

Alternative FÜR Deutschland's Electoral Success: A Birth of a New Class in Germany?

Bokang Li

Department of International Relations and International Affairs, Jinan University, Guangzhou,
511443, China

tegucigalpa@stu2021.jnu.edu.cn

Abstract. The issue of class division has been growing in importance as a common problem in modern society. This paper first synthesizes the results of existing research on the voter groups of the extreme right-wing political parties represented by the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and then, based on the existing theories of class division and the theory of "risk society", proposes a new explanatory framework for the traditional theory that the criterion of class division in the highly globalized developed countries has been gradually changed from wealth to risk, that is, the "risk class". The concept of "risk class" is then used to explain the results of previous studies. Finally, this study argues that the emergence of this "risk class" is a manifestation of Germany's democratic deficit, which indicates that Germany's democracy has not effectively reduced the inequality of social risks in recent years. The rise of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party is a significant signal of this.

Keywords: Risk Class; Risk Society; Alternative für Deutschland; AfD; Democratic Deficit; Far-right.

1. Introduction

The study of extreme right-wing politics in academia has been increasing since the 1980s, and even more so in the 21st century: Mudde associates "nativism" with extreme right-wing politics, which he considers to be the product of the combination of xenophobia and nationalism [1]. This political ideology based on nativism clashed with the mainstream political ideology of pluralism and openness in the developed European countries after the war. Moreover, this conflict has intensified with the openness of the developed European countries to refugees. In contrast to other developed European countries, post-war Germany, due to its historical factors, has long been in a state of suppression of extreme right-wing political demands. This situation is reflected in the fact that although there is great demand for far-right policies in Germany, from the level of political elections, far-right parties are still challenging to succeed in elections [2].

According to existing research, there are two main reasons for this phenomenon: firstly, far-right politics is perceived by the electorate as a legacy of Nazism; secondly, the stigmatization of far-right politics has led to a tendency for competent politicians not to choose to join a far-right party [3]. However, this phenomenon has been gradually changing in recent years. In June 2023, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party won an election in the Sonneberg region with 52.8% of the vote against a coalition of all the traditional parties, including the CDU, SPD, and others [4]. This is the first time a far-right party has come to power in a local election in post-war Germany, indicating that the original German political balance is being upset.

Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany) is a German political party founded by economist Bernd Lucke in 2013. The party's political positions include the following: endorsement of the fundamental values of freedom and democracy in the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany; opposition to a centralized European Union and the euro; strengthening of the police and the judiciary, tightening of the right to bear arms, and strengthening of Germany's border defenses concerning domestic security; diplomatic emphasis on the "defense" attributes of NATO; and emphasis on good relations with the European Union and its member states. In foreign affairs, the party emphasizes NATO's "defense" attributes, good German-Russian relations, and the restoration of conscription; in cultural and immigration issues, the party emphasizes "unser Land zuerst" rather

than pluralism; and in energy and environmental issues, the party emphasizes the cost of living more than sustainable development [5].

At the same time, there have been reports of close links between some party members and neo-Nazis. Björn Hörk, one of the party's main members, mentioned in a speech in Dresden in 2017 that "(in the face of today's reflective policy in Germany) all we need is a 180-degree turn on reflective policy. (Wir brauchen nichts anderes als eine erinnerungspolitische Wende um 180 Grad." [6] "And Germany's state security agency, the Federal Office for the Defense of the Constitution (Bundesverfassungsdienst), has classified Alternative for Germany as a suspected far-right "potential threat" [7]. The mainstream media perceive it in the German political environment as an EU-skeptical, Nazi-suspecting, anti-immigrant far-right party [7].

2. The Portrait of Far-right Party Supporters and the Birth of a New Class

Suppose one is to study the characteristics of the voters of the European far-right parties. In that case, it is necessary to aggregate existing results and abstract their commonality as a class. This section will attempt to enumerate some of the facets, thus painting a portrait of a new class,

First is the group of skill-specific laborers. Individuals with specialized skills are more likely to vote for populist parties, as those with more specialized skills have less mobility and can only produce value in a limited number of industries, making them more averse to the risk of unemployment. Populist parties are generally more favorable to protectionist trade policies, thus protecting the domestic job market and inadvertently reducing the risk of unemployment. Furthermore, "since the 'left' (welfare state) solutions are no longer achievable in the context of the fragmentation of their class support in the post-industrialization process, societies have to look for alternative, closed and conservative means of self-protection [8]."

Secondly, the politically excluded people in mainstream society are more inclined to far-right parties. The term "politically excluded" refers to voters marginalized by the country's economic and social changes. Specifically, they are described as "older, working-class, less-educated white voters who have been pushed to the margins of society and feel politically excluded" [9]. These voters have lost faith in the mainstream political parties and are looking for a political alternative to address their grievances. This concept originally appeared in Goodwin's study of the UK Independence Party and later in Arzheimer's study of the voter base of the Alternative for Germany, where he referred to the possible existence of a "left behind" group [9]. The rise of right-wing populist parties was "due to their ability to tap into these voters [10]."

In addition, some studies have shown a negative correlation between Christian beliefs and support for the Alternative for Germany party. Although secularization has been a world trend in recent centuries, Germany's large Christian population makes religion an influential factor that cannot be ignored. First, the two major political parties in Germany (CDU and CSU) have close ties with churches, which gives religious believers a relatively smooth channel for the political expression of their interests. Second, the churches' message of tolerance and solidarity with refugees and immigrants "seems to influence the political attitudes of religious Christians [11]." Ultimately, religious beliefs can provide a sort of "immunity" against extreme right-wing thinking [11].

3. Is a New Class Emerging in German Society?

Two major class theories have been influential in the study of social stratification, namely Marx's class theory and Weber's pluralistic social stratification theory. The main difference between the two is that Marx emphasized the role of social relations of production in class stratification. At the same time, Weber focused on market relations, arguing that the possession of property is only the first step and that the inequality of economic power, which manifests itself in unequal access to market opportunities, ultimately leads to class stratification. In other words, different distributions of wealth define different social classes more than the possession of property. However, the era in which Weber

and Marx lived is long gone. Today, most countries have been or are in the midst of highly developed marketization and high levels of globalization, and changes in social patterns have inevitably led to the emergence of new manifestations of social stratification.

If we summarize the essential features of the contemporary globalized world, the generalization of risks in human society is undoubtedly one of them. In highly developed capitalist societies, with the generalization of the capacity of money, everything can be purchased with money—including security—thus, accumulating wealth implies an increased resistance to risk. Ulrich Beck's theory of the "risk society" points to the modern nature of "risk": "Risk is the result of the threatening forces of modernization and the suspicion that modernization creates.....They are politically reflexive [12]". Starting from this, the studies listed in the former content can be well explained: skill-specific labors take more risks due to the weak mobility of their skills and defect to far-right political parties in search of security, while this risk is itself a by-product of modernization and globalization; "politically excluded" people take risks because they have been excluded from the mainstream, the atomization of social relations exposes individuals without an organizational base to anxiety, which is for far-right parties to seize the opportunity—specifically in the face of the absence of mainstream political parties; Individuals of the Christian faith form a kind of social support network due to their religious affiliation, which reduces the risks faced by individuals, and therefore Christian faith can provide a kind of "immunity" to the far-right political parties.

4. The "Democratic Deficit" in German Politics

The emergence of the "risk class" is undoubtedly a consequence of the malfunctioning of German democracy and can be characterized as a "democratic deficit." "Democratic deficit" as an academic concept, although it was born more than forty years ago, still has academic vitality. Lax and Phillips consider a "democratic deficit" to be a lack of consistency between public opinion and policy outcomes or a situation in which elected officials make policy decisions that do not reflect the preferences of the majority of citizens [13]. In June 2023, the German Institute for Human Rights, which is financed by Germany's Federal Parliament, released a report titled "Why Alternative for Germany can be banned," which argues that "The Alternative for Germany party has posed a significant danger to the basic order of liberal democracy [14]." This report undoubtedly reflects mainstream German society's fear of far-right parties. The German political system is faced with a new class whose interests and demands cannot be adequately represented by mainstream political parties, so the extreme right-wing parties are ultimately left to grow and flourish. In any case, banning a political party does not eliminate the factual basis of its existence and the cause of its success but rather reflects the "democratic deficit" of the German political system, which is getting more and more serious.

5. Conclusion

This paper firstly presents the existing research on the voters of the Alternative for Germany, namely the skill-specific labor group, the marginal voter group "politically excluded" from the mainstream society, and the Christian faith group, then based on the existing stratification theory and the "risk society" theory, proposed that the German political system has a "democratic deficit" becoming more and more serious. After that, the paper based on the existing theory of class division and the theory of "risk society", put forward a new explanatory framework for the traditional theory that the criterion of class division in highly globalized modern developed countries has gradually changed from wealth to risk, i.e., the "risk class". It is further argued that the above three groups are all "risk class": skill-specific laborers who are exposed to greater unemployment risks due to the low mobility of their skills, tend to the trade-protectionist Alternative for Germany (AfD) party; and marginalized voters who are excluded because they cannot be integrated into the mainstream society, and thus face greater risks and anxieties, Alternative for Germany was able to respond to this anxiety

with a nationalist discourse; and the Christian faith community was less inclined towards Alternative for Germany because of both a religious community of thought and a political community such as the CDU, thus reducing the risk of membership. Finally, this study argues that the birth of this "risk class" is actually a manifestation of Germany's democratic deficit, suggesting that in recent years, democracy in Germany has not been effective in equalization of social risks in its operation and that the mainstream political parties have not been able to adequately represent the public opinion of the "risk class" to the extent that they have allowed the Alternative for Germany party to fill in the blank.

Numerous historical facts have proved that the course of human history is not a Whig historian myth. Similarly, the rise of Alternative for Germany is not a reaction of ignorant and retro conservatives against rational and modern progressivists, but rather an emerging political party with a keen sense of German society that utilizes the anxiety of the "risk class" to defeat the traditional political parties—which seem to be decent but in fact produce democratic deficits and inequality of risk. When people face risks, they will fight for even a false sense of security to protect themselves, which is an irrational fervor—especially in light of the links between Alternative for Germany and the neo-Nazis. It is also a test of the political wisdom of the German people, and whether the future will be an age of reason, or an age of fanaticism will depend on how many people are left behind by modernization and how many will become a "risk class" with no place for them to live. This question is not only in defense of the "risk class" themselves but also our modern life.

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