Populism, social media and the German elections

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O n September 24th, the far right-wing populist Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) exceeded the projections and won 12.6% of the vote in Germany's parliamentary elections. It has now become the first far-right party to sit in the Bundestag since 1961.[1] This victory follows in the wake of recent elections in the Netherlands and in France where populists also made a significant impact at the expense of traditional political parties.

The AfD did not win this success overnight but rather built up to it over the past four years. In the 2013 elections, the party just missed the 5% threshold for entering the Bundestag by 0.3 percentage points, and this latest result puts it only slightly ahead of Germany's three other minor parties in Bundestag representation.[2] The party's success in these elections does not mean that populism has taken control of German politics. It is still a minor party in a system dominated by two major parties, despite their recent losses.

Yet the AfD's performance does provide an opportunity to re-examine our conceptions of how populism operates in European politics. The German elections offer several specific insights into populism, including how times of crisis can make voters more susceptible to populist communications, what role do fake news and social bots play and how populists are using social media. They were particularly illuminating with respect to this latter question, to which this commentary devotes special attention.

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[1] Elected in the first West German parliamentary elections in 1949, the Deutsche Partei, which expressed support for nationalist positions, was a minor member of Konrad Adenauer's governing coalition until 1960. The party left the Bundestag after the 1961 elections.

[2] The FDP won 10.7%, die Linke 9.2% and die Grünen 8.9% of the vote respectively. (www.bundeswahlleiter.de/info/presse/mitteilungen/bundestagswahl-2017/32_17_vorlaeufiges_ergebnis.html).

Priming for populist messaging

The first lesson the German election presents about populism is the power of political and economic crises for priming voters to respond positively to populist communications. The AfD arose in response to the eurozone crisis and its popularity skyrocketed after the migrant crisis in 2015. The latter crisis and anger at Angela Merkel's refugee policy remain the driving forces behind the AfD's success.

Populism, as defined by Cas Mudde, sees politics as a battle between the "corrupt" elite and the "pure" people.[3] It claims that politicians and other elites become corrupt when they act against the will of the people.

Merkel's response to the migrant crisis provides a textbook example of this dynamic in action. Her unpopular decision to allow over one million refugees into Germany convinced a significant share of voters that she no longer served their interests. Enter the AfD and its promise to protect the interests of the 'man in the street' by opposing Merkel's migrant policy.

Without the migrant crisis, it is doubtful that the AfD would have performed as well as it did in this election. European leaders should take note and prepare for populist surges as likely the fallout of future economic and political crises.

Fake news and social bots

Another popular explanation for the success of populist parties is social bots and fake news.

One of the largest stories to come out of the US 2016 presidential election was the rise of fake news. In the key battleground state of Michigan, Twitter users shared fake news just as frequently as professional news in the week preceding the election.[4] Fake news, often originating from social bots meant to augment support for particular candidates or ideas, also tends to support populist politicians over more traditional candidates.

European governments took note and expressed the fear in every major European election this year that Russian-backed social bots would attempt to influence the outcome in favour of populist candidates. Germany was no exception. Chancellor Merkel held numerous meetings with top government officials to ensure the election's integrity, and in June the Bundestag passed a law that imposed serious financial penalties on social media sites that failed to delete illegal content or fake news within 24 hours of its posting.[5] Facebook itself resolved in the spring to be more proactive about taking down fake news shared on the site.[6]

In the end, social bots and fake news did not play a large role in the German election. For each piece of fake news shared on German social media accounts before the election, German users shared four times

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[3] Cas Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist", *Government and Opposition,* Vol. 39, No. 4, Autumn 2004.

[4] Lisa-Maria Neudert, Bence Kollanyi and Philip N. Howard, "Junk News and Bots during the German Parliamentary Election: What are German Voters Sharing over Twitter?", Data Memo 2017.7. Oxford, UK: Project on Computational Propaganda (comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk).

[5] Gesetz zur Verbesserung der Rechtsdurchsetzung in sozialen Netzwerken (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz – NetzDG), 30 June 2017 (www.bundesrat.de/SharedDocs/drucksachen/2017/0501-0600/536-17.pdf?__blob= publicationFile&v=1).

[6] Andrew Rettman, "Facebook helping Germany to stop Russian meddling", *EU Observer,* 22 September 2017 (https://euobserver.com/elections/139110).

that number of professional news articles.[7] Social bots also played a relatively small role. The new law's role in this outcome, if any, is yet unclear.

Social bots and fake news are new players in political elections, but their potential to limit voters' opinions is significant. Little doubt exists that attempts were made to disseminate fake news in the German election, and the sharing of fake news spiked the weekend of the voting. Nevertheless, the AfD secured its record success without the sustained flow of fake news seen in other elections. Politicians should continue to work against the influence of social bots and fake news in elections. But they should not expect this to cause a corresponding drop in populists' electoral fortunes until the key issue of voters' resentment of liberal cosmopolitanism is addressed.

Populist politicians on social media

The final lesson to be taken from the German elections is the importance of populism on social media. The AfD may have taken third place in the election, but it won first place in the social media race. The party has more than twice the number of Facebook followers as the CDU, SPD or FDP. Die Linke, a party with its own populist tendencies, has the second-most popular Facebook page among German political parties, yet even it has 140,000 fewer followers than the AfD's page. The size of a page's following does not necessarily indicate support for the party's ideas, but the AfD also performs relatively better than mainstream German political parties in 'Key Performance Indicators' such as likes, comments, and shares of posts.[8] These indicators are used to evaluate a page's popularity on social media and to estimate the size of the audience the page's postings reach.

The AfD's use of social media set it apart from other parties in the German elections and allowed it to create an image of direct communication with voters. Over the summer it faced numerous scandals. One lead candidate, Alice Weidel, was accused of describing immigrants as "non-people", and another lead candidate, Alexander Gauland, said that Germany should be "proud" of its soldiers' accomplishments in the First and Second World Wars. While these scandals could have damaged the AfD's campaign, they gave the party another opportunity to spread its message. As the scandals piled up in the final month of the campaign, the AfD stepped up its rhetoric, especially through its social media channels, alleging that mainstream media outlets were treating it unfairly. The party thus used its scandals to further the populist narrative that Germany's elite was working against average Germans.

Social media alone did not lead the AfD to its victory. A linkage between engagement on social media and votes cast is notoriously difficult to determine. What is clear is that the AfD was able to engage many more Germans on social media than its competitors. This success stems at least partially from social media's inherent disposition to populist-style communication. Social media allow populist politicians and political parties to circumvent a country's 'elite' media and political structures and speak directly to voters. It is thus particularly useful for populists who need to claim that they have legitimate connections with the people and represent their will.

Had AfD voters been more satisfied with the performance of mainstream parties, they would not have been as susceptible to the AfD's populist use of social media. Exit polling on Sunday found that only 31% of AfD voters had supported the party out of genuine excitement about its ideas; meanwhile, 60% supported the party to protest other political parties. The reverse was true for all parties besides the AfD. The frustration that AfD voters felt with mainstream parties, largely for their response to the migrant

[7] Lisa-Maria Neudert, Bence Kollanyi and Philip N. Howard, "Junk News and Bots during the German Parliamentary Election: What are German Voters Sharing over Twitter?" Data Memo 2017.7, Project on Computational Propaganda, Oxford (comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk).

[8] Paul-Jasper Dittrich, "Social Networks and Populism in the EU: Four Things You Should Know", Jacques Delors Institute, Paris, 2017 (www.delorsinstitute.eu/011-25174-Social-Networks-and-Populism-in-the-EU-Comparative-Study.html).

crisis, primed them to be favourably predisposed to the types of messages the AfD crafted on its social media accounts.

The low level of support for the AfD's ideas shows that there is still ample opportunity for Europe's mainstream parties to win their voters back. At the same time, Europe's mainstream political parties need to recognise that populists' advantage on social media will only increase as sites such as Facebook and Twitter become increasingly popular. To win back voters, mainstream parties should work to diminish that advantage by using social media platforms to communicate that they recognise voters' concerns while also countering populists' arguments by emphasising the benefits that migrants and multiculturalism can bring to their countries.

Conclusions

The AfD's success in this election creates just as many questions as it answers. Whether the party will be able to maintain internal cohesion now that it sits in the Bundestag is questionable, especially following Frauke Petry's announcement that she is leaving and will instead serve as an independent MP. This election has shown that populist communications benefit from voters being primed by periods of crisis and that populist parties can succeed without significant help from social bots and fake news. It has also shown how populists are using social media to circumvent traditional structures to connect directly with voters. Europe's mainstream should take heed and devote increased attention to the mechanisms of populist communication.