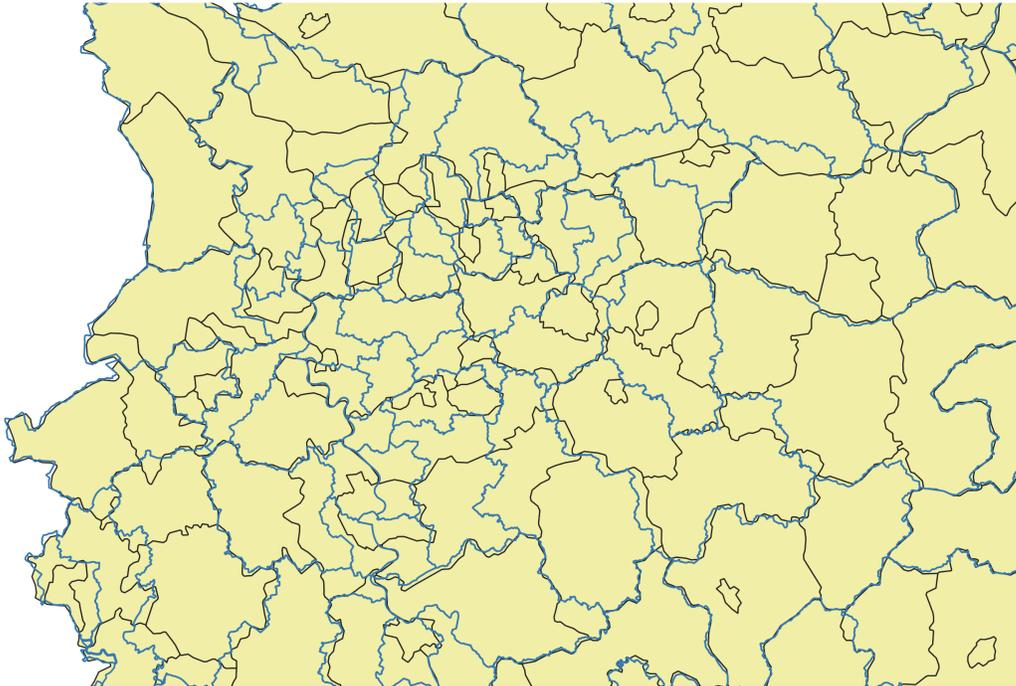


Figure 3: Zoom-in into differences in county differences between 1933 and 2017 in the Ruhr

In order to account for these differences resulting from redistricting and to arrive at units that can be compared between the two points in time, I use QGIS, an open-source geographic information systems software. In order to do so, the election data from both years first need to be merged with shapefiles. For the 2017 electoral districts, the Office of the Federal Returning Officer (*Bundeswahlleiter*) provides the shapefiles. Since the election data and the shapefiles both include county numbers (*Wahlkreisnummer*), they can easily be merged.

For 1933, the process presents itself as more involved. The Census Mosaic Project provides historical GIS files, including for the German Empire (1871-1945). These files and the election dataset do not, however, share identifiers. When matching the files by

county name, a large portion of observations is dropped. Visualizing the resulting matched data makes it easier to understand the extent (Figure 4).

1933 NSDAP Election Results (including only counties that have exact name matches to shapefiles)

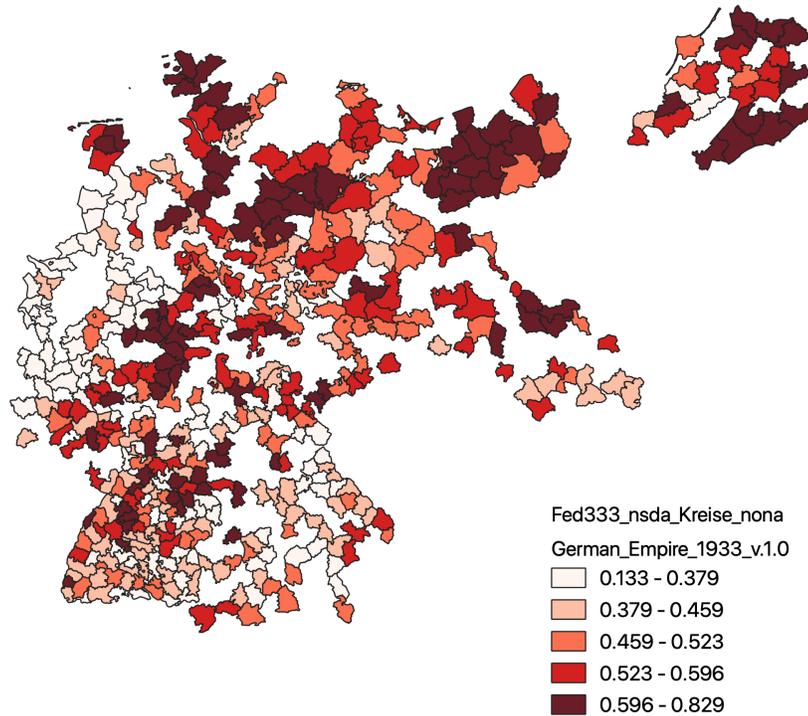


Figure 4: Loss of data when matching counties in election file and GIS file by name

Instead of relying on matching by county name, which results in a large loss of data, I matched files manually. As a starting point I used a matching key for 1925 put together by Thomas Rahl, professor at University of Bonn. I adjusted the key for all redistricting that occurred between 1925 and 1933 and subsequently used it for merging the election data file with the GIS file. This process resulted in 1010 matched observations.

I was then able to join the data in QGIS and use the intersect tool. The intersect tool allowed me to overlay the two layers of shapefiles (1933 and 2017). It discards the observations that have no overlap, which includes the areas to the East of the 1945

redrawn German border as well as to the South-West of *Saarland*, which were added after the war; see Figure 2). The intersect tool simultaneously creates new observations resulting from the observations that have overlap, similar to a process of matching with replacement. This means that all observations in the resulting attribute table have information about the 1933 election results and the 2017 election results from the counties that geographically overlap. For example, in the case of the city of Berlin, these new observations match the contemporary districts (Mitte, Neukölln, Lichtenberg etc.) with the 1933 counties to which those districts used to belong (Spandau, Teltow, Osthavelland etc.). Where the contemporary area overlaps with two historical areas, it results in two observations, one for each match. 2017 Berlin-Treptow-Köpenick for example is matched with the 1933 counties Teltow and Beeskow-Storkow. Similar to matching with replacement, this process necessitates the use of clustered standard errors. Since we now have one or more observations per county, we need to cluster the errors at the county level.

The NSDAP vote share is calculated as the proportion of votes cast for the NSDAP of valid votes cast. The AfD vote share is calculated as the proportion of votes (*Zweitstimmen*) cast for the AfD of valid votes cast. When plotting the raw data, both NSDAP vote share and AfD vote share distributions resemble a normal distribution. However, the AfD share has a substantially thicker tail to the right (see figures 5 and 6). The mean vote share for the NSDAP in 1933 is 46.82% with a standard deviation of 12.16. The mean vote share for the AfD in 2017 is 12.82% with a standard deviation of 5.47.

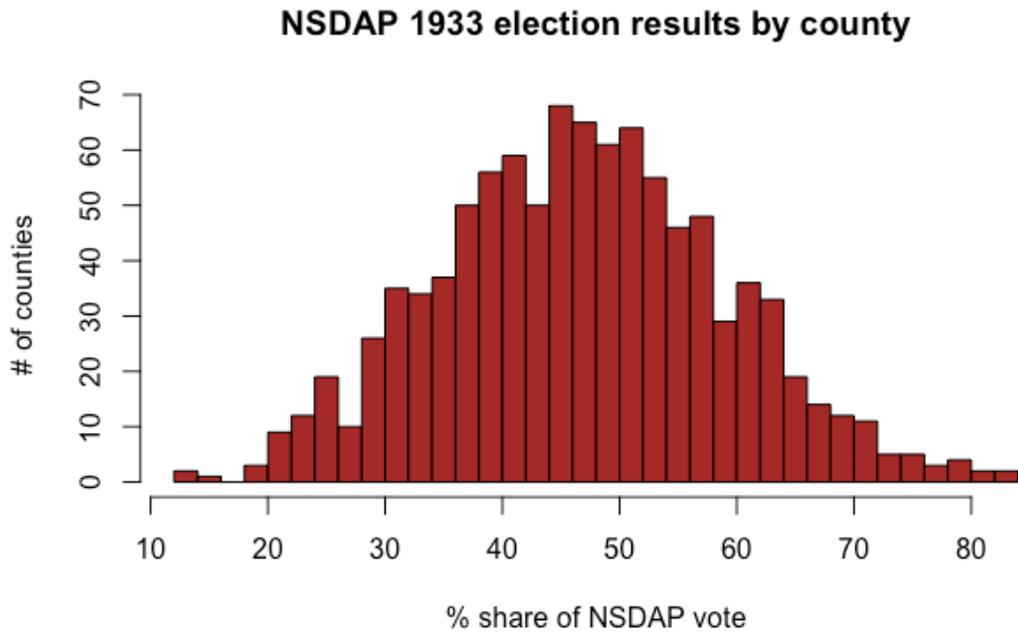


Figure 5: Histogram of 1933 NSDAP election results by county

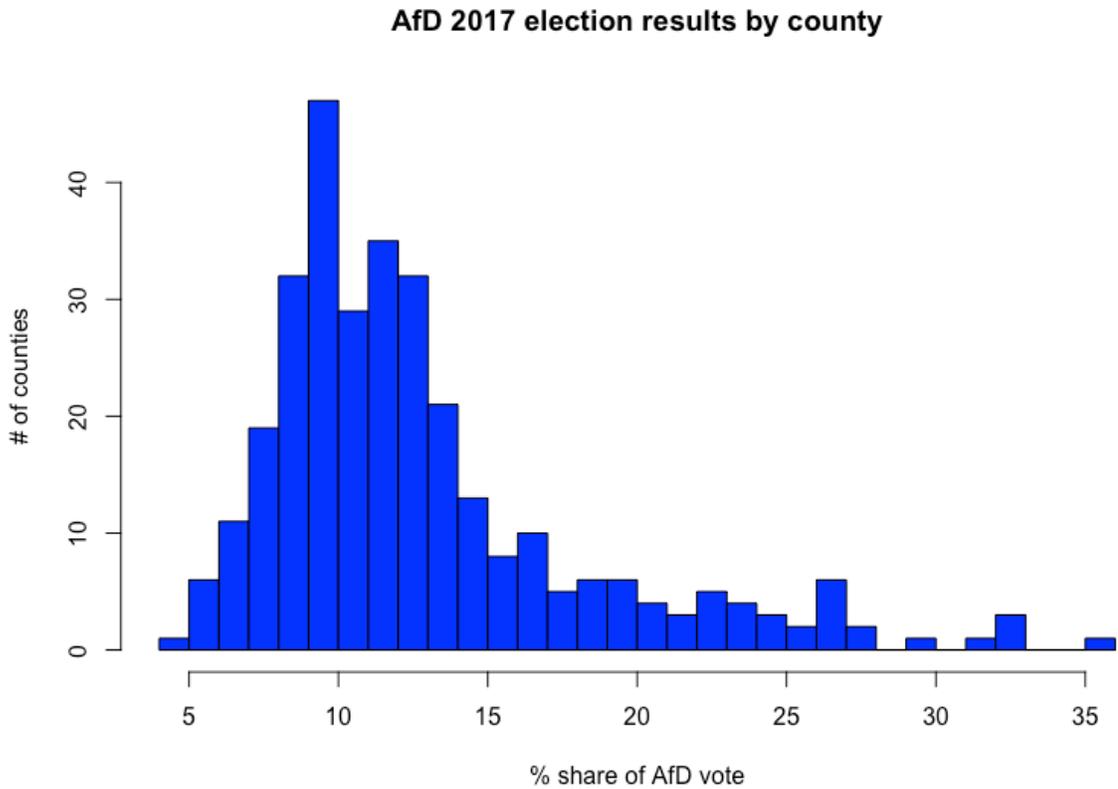


Figure 6: Histogram of 2017 AfD election results by county

Results & Discussion

Analyzing the correlation between the election results, I begin with a simple linear model, regressing the 2017 AfD vote share on the 1933 NSDAP vote share. The standard errors are clustered at the county level to account for the additional number of observations resulting from the matching-like process of using the intersect tool. This baseline model results in a coefficient of 0.062 at a significance level of .001. One percentage point increase in the 1933 NSDAP county-level vote share is thus associated with a 0.06 percentage point increase in the 2017 AfD county-level vote share not accounting for other factors. In comparison, Cantoni et al (2019) find that on the municipality level one standard deviation increase in the 1933 NSDAP result is associated with 0.08 standard deviations in the 2017 AfD result. Table 1 shows the regression results; note that the standard errors are clustered. Figure 7 shows the result with green lines indicating means and the dark red line indicating the fitted regression line from the baseline model.

Table 1: Regression results from baseline model

Results	
<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
share_AfD	
share_NSDAP	0.062*** (0.014)
Constant	11.038*** (0.632)
Observations	2,678
R ²	0.018
Adjusted R ²	0.018
<i>Note:</i>	* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01

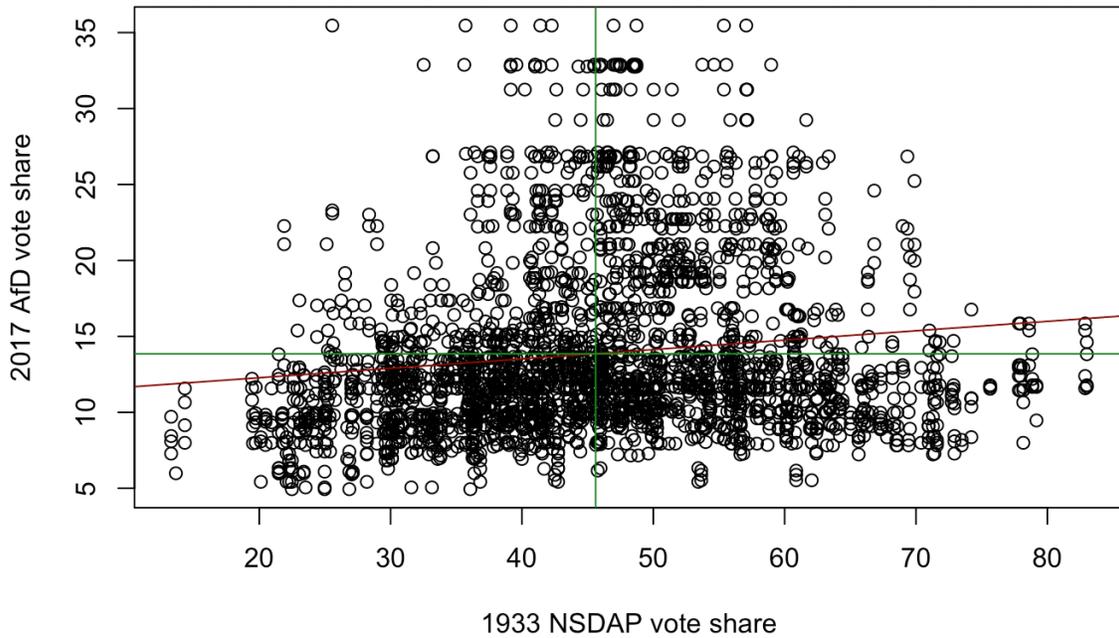


Figure 7: Scatterplot with means and regression line from baseline model

Controlling for state (*Bundesland*) decreased the coefficient to 0.04, yet it remains at a significance level of .001. Interestingly, when subsetting the data for East and West and running the baseline model separately, both direction as well as significance of the relationship differ between East and West. In the (former) East, the relationship between 1933 NSDAP support and 2017 AfD support is negative (-0.06), however, the confidence interval includes 0, thus failing to reject the null hypothesis. In the (former) West, meanwhile, the relationship is positive (0.02) and significant (at .05). See Table 2 for an overview of the results from the different models.

Table 2: Regression results from different models

Regression Results				
<i>Dependent variable:</i>				
share_AfD				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Baseline	State	East	West
share_NSDAP	0.062*** (0.014)	0.040*** (0.008)	-0.059 (0.036)	0.018** (0.008)
LAND_NR		1.182*** (0.070)		
Constant	11.038*** (0.632)	2.553*** (0.588)	25.619*** (2.054)	10.581*** (0.424)
Observations	2,678	2,678	586	2,092
R ²	0.018	0.652	0.009	0.009
Adjusted R ²	0.018	0.652	0.007	0.008
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01			

The results suggest that, overall, the correlation between 1933 NSDAP and 2017 AfD election results on the county level is positive and significant. This indicates that Cantoni et al's (2019) finding on the municipal level appears to also hold true on the county level. The magnitude of the association, however, is larger on the municipal than on the county level, which does not surprise, as we would expect greater variation within counties. Crucially, also, the relationship appears to differ substantially between East and West, with a positive and significant relationship only in the (former) West. This is in contrast to Cantoni et al's (2019) findings that persistence is greater in the East (coded as the former Soviet zone) than in the West, which the authors hypothesize is due to different denazification approaches. A multilevel model may provide clarity regarding this difference in results.

Summary and Conclusions

The results from this study suggest that there is an overall positive association between pre-war and present-day support for the German far right on the county level, which is primarily driven by this association in counties of the former West. As scholars seek to better understand how historical legacies shape current political behavior as well as what is helping to explain regional variation in support for the far right, it thus appears critical to better understand these continuities. While much attention has been paid to determinants of far right support in East Germany, it is worthwhile also looking at historical legacies in the former West where pre-war support for the Nazi party is associated with higher levels of support for the far right AfD party today.

These differences between East and West point to a potential layering of historical legacies (Wimmer, under review); consequences of one historical legacy may be mediated by another. Future research should consider this layering and explore how different layers of past political regimes or behaviors in conjunction with each other shape contemporary outcomes. A further open question concerns mechanisms. Why and how does such long-term continuity in far right electoral support occur? And under which conditions does it not? Tracing the transmission of political ideology across generations in the same localities could shed light on those questions.

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