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# Explaining Far-Right Electoral Successes in Germany

The Politicization of Immigration-Related Issues

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## 1. Introduction

Most explanations that have been advanced regarding the recent successes of far-right parties in Western Europe suggest that these parties should have also done well in Germany.<sup>1</sup> With a high per-capita income and a strong export-oriented economy, Germany has experienced large-scale immigration,<sup>2</sup> a shift toward postindustrial occupations, economic restructuring, unemployment, and social marginalization of the poorest strata. These socioeconomic developments have been accompanied by political responses which should also benefit the far right: political parties have lost credibility,<sup>3</sup> non-voting has increased,<sup>4</sup> and ecological parties have become established and have spurred environmental, feminist, and pro-immigrant policies.<sup>5</sup>

Yet far-right parties, including the Republikaner (REP), Deutsche Volkunion (DVU), and Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD), have been largely unsuccessful at the national level in Germany since the late 1960s. Even when their vote shares are combined, these parties have received only about 2 percent in Bundestag elections—not even close to the 4.3 percent attained by the NPD in the 1969 vote. This failure has occurred despite REP popularity as high as 6 to 8 percent among voters in national surveys during 1989/93. The far right's weak performance in German national politics is usually explained as the result of three factors: their failure to move beyond immigration issues, the adoption of their issues by established parties, and the sensitivity of German voters to the far

right's associations with neo-Nazism.<sup>6</sup> Thus, far-right parties failed in the December 1990 and October 1994 Bundestag elections because they relied too heavily on the asylum issue, which suddenly became less important in national politics after the unification process took center stage in 1990, and again after the constitutional amendment restricting asylum rights was passed in May 1993.

However, to say that far-right parties have failed in Germany is an overstatement. Indeed, such a claim distracts attention from the substantial and even sustained successes which these parties have had in some German regions. Far-right parties have gained about 10 percent of the vote in the last two elections in Baden-Württemberg, and their average vote shares in Bavaria, Bremen, Hamburg, and Schleswig-Holstein since the mid-1980s come close to the important 5 percent hurdle. Moreover, in April 1998, the DVU gained nearly 13 percent in Saxony-Anhalt. Meanwhile, in contrast, far-right parties consistently failed in all the other new eastern states and North-Rhine Westphalia, never reaching 2 percent in any state election before 1998; in four other western states, they have averaged about 2 percent or less since the mid-1980s. What accounts for these relative successes and failures? What do the regional German cases imply about broader theories of far-right success?

This article addresses these questions via comparisons among the sixteen German federal states. The analysis will focus on the ten states that constituted pre-unification West Germany, and Berlin, since virtually all far-right electoral successes have occurred there. Even though right-wing skinheads and neo-Nazi groups have been especially active in the east, until 1998 the far right received very few votes in the four eastern states outside Berlin. Inter-regional comparisons are especially useful given the disproportionate strength of the far right in a few German regions; for example, the REP have gained 40 to 50 percent of their votes in Bundestag elections from just two states, Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria.

The article argues that far-right successes have depended on unusual publicity concerning immigration-related issues, on which far-right parties enjoy advantages over the established parties. When electoral or legislative campaigns on immigration-related issues occur—initiated often by mainstream parties at the state level—these issues take on a higher public profile and become more important

for voters, leading many to turn toward the far right. This explanation accounts for the successes and failures of Germany's far right more accurately than many of the proffered socioeconomic and political explanations, which this article also evaluates.

## 2. Theories of Far-Right Party Success in Western Europe

Theories and explanations of the far right's recent success in Western Europe have focused largely on four kinds of socioeconomic developments and three kinds of political responses.<sup>7</sup> First, the postindustrialism theory holds that a shift from traditional manufacturing toward a high-technology service economy has broken down voters' traditional collective attachments, to churches and unions for example, and has led to an increase in issue voting.<sup>8</sup> Second, the anti-left-libertarianism theory posits that a postindustrial shift toward post-materialist values<sup>9</sup> has generated ecological or left-libertarian movements and parties, and also a corresponding anti-environmental, anti-feminist, right-authoritarian backlash benefiting the far right.<sup>10</sup>

The third theory maintains that material grievances—due to increased economic and social problems such as unemployment, poor housing, and crime—make voters feel anxious and threatened.<sup>11</sup> Voters' anxiety leads them to support far-right parties, which offer the apparent security of simple solutions for complex problems.<sup>12</sup> Finally, the fourth theory holds that non-European immigration to Western Europe is a prominent factor in many explanations of far-right party success.<sup>13</sup> Some have argued that immigrants have posed apparent threats to "modernization losers" in the industrial working class and the petty bourgeoisie, especially after the onset of mass unemployment in the 1970s increased the sense of competition for jobs and welfare-state spending.<sup>14</sup>

By contrast, political explanations of far-right successes have emphasized three kinds of responses on the part of established parties, voters, and the far right itself—responses which are substantially independent of, although affected by, the socioeconomic developments listed above. First, the issue-voting thesis claims that the per-

ceived failures of governing parties in specific policy areas, especially those related to immigration, have led some to protest by voting for the far right.<sup>15</sup> Second, the political-alienation thesis holds that a general loss of confidence in established parties and other political institutions leads to non-voting and protest voting for fringe parties, which are untarnished by involvement in government.<sup>16</sup> Third, the convergence explanation is that the major established parties have moved toward the center on matters of economic and social policy, thereby leaving space on the right for far-right parties to mobilize votes.<sup>17</sup>

The rest of this article evaluates how well these seven theoretical factors explain the successes and failures of far-right parties at the state level in Germany between 1986 and 1997; while these factors are often combined in the theoretical works cited above, the evidence for them will be analyzed separately here. The analysis proceeds in six stages. First, an examination of the relationship between far-right party success and a number of state-level variables for the 1986/97 period shows only limited support for socioeconomic theories (Section 3). While some socioeconomic factors may help to explain why certain groups—especially younger working-class males—vote for the far right, they contribute little to an explanation of why these parties succeed in some times and places but not in others. Second, an analysis of the national debate on the right to political asylum, public interest in the issue, and state-level election results demonstrates that the impact of the national debate—while playing a role in several far-right successes between 1991 and 1993—cannot explain most successes before and after that period (Section 4). Third, a brief survey of the issues which were salient during far-right successes, and a detailed look at a state-level case of far-right success and a case of far-right failure, lend support to the issue-voting thesis (Section 5). State-level publicity on asylum and immigration-related issues thus far has been the crucial factor in the success of far-right parties; when it has been present, they have done well, and when it has been absent, they have not. The fourth stage of analysis argues that the origins of anti-immigration politics are located in political processes rather than simply the pressures of immigration, and in state politics rather than mainly the federal level (Section 6). Fifth, the political-alienation and party-convergence

theses are shown to have little support at the state level (Section 7). The final part of the analysis considers the DVU's surprising success in the 1998 Saxony-Anhalt election, and evaluates both the issue-voting thesis developed up to this point and the prevalent claims that economic grievances and protest voting were responsible for the far right's success in this case (Section 8).

### 3. The Limits of Socioeconomic Theories

#### *Divergences in Far-Right-Party Success*

This section analyzes the forty-four state parliamentary elections held between 1986 and 1997.<sup>18</sup> The starting date of 1986 was chosen because far-right parties failed to gain 3 percent of the vote in any region during all the state parliamentary and Bundestag elections between 1970 and 1985.<sup>19</sup> The NPD dominated the spectrum of far-right electoral parties from the late 1960s until 1986, during which time that party—riven by infighting between nationalist conservatives and neo-Nazis—averaged about 1 percent of the vote or less.<sup>20</sup> The founding of the REP in 1983 created a new kind of far-right party, one which was somewhat more credible when it proclaimed its acceptance of democracy and which was somewhat more respectable because of its distance from neo-Nazism. The party also profited from the charismatic leadership of the former television journalist and former SS officer Franz Schönhuber (until 1994). The DVU began campaigning in some state elections in 1986/87 with strongly nationalist positions similar to the NPD's, but with an important advantage over the NPD and REP: large amounts of money, which had been amassed by the right-wing publisher Gerhard Frey during the 1970s and 1980s and has since been used for DVU campaigns.

Based on the average level of far-right support in the last three state elections through 1997, states can be divided into relative successes and failures. I define relative success as an average vote for the main far-right parties<sup>21</sup> totaling over 4 percent; six states met this criterion (see Table 1a). In four of these states, either the Republikaner or the DVU gained parliamentary representation with more than 5 percent of the vote, and in the other two, the far right came very close to the 5 percent mark—in Bavaria (October 1990) and

Table 1a Far-right party vote shares and selected data for German states, 1985-97<sup>22</sup>

State	Far-right % of vote (average % for last 3** elections)	Per- capita GDP 1991 (1000 DM)	White- collar workers 1990 (as % of employed)	Church member- ship 1987 (as % of pop.)	Post- secondary students 1990 (as % of 15-65 year-old pop.)	Green % of vote (peak before 1992)
<b>Relative successes</b>						
Baden-Württemberg	8.0	43.6	50.5	92.8	3.18	8.0
Hamburg	5.4	67.5	63.9	65.8	5.40	10.4
Bremen	5.1	50.8	58.0	77.1	4.58	11.4
Berlin (West)	4.6	46.3	57.3	71.0	7.42	11.8
Schleswig-Holstein	4.5	34.8	56.3	83.0	2.20	3.9
Bavaria	4.1	41.8	47.5	94.9	3.22	7.5
<i>Average (mean) of successes</i>	5.3*	47.5	55.6	80.8	4.33	8.8
<b>Relative failures</b>						
Rhineland- Palatinate	2.2	35.1	48.8	95.0	2.82	6.5
Saarland	1.9	35.0	49.2	96.7	3.21	2.9
Lower Saxony	1.9	34.2	51.3	88.6	2.88	7.1
Hessen	1.3	46.7	55.0	88.5	3.75	9.4
North-Rhine Westfalia	0.9	38.2	52.9	90.7	3.96	5.0
<i>Average (mean) of western German failures</i>	1.6	37.8	51.4	91.9	3.32	6.2
Brandenburg	1.2	11.9	n.a.	n.a.	0.31	n.a.
Thuringia	1.2	10.1	n.a.	n.a.	0.79	n.a.
Mecklenburg- West Pomerania	1.1	10.7	n.a.	n.a.	1.02	n.a.
Saxony-Anhalt	1.1	11.5	n.a.	n.a.	1.09	n.a.
Saxony	1.0	11.0	n.a.	n.a.	1.72	n.a.
<i>Average (mean) of eastern German failures</i>	1.1	11.0	n.a.	n.a.	0.99	n.a.
<i>Average (mean) of all failures</i>	1.3*	24.4	n.a.	n.a.	2.16	n.a.
GERMANY	2.8*	34.9	n.a.	n.a.	3.12	n.a.

\* arithmetic means of the values for the states; other values in these rows are totals for the group of states indicated or all of Germany respectively.

\*\* in eastern states, based on the two state elections held since unification



Table 1b Far-right party vote shares and selected data for German states, 1985-97 (con'd)<sup>23</sup>

State	Far-right % of vote (average % for last 3** elections)	Unem- ployment rate 1992 (% of workforce)	Housing shortage (-) or surplus (+) 1990 (as % of private house- holds)	Crime rate 1993 (crimes per 100 residents)	Non- Germans 1992 (as % of pop.)	Immi- gration rate 1982-92 (increase as % of earlier foreign pop.)
<i>Relative successes</i>						
Baden-Württemberg	8.0	4.4	-8.06	6.10	11.7	29.5
Hamburg	5.4	7.9	-9.42	16.84	13.9	36.4
Bremen	5.1	10.7	-3.90	16.11	11.0	46.4
Berlin (West)***	4.6	11.1	-8.43	16.33	11.0	38.7
Schleswig-Holstein	4.5	7.2	-2.08	10.15	4.7	33.2
Bavaria	4.1	4.9	-3.44	5.69	8.4	39.8
<i>Average (mean) of successes</i>	5.3*	7.7	-5.89	11.87	10.1	37.3
<i>Relative failures</i>						
Rhineland- Palatinate	2.2	5.7	-2.06	6.09	6.7	51.5
Saarland	1.9	9.0	-9.70	6.27	6.3	48.3
Lower Saxony	1.9	8.1	-5.18	8.58	5.4	41.7
Hessen	1.3	5.5	-5.02	8.35	12.6	34.9
North-Rhine Westfalia	0.9	8.0	-4.06	7.79	10.2	25.5
<i>Average (mean) of western German failures</i>	1.6	7.3	-5.20	7.42	8.2	40.4
Brandenburg	1.2	14.8	+3.15	12.90	0.6	100.7
Thuringia	1.2	15.4	+4.73	6.32	0.7	-21.0
Mecklenburg- West Pomerania	1.1	16.8	-0.09	13.79	1.0	71.8
Saxony-Anhalt	1.1	15.3	+4.44	10.80	1.0	16.9
Saxony	1.0	13.6	+8.18	7.64	1.0	-32.6
<i>Average (mean) of eastern German failures</i>	1.1	15.2	+4.08	10.29	0.9	27.2
<i>Average (mean) of all failures</i>	1.3*	11.2	-0.56	8.85	4.6	33.8
GERMANY	2.8*	8.4	-2.87	8.34	7.9	33.7

\* arithmetic means of the values for the states; other values in these rows are totals for the group of states indicated or all of Germany respectively.

\*\* for eastern states, based only on the two state elections held since unification

\*\*\* crime rate and non-German share are for unified Berlin.

Hamburg (September 1993, September 1997). In half of the relatively successful states—West Berlin,<sup>24</sup> Schleswig-Holstein, and Bremen—the far right's last election result has been significantly lower than the early 1990s peak, but in Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, and Hamburg, the drop has been slight so far. Moreover, in all the "relatively successful" cases except for West Berlin, the last state election has seen far-right results above 3 percent.

The second group consists of the relative failures for the far right. However, because of the political and societal cleavages created first by the Cold War division of Germany and then by the unification process, I have divided the second group into western and eastern failure states. In the western failure states, the far right has been failing since the late 1980s, under a variety of conditions which are, according to most of the socioeconomic theories, more favorable to them than in the east. In these failure cases, the REP, DVU, and NPD together averaged about 2 percent of the vote or less. However, in three of the western cases, the far right has enjoyed brief, mild success: in the Saar, the Republikaner reached 3.3 percent (January 1990), in Lower Saxony 3.7 percent (March 1994), and in Rheinland-Palatinate 3.5 percent (March 1996). In the other two western failures (Hessen and North-Rhine Westphalia), the far right has failed to come anywhere close to the 5 percent threshold in state elections—even though in Hessen, the far right had dramatic success in some municipalities in the 1989 and 1993 local elections, including 6.6 and 12.9 percent in Frankfurt.

### *The Situation in the East*

The quite different socioeconomic and political conditions in the eastern states have produced a paradoxical combination of high levels of anti-foreigner violence and low levels of far-right voting, at least until 1998. During the period of economic and political dislocation after unification, the eastern states gained new party systems and also a disproportionate share of unified Germany's right-wing skinheads. The latter have attacked immigrant workers from Africa and Vietnam as well as the asylum seekers who came from many countries in the 1990s. For example, over 500 arson attacks against foreigners were carried out in the east during 1991 and 1992, slightly over half of the national total for that period<sup>25</sup>; since then, officially recorded attacks have continued at relatively high levels in

some eastern areas, especially in Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania. Yet, between 1990 and 1994, during the first ten state elections, the far-right parties consistently gained only about 1 percent of the vote, although their membership levels indicate an approximately average organizational strength for Germany.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, in April 1998 the eastern state of Saxony-Anhalt broke with this trend, when its voters gave 12.9 percent of their votes to the DVU. (For the purposes of the analysis in Sections 3-7, I will treat the eastern states as the cases of far-right failure which they were until 1998.)

### *Postindustrialism and Individualization*

Do differing levels of postindustrialism explain the relative successes and failures of far-right parties? To test the postindustrialism thesis, I analyze three indicators of a wealthy society with a service-oriented economy and weak social ties: gross domestic product per capita, white-collar workers as a share of the workforce, and the share of the population with no religious affiliation (Table 1a). Two initial findings are clear. First, one sees some differences in the averages for these variables for the group of states that experienced relative successes and the group of states with relative failures. Second, the importance of this finding is undermined by the existence of substantial exceptions and overlaps between the groups. The cases of success are very diverse, as they include two southern states with average incomes and high church membership rates (Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria), three northern city-states with very high incomes and relatively few church members (Berlin, Bremen, and Hamburg), and one rather poor, rural northern state (Schleswig-Holstein). The group of western failures is also heterogeneous, including relatively high-income, urbanized industrial states (Hessen and North-Rhine Westphalia) as well as low-income rural states (Lower Saxony and Rhineland-Palatinate). Moreover, church membership is much lower in the eastern states than in the west, yet before 1998 the far right had failed utterly in the east. Finally, socioeconomic development does not help to explain why the far right has experienced brief successes in the Saar, Lower Saxony, and Rhineland-Palatinate—regions closely resembling the other failure cases in terms of income, occupational structure, and religious affiliation.

Moreover, although the association with per-capita income is strongest, there are serious problems with interpreting this correlation as support for the postindustrialism thesis. The major far-right success occurred in a state (Baden-Württemberg) in which per-capita income is not far above the western German average, while a major failure (North-Rhine Westphalia) occurred in a state not far below the mean. More importantly, evidence points away from all the possible mechanisms by which economic development might improve the far right's chances. Occupational structures vary relatively little, and affiliation in churches or labor-unions contribute less to the explanation than initial impressions suggest.

Across election districts within states, there is an inverse correlation between affiliations to traditional organizations and far-right voting; those attached to churches and unions are less likely to vote for the far right. Strong attachment to religion, as reflected in weekly church attendance, seems to strongly "immunize" individual voters against far-right voting, but weaker religious attachments<sup>27</sup> do not immunize much. Because the strongly immunized group comprises only about 15 percent of the population, the overall effect of church-related immunization on the composition of the far right's electorate is minor; in one set of surveys, 65 percent of voters attend church occasionally or once a year, and the REP received a similar proportion (69 percent) of its votes from this group.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, religious attachments do not help explain differences between the states. The failure states of North-Rhine Westphalia and Rheinland-Palatinate have about the same shares of weekly churchgoers (about 15 percent) and of those who seldom or never attend church (about 40 percent) as does Baden-Württemberg.<sup>29</sup> The effects of union membership are similarly small and unrelated to state-level differences in far-right voting.<sup>30</sup> This evidence suggests that while postindustrialism may lay the basis for far-right successes, it is not a sufficient condition for them. A population may be wealthy and lack traditional attachments, yet not give the far right significant shares of the vote.

### *Postmaterialism and Left-Libertarian Politics*

Perhaps postindustrialism causes far-right successes through a different mechanism: by giving rise to left-libertarian movements which trigger a far-right backlash in the population. Table 1a shows two

indicators of left-libertarianism: the proportion of post-secondary students (1990) and the largest green party electoral success in the state before 1992.<sup>31</sup> Students in universities and other institutions of post-secondary education are frequent participants in ecological or feminist protests<sup>32</sup>; green parties are a good indicator of left-libertarian politics because they depend on voters with post-materialist values and also help to promote left-libertarian issues through parliamentary initiatives, government participation, and support for protests.<sup>33</sup> The differences between the groups of far-right successes and failures on these factors show a slight correlation, but there are also major overlaps between the groups and differences within them. For example, green parties did much better in Hessen than in Schleswig-Holstein, but the far right's relative performance has been reversed in these two outlying cases. The group of successes contains three (largely rural) states with below-average student shares, and three (highly urban) states which score very high on that variable. The far right's stronghold in Baden-Württemberg is unexceptional on both these variables. Nor does the green vote share in the previous or current election correlate with far-right votes across election districts within states, for example in West Berlin (1989), Schleswig-Holstein (1992), and Baden-Württemberg (1992).<sup>34</sup>

### *Objective Economic and Social Problems*

If developments associated with prosperity cannot explain far-right successes in Germany, then perhaps the downside of economic development can. Compared with other voters, far-right voters are much more likely to be "modernization losers": young males with low incomes and little education who hold manual jobs or apprenticeships.<sup>35</sup> Those groups are most strongly affected by structural unemployment and economic uncertainty, and most likely to see themselves in competition with foreigners for scarce resources, such as jobs.

Yet at the state level, indicators of material grievances—such as high unemployment and crime rates or housing shortages—are at most weakly related to far-right success (see Table 1b). In western Germany, the groups of success and failure cases include states at the extremes in terms of unemployment and housing-market conditions. Crime shows more of a relationship with the far-right vote,

and this factor might help explain the otherwise deviant Schleswig-Holstein and Hessen cases. However, Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, key states for far-right parties, are strong counterexamples; there, low crime rates (and high church membership rates) go together with relatively high far-right voting. Moreover, while the housing surpluses in the eastern states might help explain the far right's failures there, the coexistence of those failures with high crime rates and extremely high unemployment in the east shows that the latter factors have at most limited effects on far-right chances.<sup>36</sup> Analyses at the level of election districts also fail to show a correlation of the far right's vote with unemployment, population density, or high rents.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, real economic problems do not seem to translate directly into far-right voting. Moreover, a subjective sense of anxiety or pessimism about the future also does not seem to generate support for the far right. Indeed, since 1986, one important indicator—general economic pessimism—has actually been inversely related to far-right success. Surprisingly, the REP and DVU have performed better when the public's economic expectations have been optimistic. Between January 1988 and September 1990 (a period characterized by economic optimism), these parties did well in four out of six state elections, as well as in the 1989 European Parliamentary election. Conversely, between January 1986 and December 1987, and again between late 1990 and late 1992 (two periods in which the electorate was economically pessimistic), the far right performed well in only five out of thirteen state elections.<sup>38</sup>

### *Immigration*

In order to gauge the possible influence of immigration on far-right success, I have examined data on foreign residents—mostly guest workers from southern and south-eastern Europe—in terms of both their share of the population and their rate of absolute increase since the early 1980s (Table 1b). The results show a weak relationship between immigrant shares and far-right success in western Germany (see Table 1b). Although the average foreign share for the group of states with relative successes (10.1 percent) is higher than for the group with relative failures in western Germany (8.2 percent), there are major exceptions. Schleswig-Holstein has a very low

foreign population share, while Hessen and North-Rhine Westphalia are well above average on this factor. The picture within states is also mixed; while in Baden-Württemberg and Schleswig-Holstein the far-right vote was correlated strongly with the distribution of non-German and Muslim populations, there was no such correlation in West Berlin.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, changes in foreign populations during the late 1980s and early 1990s show no relationship to far-right success, a fact which is underscored if the eastern states are included in the analysis.

If we examine asylum seekers specifically rather than all foreigners, we find even less of a relationship with far-right successes. Asylum seekers have been present in all the German states in rough proportion to their total populations because of redistributions arranged by the Federal Agency for Refugees,<sup>40</sup> and hence their presence cannot explain differences in far-right successes across states. Indeed, asylum seekers made up only a small share of the foreign population in Germany, but negative political attention since the mid-1980s focused on them rather than on guest workers or ethnic German resettlers.

### *Summary*

The socioeconomic theses receive only limited support from this analysis.<sup>41</sup> Some state cases conform well to the expected pattern: in the three northern city-states and Rheinland-Palatinate, at least eight of the ten causal factors vary in the manner expected. But other cases, including the most important ones for the far right, confound the socioeconomic analysis. In Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, and Schleswig-Holstein, most of the indicators point away from far-right success and very few point toward it, while in Hessen most of the indicators would not predict the state-level failure of the far right. The socioeconomic factors fail utterly to account for the far-right successes in regional elections in the two populous southern states which have been the most important bases of the far right in national elections. At the same time, other cases—such as Lower Saxony, North-Rhine Westphalia, the Saar, and the five eastern states—do not support most of the socioeconomic theses, and the factors these cases support differ from state to state.

#### **4. The National Debate on the Right to Asylum**

A primary political explanation of far-right successes and failures in Germany has been the rise and fall of the asylum issue.<sup>42</sup> According to this argument, the established parties made the asylum issue highly visible at the same time that they appeared unable to resolve it. Partly as a result, about three-fourths of the population came to regard most asylum seekers as economic refugees who were abusing Article 16, and the asylum right as one of the most important political problems from 1991 to 1993.<sup>43</sup> When the issue had a high public profile, some of these voters turned to the REP or DVU, which had made asylum and foreigners their main campaign themes.

This is a plausible explanation. In Germany as in most European Union countries, large minorities or majorities are at least mildly hostile toward foreigners and favor more restrictive government policies toward them.<sup>44</sup> By raising the issue in national debates, politicians increase its importance in elections, and thus aid parties whose public positions are closer to the large block of voters who find government immigration policies too liberal. Therefore, the debates on asylum policies formed an aspect of the far right's "political opportunity structure"<sup>45</sup> which is sufficiently variable, influential, and long-lived to potentially account for the many far-right electoral successes and failures. Already in the early 1980s, conservative politicians critical of generous asylum rights achieved legislation which placed restrictions on asylum seekers and thereby attempted to deter "economic refugees." The restrictions included requiring asylum seekers to live in hostels, barring them from employment, granting them social-assistance payments in kind rather than cash, and requiring visas for entry from certain countries.<sup>46</sup> Beginning in 1986, demands grew for the more far-reaching step of amending Article 16 in order to restrict rights of judicial review for many asylum seekers; in May 1993, Article 16a of the Basic Law finally passed. During the 1991/93 campaign for the amendment, the percentage of western Germans who viewed asylum seekers and other foreigners as one of the two most important problems remained very high. This proportion varied between 40 and 80 percent, and it rose and fell slightly after the national asylum debate rose and fell.<sup>47</sup> Among REP voters in 1993, the most commonly mentioned problem concerned asylum seekers



and foreigners (57 percent of REP voters); these voters were even more preoccupied with these issues than was the average voter in this survey.<sup>48</sup>

Those who argue that the asylum issue affected far-right voting have focused on the national level of this controversy.<sup>49</sup> But anti-asylum politics originated mostly at the state and local levels rather than among national politicians. In the long run, the national asylum debate was strongly shaped by what the CSU in Bavaria and the CDU in Baden-Württemberg perceived to be their electoral needs. They sought to retain absolute majorities in state parliaments by holding onto right-wing voters. Hence, beginning in the early 1980s, these parties used the asylum issue in their states and repeatedly sparked campaigns for asylum restrictions at the federal level (typically through Bundesrat initiatives).<sup>50</sup> In the short term, state election results (West Berlin, January 1989; Bremen, September 1991; Baden-Württemberg and Schleswig-Holstein, April 1992) and local mobilizations with national resonance (the anti-foreigner riots at Hoyerswerda, September 1991, and at Rostock, August 1992) strengthened the anti-asylum position of the southern states in the national asylum debate.

It is thus useful to distinguish between two different, though possibly complementary, arguments. One holds that the asylum debate among national politicians influenced state-level election results, perhaps with state election campaigns as an intervening variable. The alternative view, which receives support in Sections 5 and 6, is that state politics generated national campaigns for asylum restrictions—and these campaigns in turn influenced both state election results and the national political debate.

An examination of national daily newspaper coverage<sup>51</sup> and far-right results in state elections between 1986 and 1997 shows that the national asylum debate is only somewhat useful for explaining far-right successes and failures in the states. The national asylum debate was relatively strong during Autumn 1986, Spring 1989, Autumn 1990, Autumn 1991, Spring 1992, and between Fall 1992 and late Spring 1993.<sup>52</sup> The prominence of the national debate on asylum can explain some important successes which were not adequately accounted for by socioeconomic variables—Bavaria in 1986, Baden-Württemberg and Schleswig-Holstein in 1992—and the lulls in the

debate can help explain the failure of the far right in Hessen in 1987, 1991, and 1995. Indeed, when the asylum issue was being debated and the issue was salient for a large share of the West German public, the far right did well (obtaining 3.5 percent or more of the vote) in five out of six elections; the only failure was Hamburg in 1986, before the Republikaner or DVU began campaigning there.

But this analysis also shows that the presence of a national debate on asylum was not necessary for most far-right successes. During periods in which the asylum issue did not have national prominence, the far right still succeeded about one-third of the time, in thirteen out of thirty-six state elections.<sup>53</sup> Six of these elections were held before the major asylum debates of 1991/93 (Bremen, Baden-Württemberg, Berlin, the Saar, and Bavaria). The other seven elections occurred after the constitutional amendment passed, and four of them were held in states where the far right had done well before 1991 (in all the above-named states but the Saar). In the remainder of the article, I will argue that state-level election campaigns on immigration-related issues account for these cases of far-right success more reliably than other political phenomena such as mainstream party convergence or political alienation.

## **5. Immigration Politics in the States**

### *Baden-Württemberg*

The dramatic 1992 and 1996 successes of the Republikaner in Baden-Württemberg were preceded, as in Bavaria, by a decade of repeated political mobilization against foreigners. Already in 1988, at a time of little national interest in asylum, anti-asylum politics in the state led to a total of 3.1 percent of the vote for the main far-right parties. The issue was politicized first by the state-level CDU (in the 1980 election and in later years), and then by the NPD and REP (from 1988 onward). In the 1980 state election campaign, the Baden-Württemberg government led by Lothar Späth (CDU) permitted incoming Ethiopian asylum seekers to be crowded into Stuttgart and the community of Leinfelden, and used the press attention on the circumstances to blame the SPD-FDP federal government for permitting too many refugees to enter the country.<sup>54</sup> Despite the major

publicity, the issue did not register with many voters that year; only 4 percent of them considered asylum rights to be the most important issue facing the state (fifth out of five issues in the survey), and the NPD gained only 0.2 percent of the vote.<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, the CDU in this state, with an absolute majority in parliament until 1992, pursued a distinctively restrictive policy toward asylum seekers throughout the 1980s. The party introduced work bans, cut welfare payments, required residence in group shelters, and pushed in the Bundesrat for similar legislation for all of West Germany.<sup>56</sup>

In the March 1988 elections, two years after the first mild REP success in Bavaria (3 percent), the asylum issue again gained some importance in Baden-Württemberg. In the election campaign itself, the issue was introduced largely by the NPD ("Germany for the Germans"), which capitalized on the heightened profile of the asylum issue in late 1987 and outscored the REP by 2.1 percent to 1 percent. The Republikaner concentrated more on reunification than on "foreigners," but the latter issue was more interesting to voters; 30 percent of voters (and 40 percent of CDU and FDP supporters) considered "limiting the number of foreigners" to be important. Far-right voters linked their votes to the foreigners issue. While the combined vote of all small far-right parties totaled 4.5 percent in this election, the only issue on which more than 2 percent of the voters found a far-right party to be the most competent party was "limiting the number of foreigners" (6 percent of all voters).<sup>57</sup>

The April 1992 elections in Baden-Württemberg—in which the REP obtained 10.9 percent of the vote—were preceded by a similar pattern of anti-foreigner campaigning benefiting the far right; this time, however, the campaigning was more intense and the far-right enjoyed a great success. During this election campaign, both the Republikaner and CDU in the state made asylum the top issue; moreover, this election occurred during a fairly heated period of the national asylum debate. Baden-Württemberg voters as a whole named asylum/foreigners (43 percent) and housing (26 percent) as their main concerns, and even higher shares of REP voters (75 percent and 32 percent respectively) named these issues as top concerns.<sup>58</sup> Republikaner voters, most of whom came from the CDU's electorate, were especially dissatisfied with "asylum abuse" and the housing market. Across Germany, housing issues were often linked explicitly or

implicitly to asylum seekers, since government efforts to house them in hostels, private apartments, or hotels were highly publicized in tabloid newspapers and weekly news magazines. Voters in Baden-Württemberg were unhappy about the asylum issue specifically, rather than being generally alienated from the established parties on a wide range of issues; about 20 percent said that none of those parties was competent on asylum policy, while only 10 to 13 percent said this about five other issues on which they were queried.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, the pattern was repeated in March 1996, when the REP's surprising success in this state (9 percent) followed a campaign by the SPD's Prime-Minister candidate Dieter Spöri in which he demanded limitations on ethnic German resettlers.<sup>60</sup> Non-Germans and asylum comprised the third most important issue for all voters, and the second most important issue for REP voters, behind only the dominant issue of unemployment.<sup>61</sup>

### *Hessen*

Hessen, like Berlin, was a site of strong anti-immigration mobilization in the 1980s, but the major parties in Hessen have so far avoided major successes by the far right in *Landtag* elections. In 1980, Frankfurt mayor Walter Wallmann (CDU) ran a strongly anti-foreigner local election campaign. Relatively large numbers of asylum seekers entered Hessen through the Frankfurt airport during a surge in applications during 1980, and Wallmann responded by moving groups of Ethiopian and Afghani asylum seekers from Hessen to Bavaria as part of a conflict with the SPD-led federal government. The asylum issue again played a role in Wallman's successful mayoral campaign in 1985.<sup>62</sup>

Immigration issues have remained at the local level in Hessen, however, largely because the timing of state elections has been unfavorable to these issues. The April 1987 election occurred during a major lull in the national asylum debate, and consequently neither the REP nor the NPD fielded large numbers of candidates. In the January 1991 state election, the asylum issue ranked eighth in an open-ended survey question about the most important political problems, reflecting the national preoccupation with unification and the Gulf War at this time; the REP gained only 1.7 percent of the vote.<sup>63</sup> In 1995, two years after the constitutional amendment passed,

only 8 percent of Hessen voters considered asylum an important issue, and the REP vote share stagnated at 2 percent.<sup>64</sup>

Conditions were more favorable for the far right in Hessen's local elections, which occurred at times when national debates on asylum issues were strong. In 1989 and 1993, this combination led to dramatic successes for the NPD, which had unusually strong organizations in the state.<sup>65</sup> In March 1989—two months after the Republikaner's surprise Berlin success (7.5 percent) and during a peak in the national asylum debate—the NPD gained 3.1 percent in Hessen's larger cities, and a shocking 6.6 percent in Frankfurt; the Hessen CDU's tradition of anti-foreigner politics at the local level did not immunize it against large losses to the far right in this election. Exactly four years later, local elections were held again, this time a few months after the height of the national debate on Article 16. In this election, the REP led the far right to a total of 10.6 percent in Hessen's larger cities, 9 percent in the counties, and 13 to 15 percent in Frankfurt, Wiesbaden, and Offenbach; the SPD suffered large losses.<sup>66</sup>

#### *A Brief Survey of Other Far-Right Successes*<sup>67</sup>

A brief survey of some other state-level far-right successes suggests a strong correlation between such successes and the use of immigration-related issues in campaigns. In the immediate wake of a perceived national-level asylum crisis in Summer 1986, the REP had its first modest success (3 percent) in the Bavarian election of October 1986.<sup>68</sup> However, when the five following state election campaigns did not focus on immigration issues, the far right failed to win even 1 percent of the vote in them.

In September 1987, however, the Bremen election initiated a brief period in which far-right parties managed to create their own publicity while promoting the anti-immigration cause. The *Liste D* (which later became the DVU) gained 3.4 percent of the vote in Bremen that year, and its 5.4 percent in the Bremerhaven electoral district allowed the party to enter the Bremen city-state parliament. The DVU's success depended on spending more on campaign advertising than the two major parties combined, and using the advertising to spread a blatantly anti-foreigner message.<sup>69</sup> Next, in January 1989, soon after the 1988 Baden-Württemberg election discussed above, the REP had

its first major success: returns of 7.5 percent in West Berlin. In this campaign, the party benefited from free publicity in the news media because of an unsuccessful court challenge (against a strongly anti-foreigner television ad used by the REPs) and a left-wing counter-demonstration at which protesters clashed with police.<sup>70</sup>

In the following year, the established parties went on the offensive with regards to immigration-related issues. In the Saar's January 1990 election, the REP gained 3.3 percent of the vote by capitalizing on a confusing variety of immigration issues made salient with the help of Minister-President Lafontaine (SPD), who called for limits on the influx of resettlers and eastern Germans.<sup>71</sup> Later that year, the REP nearly won parliamentary seats in Bavaria (with 4.9 percent of the vote) after the CSU had run a strong campaign for asylum restrictions, which included the introduction of Bundesrat legislation earlier in the year; moreover, the REP had made competition from foreigners for jobs and housing its main issue in the campaign.<sup>72</sup> During the rest of 1990 and through mid-1991, however, the asylum issue lost ground to unification-related issues nationally and in most states, and far-right parties gained 2 percent or less in ten other state elections; the only exception was the REP's 3.1 percent in Berlin (December 1990), which faintly echoed the party's strong showing less than two years earlier.

From mid-1991 through 1995, the correlation between the national asylum issue and far-right successes was strong. The far right did very well (7.5 percent to 11 percent of the vote) in all four state elections which were held during the national debate on amending Article 16, even though in each case the established party in government tried to preempt the far right by taking a strongly anti-asylum stance: the SPD in Bremen (September 1991), Schleswig-Holstein (April 1992), and Hamburg (September 1993), and the CDU in Baden-Württemberg (April 1992). After the passage of the constitutional amendment to Article 16 in May 1993, the asylum issue declined and it has remained unimportant for voters on the national level and in most states. For the first few years after the amendment passed, the far right did poorly, getting less than 3 percent of the vote in ten of the next twelve elections through the end of 1995; the only bright spots for the far right were mild successes in Lower Saxony (3.9 percent in March 1994) and again in Bavaria (4 percent in September 1994).

But as the importance of immigration-related issues rose again, so did the fortunes of the far-right parties. In the months before three state-level elections in March 1996, many federal and state politicians spoke out in favor of limiting the influx of refugees and ethnic German resettlers.<sup>73</sup> In those elections, the far-right parties then enjoyed mild or strong successes, including 3.9 percent in Rheinland-Palatinate, where they had been unsuccessful since the 1960s, and 9.1 percent in Baden-Württemberg (only a small drop since the previous high in 1992). Finally, the far right's combined 6.8 percent of the vote in Hamburg (September 1997) followed a campaign by federal SPD leader Gerhard Schröder and Hamburg Mayor Hennig Voscherau (SPD) in favor of deporting "criminal foreigners";<sup>74</sup> the far right narrowly missed gaining parliamentary representation because the vote was divided between the DVU and REP.

A more systematic examination<sup>75</sup> of the links between campaigns, voter opinion, and election results also strongly supports the immigration issue-voting thesis. In sixteen elections for which I have analyzed the content of state campaigns, the connection is strong: the twelve cases in which immigration issues were politicized experienced far-right successes, while four elections without such politicization brought failure for the far right. Furthermore, data on issue salience supports the view that far-right voters became especially concerned with the immigration issues raised in the campaigns. Of twenty-five elections for which information on issue salience is available, the relationship with this variable is very strong; eighteen out of nineteen elections during which immigration issues ranked among voters' top four concerns resulted in far-right successes;<sup>76</sup> five out of six elections with low salience for these issues led to far-right failures.<sup>77</sup> The same process also accounts for the REP failures in the 1990 and 1994 Bundestag elections, at which times the asylum issue had dropped dramatically out of national campaigns and out of voters' awareness. Similarly, the REP success in the May 1989 European Parliament elections (71 percent) came at a time when their surprising gains in the West Berlin election had spurred a CDU-CSU campaign to limit asylum rights.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, the issue-voting thesis is also supported by Jürgen Falter's findings about REP voters in 1993. Asylum seekers and foreigners were identified as problems by 57 percent of REP voters, making this their top concern, compared with 36 percent of all voters. More-

over, REP voters were much more likely than other voters to harbor right-wing views on foreigners, asylum seekers, nationalism, the Nazi dictatorship, and Jews.<sup>79</sup>

## **6. The Political Origins of Anti-Immigration Politics**

What are the origins of the politicization of immigration issues in state elections? First, while the presence of relatively large numbers of guest workers and asylum seekers may have been a necessary precursor to this politicization, it was clearly not solely responsible for it (see Section 3). Many states with large numbers of immigrants have had few or no far-right successes. To some extent, however, the location of the asylum issue's emergence reflects short-term differences in the locations of asylum seekers. Authorities in Frankfurt and West Berlin spoke out publicly for restricting the right to asylum in the early and mid-1980s, a period in which these cities had large influxes of asylum seekers via the Frankfurt airport and East Berlin respectively. Typically, several months passed before the new arrivals were redistributed to other states. Similarly, authorities in Bremen in the 1980s pursued liberal policies which attracted a disproportionate number of asylum seekers; this situation in turn encouraged the DVU to campaign against foreigners in 1987, which helped generate a policy backlash by the SPD in 1991.<sup>80</sup>

The construction of immigration issues has also depended on political interventions. At times, the ways in which state authorities distributed asylum seekers to local governments generated opposition from municipalities, citizens groups, and skinheads, resulting in publicity beneficial to the far-right parties. For example, asylum seekers were moved into the eastern states in 1991, where they were especially prone to attacks by right-wing skinheads; the publicity resulting from these attacks helped fuel the national asylum debate.<sup>81</sup>

Second, the politicization of immigration issues in election campaigns was often carried out jointly by mainstream politicians at the state and federal levels; on many occasions however the initiative came from the states. In some states, the far right had its biggest successes during or soon after peaks in the national asylum debate (e.g. Bremen, September 1991 and Baden-Württemberg, April 1992), and the national debate at times encouraged state-level asylum debates