

Analysis

Which social spaces for far-right parties? A comparative electoral analysis in France and Germany

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Within the “popular classes”, the gender attributes that characterise the workers who vote for the far-right were analysed. By “popular classes” we mean the respondents who defined themselves as “Clerks and skilled service employees” or “Industrial skilled employees” or “Less skilled employees” when we asked their socio-professional category.

Data basis: In 2017, the year of the last two national elections, these two parties achieved particularly high results: 12.6% for the AfD in the last German federal election and 21.3% for the RN (called *Front National* at the time of the election) led by Marine le Pen in the last French presidential election.

The paper builds on the analysis of data collected through a European survey conducted in 2019 in France, Germany, Spain and Greece. The outcome of the survey is a dataset comprising four samples of about 8,000 (approximately 2,000 for each country) working age respondents who voted in at least one election. In our data, women represent 59% of the French cohort, while in reality they represent 52% of the French population [1]. Students and retirees are not part of the data set, which could explain the relative over representation of the electoral results of far-right parties. When we asked “Which party did you vote for in the most recent national elections?” 14.6% of German respondents answered AfD, while 24.1% answered Marine Le Pen (RN).

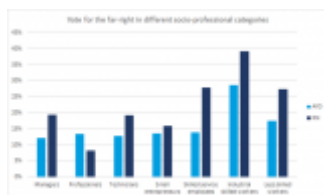
The socio-professional categories were based on the European Socio-economic Groups (ESeG) standard.

1. Labour conditions and support for the far-right

Although there are some common dynamics linking the AfD and RN electorates, such as the general over-representation of the “popular classes” compared to the “upper classes”, the two electorates differ in terms of contractual stability. AfD voters are mostly salaried, with permanent contracts and full-time jobs. In addition, the AfD has a somewhat homogeneous success among all socio-professional categories. The RN electorate, on the other hand, is more often unemployed, or on

fixed-term contracts. It consists more of self-employed and part-time workers. In addition, the RN is not able to penetrate specific sectors of the upper classes, such as the intellectual professions.

The AfD is in fact equally represented across all socio-professional categories, from the working classes to the upper classes without being underrepresented in any of them as compared to its average score. AfD is the most voted party among the German skilled workers (28%) and the second most voted party among the unskilled wage earners (17%). The RN has a different dynamic. It achieves a high score in the working classes (39% skilled workers, 27% employed, 27% unskilled workers), but is under-represented and more discontinuous among the upper classes, with a collapse among the intellectual professions (8%) slightly increasing among managers (19%) and technicians (19%).



This difference probably stems from the fact that at the time of its foundation the AfD, the so-called “party of professors” had a market-liberal agenda (Arzheimer 2015), attracting voters from the upper classes who moved toward the far-right party. In addition, other studies show that AfD has managed to achieve widespread electoral support in all socio-economic categories (from self-employed to blue collars) without any difference (Spies et. al 2017). However, our analysis shows a trend of greater support of AfD among the popular classes.

Instead, we can explain the dynamics of the RN vote on the basis of the model already proposed by Daniel Oesch according to which, especially in France, where the tripartition of the electorate between left, center-right and far-right is more evident than in other European countries, the far-right fails to recover votes among the intellectual professions, but competes with the Left for working class voters and with the Right for managerial executives and small entrepreneurs (Oesch, Rennwal 2017).

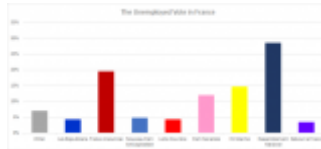
A strong distinction between AfD and RN comes from the participation of the currently employed voters and unemployed voters. In fact, the AfD electorate is composed of 91.8% currently employed voters and 8.2% unemployed voters. This composition differs from RN electorate, which consists of only 83.7% currently employed voters and 16.3% unemployed voters.

This difference can be explained by the generally lower level of unemployment in Germany as compared to France[2] and is confirmed even if we look at the percentage of support for far-right parties within the unemployed population.

In fact in Germany, the only parties that are overrepresented within this population are SPD and Die Linke (19% and 18% respectively), while AfD remains stable at 13%. In France, on the other hand, we observe the competition between the two radical poles. On the one hand, RN obtains 28% of the votes among the unemployed voters, 4% higher than its total result. On the other hand, La France Insoumise with 19% of the votes among the unemployed voters, 2% higher than its total result. It should be noted that even the small parties of the far-left are largely over-represented among the unemployed voters in France (*Lutte Ouvrière* 4%, *Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste* 5%).



FDP: *Free Democratic Party (Freie Demokratische Partei)* – EP affiliation: *Renew Europe* (liberals), **CSU:** *Christian Social Union (Christlich Soziale Union)* – **EPP** (conservative), **Die Linke:** *The Left* – GUE/NGL (radical left) **SPD:** *Social Democratic Party of Germany (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands)* – **S&D** (social democrats), **CDU:** *Christian Democratic Union of Germany (Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands)* – **EPP** (conservative);



Les Républicains – EP affiliation: **EPP** (*conservative*), **France Insoumise** – GUE/NGL (radical left), **Nouveau Parti Anticapitaliste** (radical left), **Lutte Ouvrière** (radical left), **Parti Socialiste** – **S&D** (social democrats), **En Marche** – *Renew Europe* (liberals), **Rassemblement National** – *Identity and Democracy* (far right), **Debout la France** – *European Conservatives and Reformists* (right wing);

Contractual status: the AfD electorate is the most homogeneous in comparison with other German electorates, having a strong participation of permanent workers. In fact, 88% of AfD voters have a permanent contract and only 7% have a fixed-term contract. Only SPD, although to a slightly lesser extent, has a similar degree of homogeneity with regard to permanent contracts. We find the same trend in France, where the RN electorate consists of 81% workers with permanent contracts and 11% workers with fixed-term contracts. If we look inversely at the vote for the two parties within the precarious population, we see that both AfD and RN are under-represented within the electorate with fixed-term contracts (10% for AfD and 19% for RN respectively). In fact, most of these voters support left-wing positions (Hamon and Mélenchon in France, Greens in Germany). The tendency of the electorate with fixed-term contracts to support radical left-wing parties or green parties has already been theorized by academic literature. Paul Marx affirms that precarious voters are more in favor of the redistribution and welfare policies supported by these parties. Moreover, Paul Marx affirms that there are determinants of holding temporary contracts, such as being a female, young or migrant worker, which therefore contribute to undermining the vote of these groups towards the far-right (Marx 2015).

Self-employed and paid-employed voters: First of all, it should be pointed out that in Germany the proportion of paid-employed voters is higher than in France. The AfD is composed of 65.5% paid-employed voters and 34.5% self-employed voters. The paid-employed voters are better represented in the AfD than in the other electorates (with the exception of the SPD). The RN, on the other hand, follows the national proportions exactly, 45% independent voters and 55% paid-employed voters respectively.

Even with regard to the **ratio between full-time and part-time workers**, two different trends appear in Germany and France between the two far-right parties. The AfD electorate is composed of 71.6% full-time workers and only 28.4% part-time workers (the lowest percentage among German big parties). In France, the opposite dynamic can be observed: 56.9% of the RN is made up of full-time workers and 43.1% of part-time workers (the highest percentage among the major French parties).

2. Support for far-right parties inside the working-class

To better understand the dynamics of far-right support inside working classes, we will look at what divides this population concerning **contractual precariousness**. Indeed, working classes' political behavior differs significantly according to qualification, field of activity or type of job (Peugny 2015). Working with a contract where the respondent feels "exposed to the international competition" has ambiguous effects depending on the country. In France, unexposed permanent contract among working classes is correlated with voting for RN: 32% of working classes holding that type of contract vote for Le Pen's party (29% among French working classes). In Germany, an exposed permanent contract tends to lead more towards AfD voting because 19% of German working classes with such a contract give their vote to the far-right party (15,5% among German working classes on average).

Precariousness corresponds to a state of uncertainty, be it financially, psychologically or professionally derived. Thus, the fear of losing one's job or some part of one's income in the future conveys a state of precariousness. The two far-right parties attract different parts of the working classes based on their feelings toward the future. AfD reaches 17,5% among those who agree that they will lose their job in the coming years (15,5% among German working classes). In France there is no overrepresentation of RN among the anxious groups. RN voters seem in fact to be quite optimistic for the future: those who believe that they will probably lose their job in the future are only 24% to vote for RN. Our data about contractual status show working-class RN vote doesn't rely on a fear for the future contrary to the working-class AfD electorate (to some extent).

Although RN voters seem to be confident in their professional future, they differ from AfD voters concerning their capacity to make ends meet. The far-right German party reaches a similar score among people who declare facing economic difficulties every month (15%) than among all German respondents. In France, RN gathers 31% of votes of those with economic difficulties every month, way more than among all French respondents (24%). Although the proportion of precarious people in AfD and RN is very high compared to other national parties, the radical left parties in both countries have the most precarious electorate. We observe that two different mechanisms exist in the working-class support for far-right parties. Because the working-class AfD electorate is doubtful about keeping the same living and working conditions in the future, far-right support might be explained partially by a fear for the future ; its authoritarian political offer represents an adequate response to their anxiety. In France, support for RN is rather based on relative deprivation (Gurr, 1970): a perception that their lifestyle is worsening compared to the unfair amelioration of lifestyle of other citizens. Indeed, they suffer, to a lesser extent, from unstable working conditions but their present living conditions are clearly degraded. As Violaine Girard described it, their perception of society is based on a distancing between their merit through effort and the perceived laziness of marginalized people (social benefits recipients and/or migrants) (Girard, 2017).

Precariousness at the workplace is one common aspect of far-right electorates, depreciation of one's job experience seems to structure working-class support for AfD and RN. Indeed, both parties reach high scores among people whose job leads to a feeling of alienation. Among working-class respondents who consider their job to be unrecognized, 18% vote for AfD and 34% for RN. Moreover, we can find a significant over representation of far-right parties among working-class people who describe their job as hazardous: in this cohort 31% vote for AfD in Germany and 36% for RN. Thus, as showed by a study of H. Kriesi (Kriesi 1998), contemporary far-right parties' social basis corresponds to industrial workers. The job's dangerousness makes us believe that AfD and RN succeed in attracting the part of the working-class whose working protocols are merely executant and don't require interpersonal relations. Although the lack of recognition affects the feminized field of care which often leads to the support for new-left parties, a hazardous and unrecognized job

creates the adequate disposition to vote for far-right parties. However, experiencing job devaluation only partially explains this political orientation, and this is why we should focus on the main socio-economic features that determine vote choice.

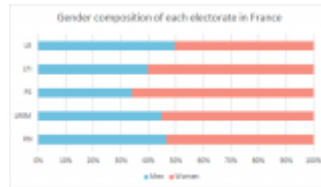
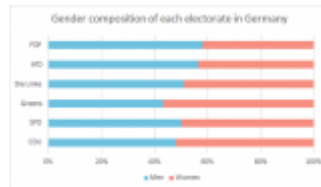
3. Socio-economic profile of far-right support

A significant aspect of contemporary far-right parties is the low **level of education** of their electorate (Oesch, 2008). Indeed, 28% of the German population has a higher-education diploma. However, the proportion of AfD voters who went to a third-level institution reaches only 15%, the lowest proportion compared to all other German electorates. Due to policies aimed at increasing post-secondary education, 54% of the French people have a third-level diploma. The holders of such level of education constitute 36% of the RN voters, here also it corresponds to the less-educated electorate. Because the labor market became more competitive, holding a low diploma means the potential loss of a job without being able to find a similar one. This factor is correlated with their executant work which requires them to follow orders and it might explain their attraction to an authoritarian political offer.

It seems that far-right voters are not civically involved and tend to be less active in associations. Among German respondents one out of two (51%) is a member of at least one association; this proportion drops to 43% among AfD voters. In France where the civil society is less developed, 42% of the French respondents are members of an association. Only 35% of RN voters are involved in such an organization. Compared to other electorates in France and Germany, AfD and RN are the parties with the least voters involved in associations. This lack of commitment depicts the possibility that anomia might lead to a political support of far-right movements (Heyder, Gaßner 2012). Voting for a populist far-right party would express, to some extent, the hope of a better structured social life (through a reinforcement of the familial sphere) that some far-right supporters have lost like the disruption of collective labour relations (Girard 2017).

Due to AfD and RN's xenophobic political offer, **respondents with migratory background** (at least one of their parents or grandparents was born in a foreign country) are underrepresented in both electorates. The proportion of respondents with foreign ancestry in Germany and in France reaches respectively 25% and 28%. Only one elector of AfD and RN out of five has a foreign parent or grandparent: those are the parties with the lowest proportion of people with a migratory background.

Gender: As usual for far-right parties, the AfD and RN electorates are mainly composed of men. While men represent 48% of the German electoral population, 57% of the AfD voters are male. The AfD is the second most masculine electorate behind the liberal party FDP (58%). In France men represent 41% of the respondents whereas 46% of RN electorate is constituted of men. Only the conservative party *Les Républicains* has a bigger proportion of men (50%) among its voters. This gender-biased trend has already been the object of sociology studies: men are relatively more present in far-right political movements like cliques and parties (Bitzan 2017) but women tend to slightly more regularly express group-focused enmity than men (Zick, Küpper, Hövermann 2011). Being a woman constitutes the most influential factor to avoid far-right vote because women distance themselves from an authoritarian hateful rhetoric and fear their sexist political action [2]. Over-representation of low-skilled industrial men can be understood as the response to the weakening of the male breadwinner model through feminisation of the labor market and fragility of traditional masculine employment (industrial company relocation).



Conclusion

In the first part, we have seen that the two electorates share some common characteristics - such as the over-representation of groups we have defined as “popular classes” : employees, industrial workers, low-skilled workers, as demonstrated by other studies (Kim 2018, Perrineau 2017). On the other hand, there are some differences regarding AfD and RN voters. AfD voters are more often employed, they have permanent jobs and are more often full-time than part-time employees. In contrast, RN voters are more often unemployed, precarious or part-time.

In the second part, we have analysed the far-right voters from the working classes. We found a difference in the perception of precariousness for these two electorates. AfD voters from the popular classes identify more as the “losers of globalisation”, starting from a situation of relative advantage over French voters, but fearing a worsening of economic conditions in the near future. On the contrary, French voters do not fear any worsening in the future, but are currently experiencing a situation of relative deprivation: they suffer to a lesser extent from unstable working conditions but their current living conditions are degraded.

Finally, we have looked at the issue of gender division in the two electorates. In both cases, men from popular classes position themselves on the far right more often than women. We could therefore contend that within the social reconfiguration of the electorate carried out by the far-right, there is a conservation of male privilege. In this sense, we can conclude that women workers from the popular classes represent a limit to the inclination of the far-right to hegemonize the popular classes and therefore that the feminist battle for the stabilization of women’s work directly helps the battle against the far-right.

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P.S.

• Transform. 02 Oct 20 :
<https://www.transform-network.net/focus/overview/article//which-social-spaces-for-far-right-parties-a-comparative-electoral-analysis-in-france-and-germany/>

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Footnotes

[1] www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/1892086

[2] RN and AfD MEPs voted against Tarabella's report in which gender equality was claimed.