

Project *brief*

Thünen Institute of Rural Studies

2023/38a

‘Feelings of being left behind’ in rural areas?

Larissa Deppisch, Torsten Osigus, Andreas Klärner¹

- Election successes of the right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) are partly attributed to ‘feelings of being left behind’ among the population in rural areas.
- This must be viewed in a more nuanced way: In the 2017 and 2021 federal elections, the AfD was successful in eastern Germany, especially in more rural areas, and in western Germany in more rural and non-rural areas; in very rural areas, the AfD tends to have lower results.
- Dissatisfaction in structurally weak areas is only associated with high AfD election results if a right-wing conservative interpretation of the problem situation prevails.

Background and purpose

In the 2017 federal election, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) became the first right-wing populist party to enter the German parliament. At the time, the AfD achieved a second-vote result of 12.6 percent. In the 2021 Bundestag election, it was again elected to the Bundestag with 10.3 percent.

For a while already, the AfD’s youth organization as well as the now dissolved internal party faction ‘Wing’ have been monitored by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution as being suspected of right-wing extremism. Several of the party’s state associations are also under observation by the constitutional protection authorities as suspected cases of right-wing extremism, and the Thuringian state association is considered ‘confirmed right-wing extremist.’ In the public debate, the AfD’s electoral successes have partly been attributed to so-called ‘feelings of being left behind’ among the population in rural areas. In the research project ‘Feelings of being left behind’ in rural areas? we investigated:

1. what the public understands by ‘being left behind’;
2. whether the AfD is actually particularly successful in rural areas; and
3. how people in rural areas perceive and interpret the situation.

1. What is understood by ‘being left behind’?

Within the framework of a discourse analysis based on 92 online and 155 print articles of German-language media, which were published around the federal election 2017 and dealt with the topics ‘being left behind’, ‘rural’ and ‘AfD’, three levels of meaning were elaborated:

- Infrastructural ‘being left behind’ as a result of the regional and local thinning out of public and private services of general interest;
- Economic ‘being left behind’ as a result of unemployment, business closures or below-average regional economic growth;

- Cultural ‘being left behind’ of traditionally thinking people as a consequence of a change in social values toward cosmopolitan-modern attitudes.

Common to all narratives is the explanation that the fears and concerns of the ‘left-behind’ in each case were not taken seriously by the governing parties. As a result, they would vote for the AfD out of protest or substantive conviction.

Research on the electoral success of the AfD found evidence of the influence of both economic ‘being left behind’ and cultural ‘being left behind’ on the election of the AfD. The influence of infrastructural factors as well as living conditions in rural areas has been little researched so far. Our project addresses this research gap.

2. Is the AfD particularly successful in rural areas?

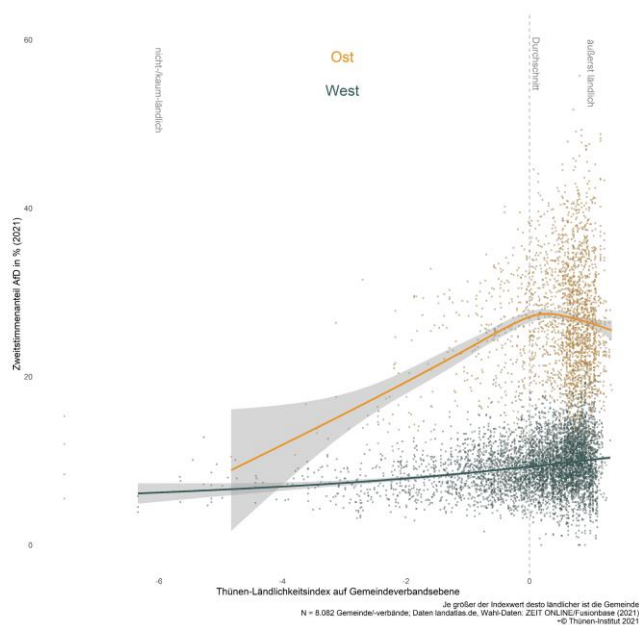
We have analyzed the election results of the AfD in the 2017 and 2021 federal elections as a function of the degree of rurality (Thünen rurality index) at the municipal level (see Fig. 1). Very rural areas are characterized, among other things, by the fact that offers and facilities of public and private services of general interest (shopping facilities, doctors, local transport, etc.) are less accessible.

The results show:

- the AfD achieves its highest election results in eastern Germany, especially in more rural communities;
- AfD election results are at the same level in western Germany in more rural and in non-rural communities;
- in both western and eastern Germany, very rural municipalities tended to have lower AfD election results in 2017 compared to more rural municipalities; this changed in western Germany in 2021, where the AfD was slightly stronger in very rural municipalities;
- AfD election results are at a higher percentage level in eastern Germany than in western Germany.

Overall, the thesis that people in rural areas are more likely to vote for the AfD must be rejected in its simplistic form. Instead, it makes sense to differentiate between rural areas.

Fig. 1: AfD results (federal election 2021) by rurality



Source: Own representation based on: landatlas.de, Federal Election Commissioner

3. How do people in rural areas perceive the situation?

To understand phenomena of ‘feelings of being left behind,’ the perspective of the population is relevant. This is because subjective perceptions of the situation as well as its evaluations are crucial for the development of dissatisfaction and its consequences. These do not take place in isolation, but are shaped collectively.

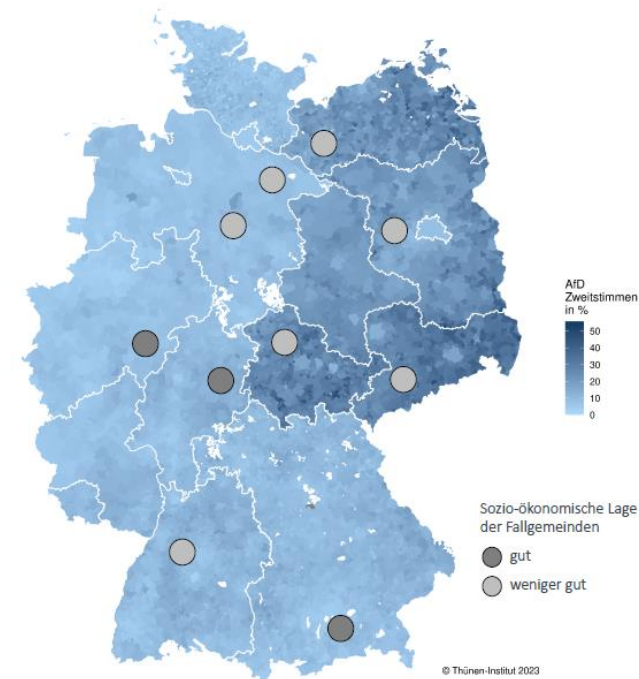
Therefore, we conducted 26 interviews with experts and ten group discussions with a total of 68 persons. In order to do justice to the diversity of rural areas, we selected the case regions in a contrastive manner. Thus, we examined areas with different socio-economic situations, each with comparatively low and high AfD election results (see Fig. 2).

The analysis of the group discussion revealed that

- a high level of satisfaction prevails in structurally strong areas and the AfD meets with low support there, even despite a locally dominant right-wing conservative culture;
- dissatisfaction in (rather) structurally weak areas is only accompanied by high AfD election results if a right-wing conservative political culture dominates locally;
- the AfD is less popular in structurally weak areas even when there is strong dissatisfaction with the infrastructure, if a left-wing liberal political culture dominates locally;
- in all regions, there is a strong desire to play an active role in shaping the local living situation.

Overall, the perception and interpretation processes of the population show an interweaving of infrastructural, cultural and economic factors. There is no simple correlation between infrastructural ‘feeling of being left behind’ and AfD election results.

Fig. 2: AfD results (federal election 2017) and case study regions



Source: Own representation based on: landatlas.de, Zeit Online/Fusionbase.

Conclusions

Policies that rely solely on infrastructure measures to bring about a decline in right-wing populist and, in some cases, right-wing extremist tendencies do not appear very promising.

Further information

Contact

¹ Thünen Institute of Rural Studies
andreas.klaerner@thuenen.de
www.thuenen.de/iv

Duration

4.2018–
3.2023

Project-ID

1988

Publications

Deppisch L, Osigus T, Klärner A (2022) How rural is rural populism? On the spatial understanding of rurality for analyses of right-wing populist election success in Germany. *Rural Sociol* 87(S1):692–714, DOI:10.1111/ruso.12397

Deppisch L, Klärner A (2021) „Gefühle des Abgehängtseins“ in ländlichen Räumen? Ein multimethodisches Forschungsprojekt am Thünen-Institut für Ländliche Räume, Braunschweig. *Z Agrargeschichte Agrarsoziologie* 69(1):85–89

Klärner A, Osigus T (2021) Ergebnisse der Bundestagswahl 2021: ländliche Räume im Fokus. *Agra Europe* (Bonn) 62(44):D72–86

Deppisch L (2020) „Gefühle des Abgehängtseins“ – ein Angstdiskurs. In: Martin S, Linpinsel T (eds) *Angst in Kultur und Politik der Gegenwart*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS: 179–203

DOI:10.3220/PB1697437590000