The electoral victory of the NPD in Saxony and the prospects for future extreme-right success in German elections

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ABSTRACT Largely because of Germany’s traumatic experience of National Socialism, German extreme right-wing parties have remained a marginal post-war political phenomenon. The spectacular electoral victory of the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD) in the Saxon parliamentary elections of September 2004 (9.2 per cent of the vote) nurtured the fear that a far-right party could establish itself at the national level. Backes explains the election victory by relating it to a set of Saxon and Eastern German circumstances. He demonstrates that unfavourable conditions, which have so far prevented the establishment of extreme right-wing parties at the national level, still prevail. Against this background, he shows that the NPD’s capacity for taking advantage of advantageous conditions (like economic problems and xenophobia, rampant in some places) reaches its limits very quickly.

KEYWORDS extremism, German elections, Germany, Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands, party system, right-wing extremism, Saxony

Because of Germany’s traumatic experience with National Socialism, its political culture has ever since been closely observed by all those who fear a renaissance of right-wing extremism. The so-called ‘burden of the past’ seems to have contributed decisively to the fact that such groups have polled fewer votes in elections than their counterparts in European countries with older traditions of democracy, such as France. In none of the three waves of politically driven voter mobilizations that political scientists have distinguished in post-war Europe—with regard, in Germany, to the Sozialistische Reichspartei (SRP) in the early 1950s, the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD) in the second half of the 1960s, and the Republikaner (REP) in the late 1980s and early 1990s—have German far-right parties been disproportionately successful.1 Moreover, the ubiquitousness and resilience of the protest vote have diminished in the course of the decades.

German reunification did not, at first, change this picture. As Figure 1 indicates, the sum total of votes cast between 1990 and 2005 for the three far-right electoral parties—the Deutsche Volksunion (DVU), the REP and the NPD—falls far below the 5 per cent threshold needed for representation. An all-time low was reached in the Bundestag parliamentary elections in September 2002, when the NPD and REP together achieved a mere 1.0 per cent of the total vote. Compared with the previous elections four years earlier, the REP (1998: 1.8 per cent) lost 1.2 per cent, and the NPD (1998: 0.3 per cent) only gained an extra 0.1 per cent. The DVU—not least because of its low membership numbers—fielded no candidates. In the European election of June 2004, the far-right parties achieved similarly modest results, although the REP and NPD (the DVU did not participate) did register a slight increase in votes: the REP’s share rose from 1.7 to 1.9 per cent, and the NPD’s increased from 0.4 to 0.9 per cent. And, in the Bundestag parliamentary elections in September 2005, the NPD increased its vote but, having achieved 1.6 per cent (REP: 0.6 per cent), remained far below the 5 per cent threshold.

During the last decade, the vitality of militant subcultures and the high level of xenophobic violence have been in sharp contrast with the organizational weakness of legally operating far-right parties. Their memberships decreased considerably (see Figure 2) and, based on these

data, no professional observer could have predicted a wave of mobilization at the national level.

Nevertheless, there is evidence of a growing power to mobilize support by far-right parties at the regional level. This applies mainly to the NPD. In its regional strongholds in Saxony, where the party has its strongest branch nationally (1,000 members at the beginning of 2005 out of a nationwide total of about 5,100), the NPD made considerable gains in the local elections of June 2004, for example, in Saxon Switzerland. The far-right bloc Nationales Bündnis Dresden won 4 per cent of the vote and was able to send three delegates to the city council of the Saxon capital, among them the national NPD vice-chairman Holger Apfel (born 1955). Apfel advocates cooperation with neo-Nazi Kameradschaften and is a mastermind of the strategic ‘three pillars concept’, which calls for a combination of electoral politics (‘the fight for the parliament’), activist politics (‘the fight for the streets’) and the dissemination of ideas (‘the fight for hearts and minds’). 5

Furthermore, benefitting from the fact that the 5 per cent threshold was abandoned for the first time, the NPD managed to take up seats in several city councils, as well as the county council, in the local elections in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania on 14 June 2004. In the state elections in Thuringia on the same day, the NPD multiplied by many times its share of the vote, from 0.2 per cent (1999) to 1.5 per cent. In the state elections in the Saarland on 5 September 2004, the NPD well exceeded this result. Starting from square one (it did not participate in 1999), the party won 4.0 per cent of the vote. However, the NPD—and the DVU—achieved their most spectacular results in the state elections of September 2004. In Saxony the NPD succeeded for the first time since 1968 in entering the state parliament with an almost sensational result of 9.2 per cent of the vote (1999: 1.4 per cent). On

the same day, the DVU again won seats in the Brandenburg state parliament, and with an improved result of 6.1 per cent of the vote (1999: 5.3 per cent).

However, as the first two state elections that followed those in Saxony and Brandenburg showed, the dreams of the extreme right-wing parties had little in common with reality. On 20 February 2005 the NPD was able to increase its share of the vote, compared to the previous election, in Schleswig-Holstein (state election 2000: 1.0 per cent), but, with 1.9 per cent, fell far short of their—unrealistic—expectations. In North Rhine-Westphalia (22 May 2005) the result turned out to be even worse. With only 0.9 per cent of the vote, the NPD did not even reach the minimum set by the state for the refund of election campaign costs (1.0 per cent). The share of votes cast for the REP, which also participated, dropped from 1.1 per cent (2000) to 0.8 per cent (2005).

The following analysis of the Saxon election victory shows why the far right’s expectations were unrealistic. It will examine the factors in the way of a continuing extremist winning streak, and demonstrate that the so-called ‘opportunity structures’ for the extreme right in Germany are not all favourable. And, furthermore, that right-wing extremists themselves lack the ability to take advantage of those conditions that are favourable.

**The NPD’s electoral success in Saxony, 2004**

Hardly any professional observer would have thought it possible, half a year before the elections in Saxony on 12 September 2004, that the NPD would manage to win 9.2 per cent of the vote (see Figure 3), and thereby enter the state parliament with twelve delegates. However, the success of the NPD
was based on a set of peculiar circumstances that do not exist in other states of Germany or on the national level.

First of all, the characteristics of Eastern German society, with its double experience of dictatorships, must be taken into account. The expansion of Western Germany’s political, economic and social systems into the eastern states did not transform the society of the former GDR all of a sudden into a consolidated democracy. In fact, what exists is a society in transition that, in a more subtle form, exhibits the same traits as other states of the former Soviet bloc, especially the industrially advanced Poland and Czech Republic. The concurrent transformation of both the economic and the political system without creating drastic social upheaval was only possible because of West Germany’s political and economic stability but, in the process, that stability was sorely tested. Solving the social and economic problems of consolidation in Eastern Germany has been made more difficult by the longstanding ‘political stalemate’ between the major parties. Necessary structural reforms (such as the rebuilding of the welfare state due to demographic changes or the disentanglement of the federal system) have been delayed for too long. The ‘reform jam’ and the economic burdens of the reunification process (stagnant or decreasing wages and salaries, increasing taxes and social security contributions) have undermined the people’s confidence in the problem-solving abilities of the major parties. In the subjective perception, actual problems turn into insuperable mountains. According to surveys of the Sozialwissenschaftliches Forschungsinstitut Berlin-Brandenburg the number of citizens in Eastern Germany whose self-descriptions range from ‘unsatisfied’ to ‘very dissatisfied’ concerning their future prospects more than doubled between 2000 (21 per cent) and 2003 (45 per cent).\(^6\) Objective factors, like a persistent high unemployment rate (Saxony 2004 average: 17.8 per cent; Germany: 10.5 per cent,)\(^7\) are just as relevant as subjective perceptions in view of the degree to which exorbitant expectations for a swift transformation of eastern living conditions into those of Western Germany have been disappointed.

In the eastern Länder pessimism about the future turns more rapidly into dissatisfaction with democracy because faith in democratic institutions and actors depends much more on ‘output’.\(^8\) Electoral volatility is also extremely


high as the major parties of the eastern states are socially less anchored—at the
level of party identification—and can count on only a handful of loyal voters.
Volte-faces often lead to the rapid deflection of voting trends. The party
systems in the eastern states—due to the partial transfer of those from the
West—do not evince a high degree of fragmentation, but tend, like the party
systems in Poland and the Czech Republic,9 towards polarization, which is
indicated by the persistence of the electoral power of the Partei des
Demokratischen Sozialismus (PDS), which emerged from the Sozialistische
Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED) of the former GDR, and the frequency of
extreme right-wing success at the polls. In addition, far-right parties benefit
from the increase of fears and resentments in the eastern states towards
migrants. According to the European Social Survey 2003 the ‘resistance to
immigrants and asylum seekers’ in each case turned out to be higher in
Eastern than in Western Germany.10 In this context, one has to remember not
only that the percentage of immigrants and asylum-seekers in the population
of Western Germany is larger than in that of Eastern Germany, but that the
proportion of foreigners in the East, for example in Saxony, has tripled since
1990 (percentage of foreigners: Germany end of 2003: 8.9 per cent; Saxony
2004: 2.8 per cent11). There is no correlation between electoral wards where
there was a high NPD vote and those with a (relatively) high percentage of
foreigners. The proximity of the Saxon electoral strongholds to the neighbouring
countries of Poland and Czech Republic seems to be more relevant. The
opening of borders, related to the eastward enlargement of the European
Union, released fears of economic competition (cheap labour, increase of
cross-border activities of Czech and Polish companies) in sections of the
population. In polls taken on election day, NPD voters cited the ‘policy on
foreigners’ as the second most important reason for their party preference.12

However, another factor was more important, probably even decisive,
namely, the protest against what is commonly called ‘Hartz IV’, the govern-
ment’s attempt at labour-market and welfare reforms. Almost 60 per cent of
NPD-voters named this policy as the most important reason for their vote.13

9 See Attila Ágh, ‘The end of the beginning: the partial consolidation of East Central
European parties and party systems’, in Paul Pennings and Jan-Erik Lane (eds),
10 Marcel Coender, Marcel Lubbers and Peer Schepers, Majorities’ Attitudes towards
Minorities in Western and Eastern European Societies. Results from the European Social
Survey 2002–2003, Report 4 for the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and
Xenophobia (Nijmegen: Nijmegen Institute for Social and Cultural Research 2005),
3–4.
11 Statistisches Landesamt des Freistaates Sachsen, Ausländische Mitbürgers 2004/2005
(Dresden: Statistisches Landesamt des Freistaates Sachsen 2005), 1.
12 Infratest/dimap, WahlREPORT: Landtagswahl Sachsen 2004 (Mannheim: Infratest
dimap 2005), 2.
13 Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, ‘Landtagswahlen in Sachsen und Brandenburg: NPD und
Wahlanalysen/Newsletter_NPD_DVU (viewed 7 February 2006).
It was mainly in the eastern states that a wave of protest against ‘Hartz IV’ welled up a few months before the state elections in Saxony and Brandenburg. Despite the fact that the protests were instigated primarily by leftist groups and provocatively called ‘Monday demonstrations’, the NPD attempted to maintain a high public profile in several cities of Eastern Germany by riding the wave of these popular protest demonstrations, in the face of expressions of disapproval by their predominantly leftist organizers. The ‘Hartz IV’ protest wave reached its peak in the weeks before the state elections, and the NPD was quick to place (anti-Hartz IV) socio-political statements at the centre of its own campaign. The NPD thereby avoided appearing too shrill, and made efforts to present itself as a respectable right-wing party. According to the election-day polls of the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen, 14 per cent of blue-collar workers and 18 per cent of the unemployed voted for the NPD. The average NPD-voter was male (12.6 per cent), young (18–24 years: 16 per cent; 25–34 years: 13.9 per cent; 35–44 years: 11.7 per cent; 45–59 years: 9.8 per cent; over 60 years: 4.3 per cent), and with a low level of education. The significant impact on the vote of issues like the proposed labour-market reform or the policy on foreigners indicates that problems related to globalization can create favourable opportunities for extreme right-wing parties, particularly if the problem-solving ability of the established democratic parties seems insufficient. This adds to the inclination of a like-minded part of the electorate to exert pressure on the established parties by voting for political outsiders. In this way, extreme right-wing parties can exploit the potential of both ideological sympathizers as well as voters wishing to protest particular policies. An analysis by the Statistisches Landesamt Sachsen sheds light on the high percentage of protest voters: 14 per cent of the people who cast their second vote for the NPD actually cast their first vote for the post-Communist PDS (see Figure 4).

Nevertheless, the political realities and balance of power in Saxony also contributed to the success of the NPD, whose Saxon regional branch is its strongest one nationwide (see Figure 5). The national NPD leadership had

14 The term used for demonstrations against the Communist dictatorship in 1989–90.
16 At the federal and regional level, German electoral law mandates that each voter has two votes. The share of seats for each party depends on the share of second votes. The first vote is for a local candidate and influences only the individuals who will occupy the elected seats. The motive for ‘splitting’ votes in the election of smaller parties is the expectation that the party will be too weak to receive a direct mandate in the second vote.
chosen Saxony as a model region, transferring the editorial office of the party paper, *Deutsche Stimme* (German Voice), to the small Saxon town of Riesa, and the central youth organization, Junge Nationaldemokraten, to Dresden. Accordingly, the NPD achieved its best result in years at the regional level in the Saxon state elections of 1999 (1.4 per cent). Michael Nier (born 1943), a former professor of ‘dialectical and historical materialism’, managed to become a NPD candidate, and attracted attention with a platform mixing nationalism and anti-capitalism. Steffen Hupka (born 1962), a former professor of ‘dialectical and historical materialism’, also ran for a NPD seat.

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companion of the neo-Nazi Michael Kühnen and, until March 2000, chairman of the Saxon NPD, appeared as the spokesman of an internal party tendency known as the Revolutionären Plattaform.

Despite such candidates, in the election campaign of 2004, the NPD eschewed shrillness. In local strongholds (such as Königstein, where it won 21.1 per cent of the vote in the 2004 local elections), seemingly respectable personalities allowed themselves to be won over by the NPD, and the party achieved a certain social embeddedness. In addition, the national leadership, as the state elections approached, concentrated its efforts on Saxony, and sent some of its most experienced activists there from other regional branches. An electoral pact with the DVU helped to reduce the competitive pressure on the extreme right. The Saxon branch of the REP distanced itself from the strategic course adopted by its national leadership, and thereby demonstrated to the NPD its readiness to cooperate. In fact, a large proportion of the REP’s regional membership actually defected to the NPD. In addition to these factors, an anything but powerful CDU, thrown off balance by the change of prime ministers (Georg Milbradt succeeding Kurt Biedenkopf), and a PDS with a rather pragmatic profile and little potential for attracting the protest vote can be counted among the ‘opportunity structures’ favourable to the NPD.

Unfavourable conditions for future NPD success in Saxony

The NPD did not only find favourable conditions in Saxony, but was also able to take advantage of them. In view of this, might the party be capable of picking up the thread of its successes from the late 1960s, and this time reach the 5 per cent threshold on a national level and enter the German Bundestag?

Against the background of the recent decades, such a development seems unlikely. First of all, it is doubtful that the NPD would, on a long-term basis, be capable of exploiting opportunities as effectively as it did in Saxony. The present-day NPD differs significantly from the party of the 1960s and 1970s. Under the party chairman Udo Voigt (born 1952, national chairman since 1996), a former air force officer who, after leaving the German armed forces, earned a master’s degree in political science in Munich, the NPD opened itself up to militant neo-Nazis and skinheads. Though the party clings to a strategy of acting within the law, the fact is that it increasingly counts on provocative public activities, and propagates a mixture of ultra-nationalism, ethnocentrism and anti-capitalism that smacks of its archetype, historic National Socialism.

19 For the history of the party, see Uwe Backes and Eckhard Jesse, Politischer Extremismus in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, rev. edn (Frankfurt and Berlin: Propyläen 1996), 60–138.
The legal proceedings in which the government attempted to ban the NPD, which were initiated in 2001 and foundered on procedural grounds in 2003—namely, the heavy presence of federal undercover agents in the party’s executive on both the state and federal levels—only brought the party increased publicity. Horst Mahler, a former founding activist of the Rote Armee Fraktion, who gradually transformed himself from leftist terrorist into right-wing extremist, acted as the NPD’s lawyer. In a statement on the behaviour of the Federal Constitutional Court during the ban proceedings, he called the government a ‘vassal’ of the ‘most powerful criminal state ever on earth’. He was referring to the widespread far-right belief that the United States controls the world in an alliance with Jewish power. After the proceedings came to an end, Mahler left the NPD as it, to his mind, appeared to be too willing to compromise. The national chairman later declared that Mahler resigned from the party because the NPD leadership had refused to take up Holocaust denial and lead the party ‘in a battle over the Holocaust’. This, in the meantime, did not prevent Voigt from paying tribute to Hitler as a ‘great German statesman’ despite bearing ‘responsibility for Germany’s defeat’. According to Voigt, National Socialism as a ‘movement still exists in today’s Germany’, and the NPD is attempting ‘to embrace the National Socialist movement, as well as national-liberals and national-conservatives, because to reject it would be only to help political enemies’.

Statements like these have not been rooted out in obscure speeches; they are quite commonly produced whenever the national chairman gives interviews. They show that the NPD is only willing and able to impersonate a democratic organization to a very limited extent. The party’s ideological dogmatism is so strong that it limits its populist manoeuvrability considerably. The NPD therefore does not possess the ‘winning formulae’ that have been identified in analyses of the success of other extreme right-wing parties in Europe by academic observers like Piero Ignazi, Herbert


23 Ibid.
Furthermore, the NPD leadership lacks charisma. Like its far-right competitors, the NPD is without an exceptional talent, in terms of creating effective rhetoric and propaganda, who would be able to bring the so-called ‘national camp’ together. As for personnel generally, they are badly equipped. Even the second tier of the organization cannot boast any effective leaders. There is, in short, no one on the horizon who might conceivably grow into a successful ‘piper’.

What is more, the NPD’s ideological dogmatism and its (partial) orientation towards historic National Socialism diminish its ability to form alliances with more moderate potential partners. The NPD’s neo-paganism, with its accompanying social revolutionary and racist character, do not mesh well with either neo-liberal or with Christian fundamentalist positions. Accordingly, an alliance, in particular with the REP, should not be possible, even if some regional associations of the REP attempt to forge such an alliance. The strategic electoral rapprochement of the NPD and DVU—the proposed formation of a ‘national people’s front (Volksfront)—met with a clear rejection by the REP leadership: ‘We do not have anything in common with parties that plan to extirpate the state and democracy in order to establish a ‘Fourth Reich’, and there will be no cooperation.’25 Whether the alliance between the NPD and DVU, which was formed in October 2004 and formally ratified in January 2005, will last for long seems at best dubious. The DVU leader Gerhard Frey’s strategy of ostentatiously asserting loyalty to the constitution is irreconcilable with the aggressive and subversive stance of the NPD leadership, with its openness towards militant skinheads, neo-Nazis, Kameradschaften and espousers of ‘national resistance’. Any serious cooperation would also mean the loss of (financial) independence, which Udo Voigt has always considered to be crucially important.

The NPD also faces a number of uncongenial ‘opportunity structures’ in the Federal Republic of Germany. One such obstacle is the concept of ‘militant democracy’ that is embodied in the constitution, even though its own limitations were revealed in the course of the legal proceedings to ban the NPD. But Germany’s ‘militant democracy’ is not exhausted by the possibility of banning parties. Of greater significance is the existence of offices charged with the protection of the constitution (Verfassungsschutz), which report, critically and publicly, on the activities of those groups that come into conflict with the basic rules of the democratic constitutional state. In Germany it is possible to ban political parties that are extremist in nature.


but that act within the law, a legacy of the failure to halt National Socialism in the 1930s. This preventive aspect of ‘militant democracy’—so-called Vorverlagerung des Demokratieschutzes—in combination with the publication of the results of the monitoring of such groups at both a national and regional level, has no fully-fledged counterpart anywhere else in Europe. Reports by the Verfassungsschutz offices are scrutinized attentively by the public and represent a major obstacle to the mobilizing ability of all those parties that are mentioned in them. This also concerns organizations against which the militant democracy is not seriously considering using any of its constitutionally mandated instruments (when their use seems inopportune or judicially unenforceable), such as banning public assembly, banning a party or demanding the forfeiture of fundamental rights or restricting employment by the civil service.

A political and cultural peculiarity aggravates this institutional factor. Because of Germany’s traumatic experience with the criminal and self-destructive policies of National Socialism, groupings whose character and development show the slightest similarity with the historic original are monitored with the greatest diligence. That the attitude towards the past is at times hysterical can be seen in the mutual accusations of fascism that fly between the major democratic parties as well as marginal groups. Often, a politician’s interest in sensationalism overlaps with that of journalists, an intersection that fosters an atmosphere of suspicion. Therefore, it is especially hard for extreme right-wing parties to make themselves heard, let alone to find acceptance. Even the populist ‘single-issue movement’ led by Ronald Schill, a former Hamburg judge, met with suspicions of this kind although, despite the radicalism of its law-and-order and anti-immigrant platform, it managed to distance itself from the extreme right convincingly.

The interaction between the trauma of National Socialism, well-developed sensitivities vis-à-vis ‘dangers from the right’ and political machinations arising from noble (and occasionally less than noble) motives predetermines the attitudes of democratic parties towards alliances with extreme right-


wing parties. In Germany extreme right-wing and nationalist populist parties encounter an ‘exclusionary oligopoly’. The CDU/CSU take part in this and would be ill-advised to enter into a coalition with a party seen to have a dubious loyalty to the constitution. With public opinion being rather inclined to be generous, a party like the PDS might just get away with something that would be seen as an inexcusable faux pas if carried out by the REP, for example. This applies even more to the ideologically ‘hard-core’ NPD. The strategy of alienating extreme right-wing parties is pursued with particular enthusiasm by anti-fascist ‘watchdogs’, who in part are devoted to the principles of militant democracy, but sometimes tend to overshoot the mark. Anti-fascists of the extreme left blur the line between loyalty and disloyalty to the constitution and, additionally, encourage the atmosphere of suspicion.

No matter how this might be assessed according to theories of democracy, high hurdles are being put in the way of extreme right-wing parties that try to appear ‘loyal to the constitution’. They therefore attract little in the way of positive media response let alone the possibility of being offered a platform—out of political interests—like the one Le Pen was offered in mid-1980s France. Extreme right-wing parties—even those with a distinctly populist profile—have a hard time in Germany attracting political activists, as anyone who comes close to them will fear repercussions in their professional lives. At this point, the consequences of the politics of supply and demand become particularly obvious.

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