



Between Socioeconomic Decline and Lack of Political Competition: What Explains the Success of the AfD in North Rhine-Westphalia's 2025 Integration Council Elections?

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Abstract The electoral success of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) in numerous municipalities during the 2025 integration council elections has drawn considerable public and media attention. Beyond the apparent paradox of immigrant voters supporting an anti-immigrant party, the substantial between-municipality variation in the AfD's performance has prompted scholarly inquiry into its underlying causes. This study examines the determinants of variations in the AfD's electoral success in the recent integration council elections. We employ indicators of structural economic grievances as explanatory factors while also examining the role of party competition from mainstream parties, which is often limited due to integration councils' minimal political power. Drawing on data from 113 municipalities in North Rhine-Westphalia, we find evidence that the AfD's electoral success is strongly associated with political opportunity factors. The AfD performs significantly better in municipalities with fewer competing mainstream parties. These findings contribute to the broader literature on immigrant voters and far-right party dynamics by demonstrating the critical role of political competition and active campaigning by democratic political parties and lists in mobilizing newly enfranchised voters for democratic politics—even in elections for largely symbolic political bodies.

Keywords Alternative for Germany · Immigrant voters · Elections · Local politics · Far-right parties

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Zwischen sozioökonomischem Abstieg und fehlendem politischen Wettbewerb: Was erklärt den Erfolg der AfD bei den Integrationsratswahlen 2025 in Nordrhein-Westfalen?

Zusammenfassung Der Wahlerfolg der rechtsextremen Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in zahlreichen Gemeinden bei den Integrationsratswahlen 2025 hat in der Öffentlichkeit und den Medien große Aufmerksamkeit erregt. Abgesehen von dem scheinbaren Paradoxon, dass Einwander:innen eine einwanderungsfeindliche Partei unterstützen, hat die erhebliche Variation der AfD-Ergebnisse zwischen den Gemeinden wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zu den zugrunde liegenden Ursachen ausgelöst. Diese Studie untersucht die Determinanten der Variationen im Wahlerfolg der AfD bei den jüngsten Integrationsratswahlen. Wir verwenden Indikatoren für strukturelle wirtschaftliche Missstände als Erklärungsfaktoren und untersuchen gleichzeitig die Rolle des Parteienwettbewerbs durch die etablierten Parteien, der aufgrund der minimalen politischen Macht der Integrationsräte oft begrenzt ist. Anhand von Daten aus 113 Gemeinden in Nordrhein-Westfalen finden wir Hinweise darauf, dass der Wahlerfolg der AfD stark mit politischen Opportunitätsfaktoren zusammenhängt. So schneidet die AfD in Gemeinden, in denen weniger kandidierende partei-affilierte Listen antreten, besser ab. Diese Ergebnisse tragen zur breiteren Literatur über Wähler:innen mit Migrationshintergrund und die Dynamik rechtsextremer Parteien bei, indem sie die entscheidende Rolle des politischen Wettbewerbs und der aktiven Wahlkampfführung durch demokratische Parteien bei der Mobilisierung neu wahlberechtigter Wähler:innen für demokratische Politik aufzeigen – selbst bei Wahlen zu politischen Gremien mit weitgehender symbolischer Funktion.

Schlüsselwörter Alternative für Deutschland · Wähler:innen mit Migrationsgeschichte · Wahlen · Lokalpolitik · Rechtsextreme Parteien

1 Introduction

Following the 2025 local elections in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), the electoral success of the far-right *Alternative for Germany* (AfD) attracted widespread media attention. While the AfD's growing electoral success in areas beyond its initial strongholds in eastern Germany is well documented, its performance in local integration council elections was particularly notable (nd-aktuell 2025; WDR 2025). These elections, held concurrently with municipal elections in NRW, are unique in that their electorate consists exclusively of individuals with an immigration history, including foreign citizens, dual nationals, and naturalized German citizens. Originally established to address the democratic inclusion of noncitizen residents at the local level, integration councils are formally embedded in NRW's municipal law and serve as advisory bodies to local governments to promote immigrant integration and participation. The apparent paradox of an anti-immigration party receiving support from immigrant voters within an institution designed to represent immigrant interests reignited public debate about the underlying reasons for far-right support among this electorate.

Among contextual explanatory approaches of the rise of far-right parties, place-based accounts have highlighted socioeconomic pressures, including high unemployment rates, low purchasing power, and an influx of asylum seekers (Arzheimer et al. 2024; Bornschier 2018; Oesch and Rennwald 2018). These adverse conditions may induce (perceptions of) status threat and a lack of societal recognition, which, in turn, fuel support for populist radical-right parties and their nostalgic promises to restore the common man to greatness (Steiner et al. 2023). Similar mechanisms may apply to immigrant voters who feel economically marginalized or threatened by new migration flows (Goerres et al. 2018; Kurer 2020; Spies et al. 2023). However, in the case of integration councils, these socioeconomic explanations may be insufficient on their own. They risk overlooking the institutional structure and electoral dynamics of these councils, which are characterized by low voter turnout, limited political influence, and weak engagement from mainstream parties (Vierus et al. 2022). These characteristics have created a political vacuum in many municipalities that the AfD may strategically exploit. In such low-competition environments, even modest support could translate into significant political influence. Thus, this study addresses the following research question:

Are the participation and success of the Alternative for Germany in integration council elections primarily driven by local socioeconomic conditions or by the institutional opportunity structure of these elections?

To address this question, we analyzed official municipality-level data from the 2025 integration council elections in NRW. Specifically, we examined the AfD's participation and vote share across municipalities, using socioeconomic and demographic indicators, including unemployment rates, purchasing power, and the share of asylum seekers, as well as indicators related to the political opportunity structures, such as the voter turnout and the number of competing lists.

Our findings suggest that, while socioeconomic pressures, and particularly increases in unemployment, partly explain where the AfD chooses to participate, the party's vote share is more strongly related to electoral opportunity structure, with the AfD performing significantly better where fewer mainstream parties field lists. Therefore, political competition, rather than socioeconomic pressures, predicts the AfD's electoral performance in these councils. Overall, this study contributes to the literature on immigrant political behavior and far-right party dynamics by shedding light on a relatively understudied arena of local governance. Understanding whether the AfD's success is driven by contextual grievances or by electoral opportunity is essential for assessing the resilience of representative institutions and the scope of action available to political actors who want to reduce the far-right influence in these councils.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Local Integration Councils

Integration councils (*Integrationsräte*)¹ were created to promote the political inclusion of foreign residents at the local level. While European Union (EU) citizens have been eligible to vote in local elections since the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, permanent residents without German or EU citizenship remain excluded from all regular elections. This leaves any long-term residents, such as Turkish nationals, without voting rights at any level of government (Kuhlmann 2026; Neuman 1992; Schwarz 2013). To foster immigrant integration and provide political rights to noncitizens, several municipalities have introduced integration councils since the 1990s. The state of NRW has been a trailblazer in implementing these municipal bodies (Schmidtke and Zaslove 2014). Not only does NRW have the highest absolute number of integration councils in Germany, but it has also officially introduced these councils in its municipal ordinance. They are mandatory in municipalities with more than 5000 foreign residents. Furthermore, if a municipality has more than 2000 foreign residents and at least 200 eligible voters request its establishment, an integration council is formed (§ 27(1) GO NRW). Integration council members are usually elected on the day of the local elections in NRW. Those eligible to vote are individuals without German citizenship, individuals with foreign citizenship in addition to German citizenship, naturalized German citizens, and individuals who acquired German citizenship according to § 4(3) of the German citizenship law. This refers to children of foreign citizens born in Germany after January 1, 2000. Voters must be at least 16 years old and must have been rightful residents of Germany for at least 1 year before the election, as well as residents of the respective municipality for at least 16 days before the election (§ 27(4) GO NRW).

Although integration councils aim to represent immigrants, their limited political power and low public visibility render them symbolic political bodies of immigrant political inclusion. Specifically, the limited engagement from mainstream parties has created a climate in which political interest in integration councils and their work is low in many municipalities. This low interest presents an opportunity for political actors seeking to exploit the councils' symbolic value without facing intense electoral competition. In this context, the AfD has increasingly recognized integration councils as strategic arenas for advancing its broader political agenda centered on anti-elitism and restrictive positions on immigration.

2.2 AfD's Strategic Motives for Integration Council Participation

The AfD's increasing engagement in integration council elections reflects a calculated strategy to expand its electoral base and influence integration policy from

¹ In July 2025, the state parliament of NRW amended the municipal code and reestablished the legal basis for the election and work of integration councils. Among other things, these councils are now formally called "Committees for Equal Opportunities and Integration" (*Ausschüsse für Chancengerechtigkeit und Integration*).

within. The party appears to have identified integration councils as venues where anti-elite narratives resonate, which might be additionally fueled by the fact that these institutions are broadly perceived as symbolic political bodies with merely advisory functions (Vierus et al. 2022). By positioning itself as a voice against an allegedly ineffective political establishment, the AfD can appeal to politically disenfranchised immigrants and advance its broader populist agenda (Goerres et al. 2018). Moreover, the party strategically exploits intergroup tensions by amplifying conflicts between established immigrant communities and recent arrivals, particularly targeting voters who view new migration waves as competition for limited integration resources and social recognition (Tikhomirova 2024).

This points to the fact that immigrant-origin populations are not uniform in their attitudes toward immigration. Research shows substantial variation across groups and cohorts where longer-settled communities may view new immigration as economic or cultural competition, and immigrants from Christian-majority countries may hold restrictive views toward predominantly Muslim immigration (Hamidou-Schmidt and Mayer 2021; Spies et al. 2023). These internal cleavages create openings for parties like the AfD to mobilize specific segments of the immigrant electorate. Although systematic data on candidate backgrounds are not available, media reports indicate that AfD-affiliated lists in integration council elections frequently include naturalized German citizens, particularly individuals with post-Soviet, Eastern European, or Turkish backgrounds who position their own “successful integration” as a credential and distance themselves from more recent arrivals (Tikhomirova 2024; Deutschlandfunk 2025). This candidate recruitment strategy aligns with the party’s broader effort to present restrictive immigration positions as consistent with (rather than hostile to) immigrant interests.

Beyond immediate electoral gains, the AfD’s participation in integration councils may serve a longer-term objective of shaping the political socialization of immigrants, as integration council elections often represent the first point of political engagement for many immigrants (Hainmueller et al. 2015). Another possible motivation is that the AfD sees the potential utility of using integration councils as platforms for “disruptive opposition” (Mau et al. 2023), aimed at paralyzing integration processes and draining administrative capacities. Stalling consultation processes and practicing strategic noncooperation reflect potential obstructionist approaches by which the AfD reinforces narratives about government dysfunction and frustrates genuine integration efforts rather than advancing integration programs. The rebranding of integration councils in NRW as “Committees for Equal Opportunity and Integration” in 2025 may provide the AfD with expanded opportunities for such disruption, as the broader mandate could be exploited to challenge an even wider range of municipal policies under the guise of protecting “equal opportunity” for established residents against newcomers. This tactical paralysis aligns with the AfD’s broader strategy of rendering democratic institutions ineffective, thereby justifying more radical alternatives.

2.3 Institutional Opportunity Structure and AfD Participation

Despite their original intent to politically represent the interests of individuals with a migration history, integration councils face several structural challenges. As advisory bodies, they have limited political authority and receive little public attention. These limitations are reflected in consistently low voter turnout, typically averaging between 10% and 20%, and in the low level of participation by mainstream political parties (Schmidtke and Zaslove 2014; Vierus et al. 2022). As a result of the institutional design, established parties often lack the incentive to invest in selecting candidates who campaign in integration council elections. This political vacuum presents an opportunity for the AfD. In the absence of strong competition from established parties, the AfD can amplify its populist messaging and secure seats with minimal mobilization.

In municipalities such as Paderborn, there have even been reports of informal agreements among established parties not to field lists. The AfD, however, chose to do so nonetheless (Deutschlandfunk 2025), likely seeking to strategically exploit this vacuum left by mainstream parties. Meanwhile, the competition of mainstream parties may suppress AfD participation and its electoral success. Vierus et al. (2022) found that municipalities where parties such as the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), and the Greens participate in integration council elections experience significantly higher turnout. This suggests that mainstream party engagement, in particular, not only boosts electoral participation but also limits the electoral space available to the AfD. Such an effect of comprehensive political competition may operate through several mechanisms. First, it legitimizes integration councils as meaningful forums for democratic representation rather than symbolic advisory bodies. Second, it raises the quality and visibility of campaigns, as established parties tend to invest in outreach and communication. This may force the AfD to compete on substantive policy-related grounds, reducing its ability to rely solely on populist messaging. Third, it provides immigrant voters with programmatic alternatives and credible channels for linking local concerns to broader political agendas. Hence, we expect a low-competition political opportunity structure of integration council elections to create a fertile ground for AfD participation and success. In contrast, when mainstream parties actively engage, the space for far-right mobilization narrows considerably.²

Hypothesis 1: Low-competition political opportunity structures incentivize the AfD to participate in integration council elections and increase the AfD's electoral success.

² Since integration council elections are held concurrently with general local elections, the marginal cost of casting the additional ballot is low for voters who are eligible in both elections and are already at the polling station. However, this does not guarantee participation. Voters may complete the additional ballot only if they perceive meaningful choices among the lists presented. As this might mean that turnout is partially endogenous to the competitive supply of lists (e.g., if AfD mobilization itself increases turnout), we used an adjusted turnout measure in our empirical analyses that excluded AfD ballots from both the numerator and denominator.

2.4 Socioeconomic Conditions and AfD Participation

While the institutional opportunity structure may shape the AfD's strategic opportunities, political participation is also influenced by broader structural conditions within municipalities. In particular, socioeconomic conditions, such as unemployment, purchasing power, and the presence of asylum seekers, may create foundations of grievance-based mobilization. The relationship between socioeconomic conditions and far-right electoral success has been extensively documented, with growing evidence that place-based economic and infrastructural decline enhance populist mobilization (McKay 2019).

Economic insecurity, intergroup threat through demographic change, and perceptions of relative deprivation are downstream effects that shape both political distrust and populist party preferences (Gidron and Hall 2017; Kurer 2020). In the context of integration council elections, these factors are of particular significance because they may affect both the AfD's strategic decisions about where to compete and the receptiveness of immigrant voters to far-right messaging. Regarding structural economic characteristics, Harteveld et al. (2022) show that low income levels and high local unemployment strongly relate to populist radical-right support—especially in urban areas. Rodríguez-Pose (2018) identifies “places that don't matter”—regions experiencing long-term economic and demographic decline—as hotbeds of political discontent and anti-establishment voting. Moreover, Bayerlein et al. (2025) show that AfD success is related to high levels of historic industrial employment, which highlights the role of (expected) economic prospects rather than actual economic conditions.

The role of infrastructure and public service provision adds another dimension to understanding AfD mobilization. Cremaschi et al. (2024) demonstrate that declining infrastructure quality and reduced public service provision correlate strongly with populist radical-right success. This suggests that municipalities facing budget constraints and service reductions may see higher AfD mobilization as the party capitalizes on grievances about inadequate integration support. Similarly, Stroppe (2023) found that longer average distances to train stations are associated with decreased trust in the German government. Although these empirical relationships have been studied for the general population, it can be argued that these mechanisms also apply to immigrant communities. These infrastructure-induced grievances may be particularly relevant for immigrant communities, which often rely more heavily on public services and may interpret service reductions as deliberate neglect.

Demographic shifts, such as the influx of asylum seekers from the Middle East and North Africa since 2015 and from Ukraine since 2022, may create additional conditions favorable to AfD mobilization. Halla et al. (2017) show that rapid demographic change can trigger status anxiety and cultural threat, which increases voting for the far right. While anti-immigrant parties such as the AfD predominantly target non-immigrant citizens, highlighting cultural differences between Muslim immigrants and the Christian culture of the West may also show effectiveness among immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, who may perceive Muslim refugees as culturally distant (Spies et al. 2023). Hamidou-Schmidt and Mayer (2021) demonstrate how social identity dynamics lead some immigrant groups to

position themselves as “established” against newcomer “outsiders,” a division the AfD actively reinforces. Moreover, these demographic shifts through immigration may additionally fuel perceptions of intergroup competition through problems related to the local housing market and public service provision. For example, Adler and Ansell (2020) show that housing affordability crises in urban areas drive both native and immigrant voters toward populist options. Similarly, Ziller and Goodman (2020) show that low levels of local government efficiency were associated with a higher propensity for antirefugee violence during Germany’s so-called refugee crisis in 2015. Building on these theoretical foundations, we state the following expectation:

Hypothesis 2: Local economic disadvantages and high levels of immigration increase the resonance of anti-elite and anti-integration narratives among voters, which leads to a higher propensity of AfD participation in integration council elections and greater electoral success.

3 Data and Methods

We collected data on 113 municipalities in NRW that held integration council elections on September 14, 2025, concurrent with local elections. Election results were sourced from official municipal announcements. Our main variables of interest capture whether an AfD-affiliated list ran in the election and, if so, its vote share.

To assess the institutional opportunity structure, we used official election data published by the municipalities on voter turnout, the presence of mainstream party-affiliated lists, and the number of other competitors. To address the possibility that an increase in turnout was due to an increase in AfD support among the electorate, we used an adjusted turnout measure that excluded AfD ballots from both the numerator and the denominator. Mainstream party-affiliated lists comprise the CDU, the SPD, the Greens, the Left Party, the Free Democratic Party (FDP), and the Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW). Including the FDP and the BSW, even though neither is represented in the German Bundestag, results in a more conservative estimation, as it increases the number of mainstream party-affiliated lists. Meanwhile, the number of other competitors includes nonmainstream party-affiliated lists as well as individual candidates.

Socioeconomic and demographic indicators of conditions in the municipalities were drawn from the INKAR database, an ongoing spatial observation by the Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development (BBSR 2025). Specifically, we examined changes in the economic situation within the municipality between 2013 and 2023 in terms of local unemployment rates (per 1000 residents of working age) and purchasing power (euros per capita). Furthermore, we investigated changes in the demographic composition, examining the changes in asylum seeker shares between 2013 and 2023. Due to data limitations, asylum seeker shares were available only at the district level.

Notably, the integration council electorate overlaps substantially with the general election electorate. Naturalized German citizens, dual nationals, and individuals who acquired citizenship through birth in Germany (*jus soli*) are eligible to vote

in both integration council elections and all regular elections. Given the substantial electorate overlap between integration council elections and general elections, one might expect AfD success in integration councils to simply reflect the party's broader local strength. To assess this, we included the AfD's vote share in the NRW local elections as an additional control variable and examined the relationship between the AfD's vote share in the 2025 NRW federal elections and its participation and performance in integration council elections in supplementary analyses.

To examine the associations between both overarching explanations, we estimated logistic regression models predicting the likelihood of AfD participation in integration council elections and linear regression models explaining the AfD's vote share in municipalities where it fielded a list. These two modeling strategies allow us to distinguish between factors that influence whether the AfD fields a list and those affecting the party's electoral performance. All predictors were standardized (z-scores) to ensure comparability across measures. As the dataset represents a small but nearly complete sample of integration council elections in NRW, we report 90% confidence intervals (see also Rainey 2014).

4 Results

This section presents the association between institutional opportunity structures, socioeconomic conditions, and the AfD's participation and electoral performance in integration council elections in NRW. The analysis proceeds in two steps. First, we examine the influence of institutional opportunity structures—specifically, voter turnout and electoral competition. Second, we examine the influence of municipal socioeconomic conditions. We then combine the two sets of factors to further examine their association with the AfD's participation and electoral success in integration council elections.

4.1 Institutional Opportunity Structure of AfD Participation and Vote Share

We first assess the extent and conditions of AfD participation in integration council elections. Of the 113 municipalities holding integration council elections, an AfD-affiliated list ran in only 24 cases (about 21.2%). As illustrated in Fig. 1, the majority of integration council elections did not feature an AfD-affiliated list on the ballot.

Across these elections, voter turnout was generally low, at an average of 15.5%, compared with 56.8% in concurrent local elections (Landeswahlleiterin NRW 2025). Even the integration council election with the highest turnout had a participation level of only approximately a quarter of eligible voters and, thus, substantially lower turnout than other elections at the local level. Using our adjusted turnout measure that excludes AfD ballots from both the numerator and the denominator, we find that turnout differed significantly between municipalities with and without AfD participation ($t(df=62.27)=4.04, p<0.001$). The average adjusted turnout was 15.4% in integration council elections in which the AfD did not participate and 12.7% in elections in which it did. This is consistent with our expectation that the AfD is more likely to field a list in integration council elections, which tend to

receive less public attention. By contrast, the adjusted turnout is not significantly correlated with the AfD's vote share ($\rho = -0.05$, $p = 0.81$). This indicates that the party is neither more nor less electorally successful in municipalities where overall civic engagement (excluding AfD supporters) is higher.

Examining the overall competitiveness of the election, a Wilcoxon rank-sum test indicates that integration council elections in which the AfD participated had significantly more competitors (mean = 8.1) than those without AfD participation (mean = 5.5, $W = 634.5$, $p = 0.002^{**}$). This indicates that, against our expectations, the AfD is not more likely to participate in less competitive integration council elections, measured by the number of other lists and individual candidates.

A closer look at the AfD vote share reveals substantial variation in support. Its vote share ranged from about 9% in Düsseldorf to 51.6% in Sankt Augustin, with an average of 22.8%. Notably, in Sankt Augustin, the AfD faced only one other list and no other party-affiliated list. This highlights a context of limited electoral competition and raises the question of whether AfD electoral success is related to the level of party competition in these elections. As the number of competitors increases, the AfD's vote share tends to decrease ($\rho = -0.44$, $p = 0.033^{*}$). This suggests that in municipalities with more competitors, the AfD tends to receive a lower share of votes (Fig. A1 in the Appendix). Therefore, the results support our assumption that a broader competitive landscape may constrain the AfD's ability to mobilize support among immigrant voters.

To further assess the competitive environment in which the AfD participated, we differentiated between mainstream party-affiliated lists and independent lists or

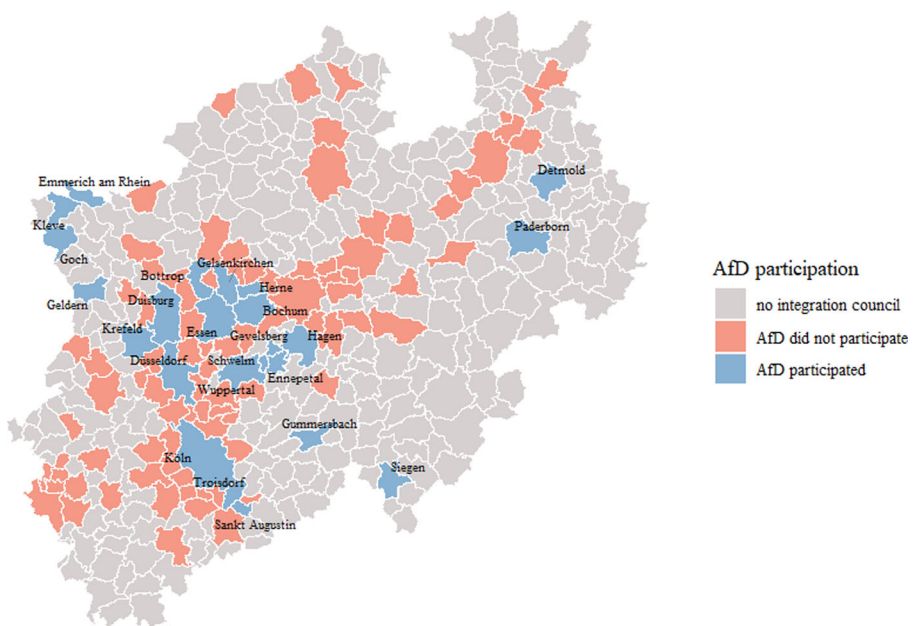


Fig. 1 Map of integration council elections. *AfD* Alternative for Germany party

individual candidates. In total, 38 municipalities featured at least one party-affiliated list on the ballot. Among the 24 municipalities where an AfD-affiliated list ran, the party faced at least one other party-affiliated list in 15 cases. Although the AfD faced approximately eight total competitors on average, it faced only about two mainstream parties. This limited engagement of mainstream parties is noteworthy. It may create a political vacuum that the AfD can exploit, potentially allowing the party to reach immigrant voters who feel neglected by traditional political structures (FOCUS 2025). However, the AfD's participation in integration council elections was not disproportionately high compared to other mainstream parties. In fact, the SPD fielded the most affiliated lists, followed by the AfD, with the CDU and the Greens trailing closely behind (Fig. A2 in the Appendix). These patterns suggest that the AfD does not systematically target integration council elections more than other parties do. Rather, all major parties appear relatively disengaged from these elections, indicating a broader institutional neglect. Furthermore, when the AfD faced competition from mainstream parties, its vote share averaged approximately 19.7%, with a maximum of 30.2% in Gummersbach. Moreover, when the AfD faced no other mainstream party, its average vote share was 28.1%, with a maximum of 51.6% in Sankt Augustin. This difference is statistically significant ($W = 104$, $p = 0.030$), suggesting that competition from mainstream parties limits AfD success (illustrated in Fig. 2).

Overall, the relationship between institutional opportunity structures and AfD outcomes differed between the party's participation and its electoral success. Lower levels of public attention, in the form of voter turnout, increased the probability of the AfD participating but were unrelated to how well it performed. Conversely, a less competitive environment, measured by both the total number of competitors and the presence of mainstream party lists, does not appear to have increased the probability of AfD participation. On the contrary, AfD participation was more likely in municipalities with a greater number of competing lists, possibly indicating a bandwagon

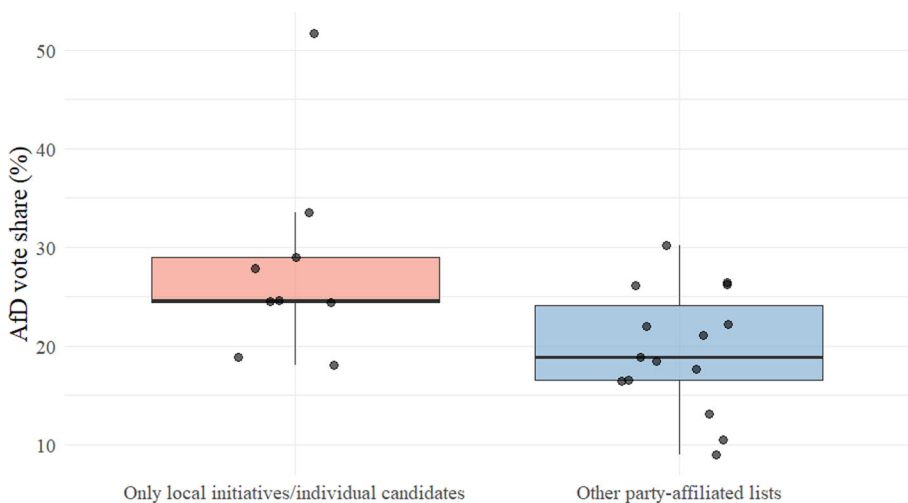


Fig. 2 Alternative for Germany (AfD) vote share by competitors

effect. The AfD may interpret a high number of competitors and mainstream party participation as a sign of political relevance and try to position itself as a serious political actor within a contested arena. However, when it comes to electoral success, both a higher number of overall competitors and the presence of mainstream parties tend to reduce the AfD's vote share. Thus, in more competitive environments, the AfD's appeal appears significantly constrained.

4.2 Socioeconomic Conditions of AfD Participation and Vote Share

Next, we examined how changes in unemployment rates, purchasing power, and the share of asylum seekers between 2013 and 2023 relate to AfD participation. In municipalities where the AfD did not field a list, the changes in socioeconomic indicators were close to the average across all municipalities. They demonstrate a slightly below-average increase in unemployment and asylum seeker share and a slightly above-average increase in purchasing power. In contrast, municipalities in which the AfD fielded a list are characterized by an above-average increase in unemployment ($z=0.43$), a below-average growth in purchasing power ($z=-0.55$), and a higher-than-average increase in the share of asylum seekers ($z=0.46$). These differences suggest that the AfD tends to participate in municipalities experiencing more pronounced economic pressure and demographic change (Fig. A3 and Table A1 in the Appendix).

Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between socioeconomic conditions and AfD electoral success in integration council elections. With positive changes in both unemployment and purchasing power in the municipalities between 2013 and 2023, the AfD's strength also tended to increase. Meanwhile, an increase in the share of asylum seekers in the municipality tended to decrease AfD support. These results are in contrast to our expectations that economic pressure and demographic change would increase AfD support in the municipalities. However, Spearman's rank correlation tests reveal that the illustrated relationships are not statistically significant.

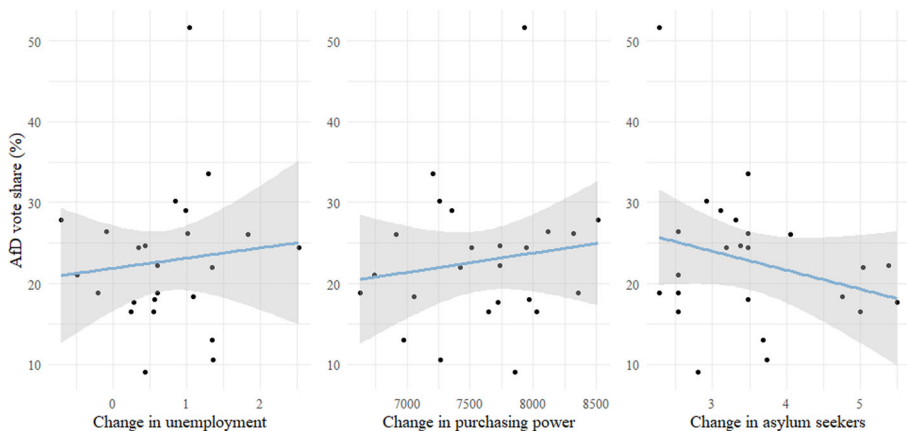


Fig. 3 Socioeconomic conditions and Alternative for Germany (AfD) electoral success

Overall, while socioeconomic conditions seem to facilitate the AfD's presence in integration council elections, they appear to be unrelated to the party's resulting electoral success. To simultaneously examine the influence of institutional opportunity structure and socioeconomic conditions on AfD participation and electoral strength, we incorporated these factors simultaneously into regression models of the party's presence and vote share.

4.3 Comparison Between Institutional Opportunity Structure and Socioeconomic Conditions

To examine the two explanations of institutional opportunity structure and socioeconomic conditions on AfD participation, we conducted a binomial logistic regression. The results of this regression are illustrated in Fig. 4.

Regarding the institutional opportunity structure, adjusted voter turnout is negatively associated with the likelihood of AfD participation in integration council elections. In contrast, electoral competitiveness, specifically the number of mainstream parties, is positively associated with AfD participation. These findings support the pattern identified in previous chapters. The AfD is more likely to participate in elections with low public attention. Nevertheless, mainstream party competition does not suppress AfD involvement but appears to increase the likelihood of its electoral engagement, even when socioeconomic conditions and voter turnout are controlled for.

Turning to the socioeconomic context, an increase in unemployment increases the probability of AfD participation. However, changes in neither purchasing power nor the share of asylum seekers are significantly associated with AfD participation at the 90% confidence level. These findings suggest that growing economic pressure,

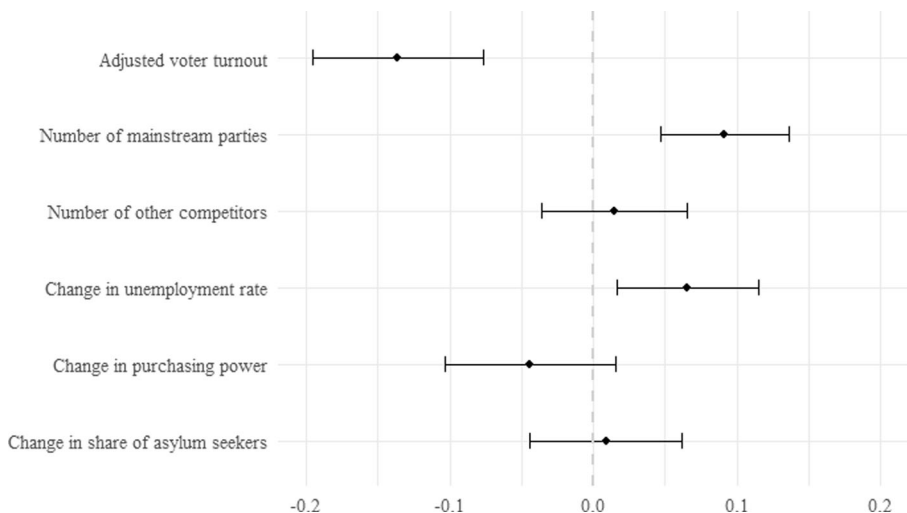


Fig. 4 Average marginal effects on Alternative for Germany participation. Dots represent average marginal effects, and horizontal lines indicate 90% confidence intervals. All predictor variables are z-standardized. For exact estimates, see Table A2 in the Appendix.

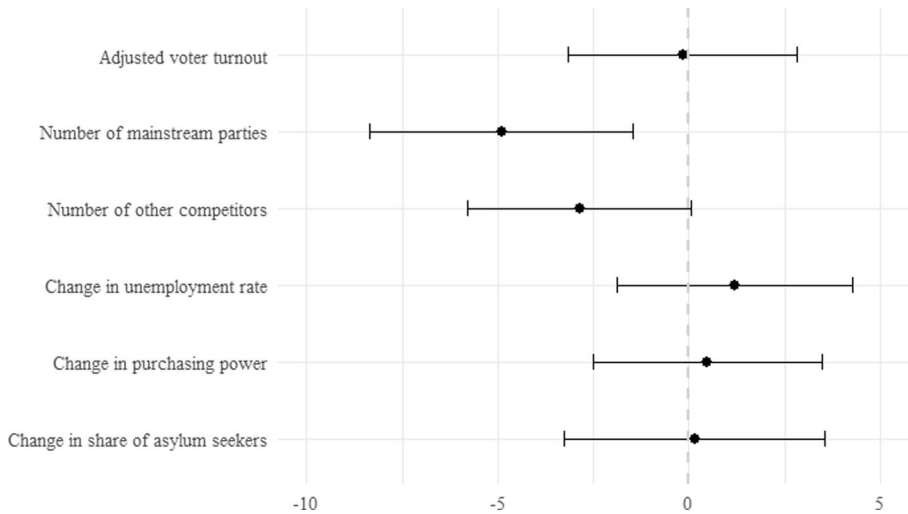


Fig. 5 Regression coefficients on Alternative for Germany vote share. Dots represent linear regression coefficients, and horizontal lines indicate 90% confidence intervals. All predictor variables are z-standardized. For exact estimates, see Table A2 in the Appendix.

in the form of rising unemployment, may play a role in shaping AfD participation at the local level.

Examining the electoral success of the AfD, we estimated a linear regression model using AfD vote share as the dependent variable. Figure 5 presents the results with 90% confidence intervals. Regarding institutional opportunity structure, increased competition appeared to suppress AfD vote strength. Specifically, the number of mainstream competitors exhibits a significant negative association with the electoral performance of the AfD. Regarding socioeconomic conditions, none of the three indicators—changes in the unemployment rate, purchasing power, and the share of asylum seekers—are significantly associated with AfD vote strength. This indicates that the AfD is not more electorally successful in municipalities facing stronger economic pressures and demographic changes.

To summarize, the comparative analysis of institutional opportunity structures and socioeconomic conditions highlights that institutional factors have a stronger explanatory power in understanding AfD participation and electoral success in integration council elections than socioeconomic conditions do.

4.4 Further Robustness and Validity Checks

In the last empirical section, we summarize the supporting evidence regarding the relationship between institutional opportunity structures and AfD participation and electoral success.

First, we reestimated all models using the most recent socioeconomic indicators, i.e., those from 2023, provided by the INKAR database. The results of this additional analysis are presented in Table A3 in the Appendix and resemble those of the main analysis. Second, the positive correlation between the number of mainstream parties

and AfD participation, as observed in Fig. 4, may be partially due to municipality size. A greater number of parties (as well as the AfD itself) might be more likely to field lists in municipalities with a larger electorate eligible to vote in integration council elections. To account for this, we conducted an additional analysis in which we controlled for the size of the electorate in the integration council elections. Importantly, even when this control variable was included, the relationship between the number of mainstream parties and AfD participation remains significant and positive (Table A4 in the Appendix). Third, Table A4 addresses the possibility that the AfD's willingness to participate and its electoral success merely reflect its broader local strength. To test this possibility, we examined whether our findings on limited political competition would remain consistent when controlling for the AfD's general vote share in the 2025 NRW local elections. The negative relationship between the adjusted turnout measure and AfD participation, as well as the positive relationship between the number of mainstream competitors and AfD participation, remain significant. Moreover, when the AfD's vote share in the 2025 NRW local elections was controlled for, the number of nonmainstream competitors also shows a significant association with the AfD's vote share in integration council elections at the 10% level, alongside a negative and statistically significant relationship between the number of mainstream competitors and AfD vote share.

Fourth, we examined the relationship between the share of residents holding citizenship of a post-Soviet state, used as a proxy for (late-)resettlers, and AfD vote shares in the 2025 German federal elections, with AfD participation and vote share in integration council elections (Figs. A4 and A5 in the Appendix). Neither bivariate association is statistically significant for (late-)resettlers, although the robustness of this test is limited because data were available only for a subset of municipalities. Meanwhile, the AfD's federal election vote share is uncorrelated with its participation but positively correlated with its vote share in integration council elections. However, this association disappears once other contextual variables are accounted for.

In particular, our finding that the AfD is not more likely to participate in integration council elections in municipalities where it performed well at either the local or national level underscores differences in voter motivations, which can be explained by different characteristics of the electorates. It also highlights the role of local political opportunity structures in integration council elections, such as the presence of other party lists. Hence, integration council elections do not simply reflect the broader political climate of a municipality but operate according to distinct dynamics, particularly with respect to immigrant voters as an electorate.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

The AfD's presence in integration council elections in NRW has resulted in widespread media attention, as it represents an anti-immigration party achieving representation in bodies designed to represent immigrants. In this study, we investigated whether AfD participation and electoral success are better explained by local socio-economic conditions or by the institutional opportunity structure of these elections.

Our findings indicate that while municipalities with higher unemployment show a higher tendency of AfD participation, institutional opportunity structures are especially decisive in explaining where the AfD fields a list and how well it performs. Particularly, the number of mainstream competitors is negatively associated with the AfD's electoral success. This suggests that the party benefits from low-competition elections with limited mainstream alternatives.

Integration councils, characterized by low turnout and weak engagement from mainstream parties (Vierus et al. 2022), create opportunities for strategic actors, such as the AfD. Consistent with this expectation, our findings indicate that the AfD is more likely to participate in integration council elections in municipalities with lower turnout. However, contrary to our expectation that weak engagement by mainstream parties would incentivize the AfD to participate, our statistical analyses provide no evidence for such a pattern. Instead, the AfD is more likely to enter elections in municipalities where other party-affiliated lists are present, implying that the AfD may perceive higher competition as a signal of the election's political relevance. This holds despite reports from some municipalities of informal agreements among established parties not to run, while the AfD nevertheless chose to compete. Nevertheless, the AfD's electoral success declines in the presence of mainstream competitors. This pattern indicates that AfD support in these elections may not reflect deep ideological alignment with the AfD among immigrant voters but rather a lack of viable alternatives.

Our findings have important normative implications. Integration councils are vulnerable to politicization by anti-immigration actors, potentially undermining their legitimacy and disrupting local integration processes if the AfD engages in obstructionist tactics (Goerres et al. 2018; Mau et al. 2023; Tikhomirova 2024). Regarding distinct features of immigrant groups, our aggregate-level analysis cannot capture the heterogeneity of attitudes within the immigrant electorate. Future research using individual-level data should examine how immigration attitudes vary across immigrant-origin groups, including country of origin, length of residence, and generational status, and how these differences shape receptiveness to far-right appeals. Relatedly, while we find no evidence for the specific relevance of (late-)resettlers, who immigrated primarily from Eastern Europe or the former Soviet Union, for the success of the AfD, data availability renders our results preliminary. As ethnic Germans, this group possesses German citizenship upon arrival and is thus eligible to vote in all official elections as well as integration council elections. At the same time, their documented leaning toward right-wing and populist radical-right parties could mean that variations in the turnout of (late-)resettlers could produce disproportionate effects on the AfD's results (Goerres et al. 2020; Hansen and Olsen 2020; Kuhlmann 2026; Spies et al. 2023).

To summarize, this study indicates that institutional opportunity structures, and specifically the competitive context of integration council elections, better explain the AfD's participation and electoral success than local socioeconomic conditions do. While the party is more likely to enter elections in which some competition exists, its electoral success declines in highly contested contexts. These findings underscore that integration council elections operate according to distinct local dynamics, making them vulnerable to far-right influence in these low-salience elections.

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