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## **The rise of Populism in Germany**

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Master Thesis  
The rise of Populism in Germany

RQ: What factors can explain the support for populism in Germany?

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Europe has experienced a rise of right-wing populism in recent years which has affected Germany as well as many other European countries. In Germany the right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany/AfD) has risen in popularity since it was first established in 2013 (Hansen & Olsen, 2024). While there is a rising trend of support for the AfD throughout all of Germany, in the East of Germany it has gone so far that they have for the first time become the largest party in a state parliament in the German state Thuringia (Thüringen) in the recent state election (Landtagswahl) in September 2024, with 32,8% of overall votes for the AfD (Election.de, 2024).

The other eastern German states, Brandenburg (Brandenburg), Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern), Saxony (Sachsen) and Saxony-Anhalt (Sachsen-Anhalt) share a similar trend of support for the AfD, with the party being the second largest party in each state except for Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (Election.de, 2024). Interestingly, the western German states do not share this trend. While the AfD has gained significant popularity throughout the western German states as well, especially Hesse (Hessen) and Bavaria (Bayern), where it has received 18,4% and 14,6% of total votes respectively in the most recent state elections in 2023, it has not gotten close to as popular as it is in the East in any western German state (Election.de, 2024). In many western German states, the AfD has only received slightly over 5 % of votes (Election.de, 2024). In comparison, in the eastern German states the lowest percent of votes for the AfD is Brandenburg with 16,7% (Election.de, 2024). This paper therefore aims to examine the support for populism in Germany and the differences in support for populism between the eastern and western German states. It seeks to answer the research question: What factors can explain the support for populism in Germany?

To answer this question, the paper adopts a quantitative research approach, analyzing the 2023 dataset of the German representative Politbarometer survey, which captures the attitudes of the German voting population towards German political parties, politics, economics and current societal issues (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen Mannheim, 2024). The level of analysis is the individual. A binary logistics regression is used to find significant factors that contribute to the support of populism in Germany. In addition, descriptive and inferential statistics methods are used to find differences in the distribution of factors between the eastern and western German states.

This paper adopts the definition of populism proposed by Mudde (2004), who defines populism as:

‘An ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde, 2004).

The AfD can be classified as a right-wing populist party according to this definition, making use of an anti-establishment rhetoric, a loosely defined narrative of the people and distrust of the established political parties (Häusler, 2018; Steiner & Landwehr, 2018; Lewandowsky, 2015; Berbuir et al, 2015). Multiple studies have been conducted on the support of populism, both in Germany and other countries. Research has found several important factors for the support of populism. The economic situation is found to be an important factor, where bad economic conditions can increase the support for populism (Franz et al, 2018; Fritsch et al, 2021; Gozgor, 2022). Furthermore, those who struggle with politics and societal life are found to be more likely to support populist parties (Spruyt et al, 2016). Age, education level and occupation are also found to be contributing factors for the support of populism (Arzheimer, 2009; Coffé & Michels, 2014; Spruyt et al, 2016; Franz et al, 2018).

The analysis found the economic situation, more specifically being in economic decline, discontent with politics and the current government and dissatisfaction with democracy to be significant factors for the support of populism in Germany. The distributions of these factors between East and West Germany can explain the difference in support for the AfD between East and West Germany, with all factors that increase the likelihood of an individual to support populism being more present in East Germany.

This research contributes to the study of populism in Germany by highlighting factors that help to explain the support of populism. Most other research in Germany in this field takes the approach of examining election data focused on regional support for populism (Franz et al, 2018; Fritsch et al, 2021; Hansen & Olsen, 2024), this paper takes the approach of examining the individual level. While studies conducted in other countries have taken the individual as a level of analysis (Arzheimer, 2009; Coffé & Michels, 2014; Spruyt et al, 2016), most research in Germany has not. Studies such as those of Schröder (2018) or Westle (2020), which look at the individual level in Germany, often only focus on one or two specific factors. While the study conducted by Schröder (2018) does take more factors into account and gives important insights for the support of the AfD, it does this based on data from 2016. The AfD is a rather new party that has since then changed and expanded on the topics that it covers as well as largely grown in support (Schroeder, 2020; Election.de, 2024). This paper aims at a broad and holistic approach of testing and taking multiple factors for the support of populism from a recent 2023 dataset into account. The academic relevance therefore lies in taking multiple

previously researched theoretical mechanisms together and applying them to the recent case of Germany. This is relevant to further test generalizability of the theoretical mechanisms on a different case as well as test previously researched mechanisms on the same case in a more recent time frame. The case of Germany is especially interesting since it shares similarities with other western European countries that are experiencing a rise in right-wing populism but is also different in terms of its federal structure and history, with its division between East and West.

The societal relevance of this paper lies in its aim to highlight relevant factors for the support of populism, thus giving politicians and policymakers areas that they can focus on. By highlighting issues that individuals are facing, which are increasing their chance to support populism, policymakers can then devise strategies on how to address these issues which could in turn help to reduce social tensions.

This paper is structured as follows, with the first chapter being the introduction. The second chapter gives a short background of the case as well as an overview of the German state election results. The third chapter is the theoretical framework, which defines the relevant concepts that are needed for the analysis, such as populism, and gives an overview of the relevant academic literature on the topic and causes for populism. From this overview of the literature, mechanisms for the support of populism are identified and formulated into hypotheses. The fourth chapter, being the methodology chapter, gives an overview of the 2023 Politbarometer dataset that will be used for the analysis, operationalizes the relevant concepts to make them measurable and explains the methodological approach that this paper adopts for the analysis. The fifth chapter is the analysis and findings chapter, which first gives an overview of the distributions of the relevant variables between East and West Germany using descriptive statistics and then analyses them using a binary logistics regression. The findings will then be discussed in relation to the previously formulated hypotheses. The sixth and final chapter of this paper summarizes the conclusions of this paper, reflects on them and gives recommendations for future research.

## **Chapter 2: Background**

This chapter will provide a short overview of the case. After the reunification of Germany in 1990, Berlin was reestablished as the capital city of Germany and became a federal state, the German Democratic Republic disappeared, and the five eastern German states which made up its territory, namely Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia became part of the Federal Republic of Germany (NATO, 2024). While since then all the 16 German states have been governed by the same federal government, there are still to this day some differences between the eastern and western German states. These differences include infrastructure and economic development as well as feelings towards politics, where often East Germany is still less developed economically than West Germany (Mollenkopf & Kaspar, 2005; Franz et al, 2018; Fritsch et al, 2021; Pickel & Pickel, 2023).

### **2.1. Support for the AfD**

In the most recent state election in the German state of Thuringia in September 2024, the AfD has for the first time since it was established as a party, become the strongest party in the parliament of a German state, gaining 32,8% of total votes (Election.de, 2024). While the support for the AfD is increasing all throughout Germany, this is a level of support that was previously unseen. A similar trend can be observed in the other eastern German states, with the AfD being the second strongest party in Saxony, with 30,6%, and Brandenburg, with 29,2% in the recent 2024 state elections (Election.de, 2024). In the western German states on the other hand, the highest number of votes that the AfD has received is 18,4% in Hesse in the state election in August 2023, while still being largely behind the Christian Democratic Union (CDU/CSU) with them gaining 34,6% of votes (Election.de, 2024). In the western German states overall, the AfD has not gained close to as much support as in the eastern German states.

The dates for state elections in Germany are not on the same timeframe. Most states have state elections every five years, apart from Bremen having them every four years (Bundesrat, 2024). Additionally, the elections are not held in the same year for all the states (Bundesrat, 2024).

Table 2.1. gives an overview of the percentage votes for the AfD by state with election dates:

German state	Election date	Vote for AfD
Berlin	12.02.2023	9,1%
Hamburg	23.02.2023	5,3%
Bremen	14.05.2023	--
Schleswig-Holstein	08.05.2022	4,4%
Lower Saxony	09.10.2022	11,0%
North Rhine-Westphalia	15.05.2022	5,4%
Hesse	08.10.2023	18,4%
Rhineland-Palatinate	14.03.2021	8,3%
Bavaria	08.10.2023	14,6%
Baden-Württemberg	14.03.2021	9,7%
Saarland	27.03.2022	5,7%
Brandenburg	22.09.2024	29,2%
Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	26.09.2021	16,7%
Saxony	01.09.2024	30,6%
Saxony-Anhalt	06.06.2021	20,8%
Thuringia	01.09.2024	32,8%

Table 2.1: Votes for the AfD in % by state and election date (Election.de, 2024).

In the case of Bremen, the AfD was not approved for the state election due to faulty election documents (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V, 2023). Overall, the eastern German states (Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia) show much higher support for the AfD, with the only exception being Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania with only 16,7%. This is partially due to the election result being from 2021, which is expected to increase in the 2026 election as well. In the western German states on the other hand, the AfD has in most cases received less than 10% of the votes. In Schleswig-Holstein the AfD only received 4,4% of votes, not making it into the parliament due to the 5% hurdle, where a party in Germany must receive at least 5% of total votes to be represented in parliament (Election.de, 2024; Deutscher Bundestag, 2024). The following chapters will aim to analyze and explain these differences in support for the AfD.

## Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

This chapter will review the current relevant academic literature on populism and define the concepts that are necessary for the analysis. Then the definition will be related to the case and hypotheses to address the research question of what factors can explain the support for populism in Germany will be presented.

### 3.1. Populism

To be able to analyze populism it must first be defined. The academic literature is not completely clear on the definition of populism. Bergsdorfs (2000) defines populism as the will or ‘gut feelings’ of the common or pure people. The people are here seen as a homogenous group by populists and intellectual criticism is labeled as elitist and going against the common people. Populism often looks to present easy solutions to complex problems or find scapegoats to direct blame at to unite followers (Bergsdorfs, 2000). Dahrendorfs (2003) on the other hand defines populism as a set of opportunistic policies aimed at (quickly) pleasing the people/voters, ‘buying’ their support instead of rationally searching for the best solution. He also notes that one's perception of populism may vary and that one may see a political act as populism while another sees it as democracy since it is hard to decide when a policy classifies as ‘sound’ or ‘honest’, rather than ‘populist’ or ‘opportunistic’ (Dahrendorfs, 2003).

In his research, Mudde (2004) critiques Bergsdorfs (2000) definition as it is difficult to operationalize and argues that sloganized politics are a core component of any political campaigning (Mudde, 2004). Mudde (2004) critiques Dahrendorfs (2003) definition for lacking a clear distinction between what is classed as populism and what is seen as legitimate democracy. Mudde (2004) offers a more comprehensive definition of populism:

‘An ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people’ (Mudde, 2004).

The people, in this definition, refer to an ‘imagined community’ similar to the nation in nationalism (Mudde, 2004; Anderson, 2020). The concept of the people is still vague and who this exactly includes varies according to the narrative of the populist. Populism builds on a ‘Us vs them’ type narrative where compromise is impossible. Mudde does not include a special form of organization, such as charismatic leadership or a special style of communication in his definition, arguing that these do not define but rather facilitate populism (Mudde, 2004). He

does note however, that factors such as strong party leaders contribute to the success of populism. Populism does not aim at changing the lifestyle or values of the people but rather making them aware of their oppression (Mudde, 2004). Thus, the consciousness of the people, or common sense, is seen as the basis of all good. This paper will adopt the definition of populism proposed by Mudde (2004) since it is seen as the most comprehensive.

Other research adds to the definition and highlights relevant aspects of populism. Anti-party sentiments play an important role in populist propaganda in liberal democratic systems, where political parties are the main actors in the process of representation (Scarrow, 1996). Populism critiques the established political system and its parties but does not generally oppose political parties (Mudde, 1996). Rather populists frame themselves as a new kind of party or a better alternative, often framing established parties as corrupt or putting their own interests above those of the people. Populists can thus be seen as reformist rather than revolutionary (Mudde, 1996).

Freedden (1998) identifies populism as ‘thin-centered ideology’, having ‘a restricted core attached to a narrower range of political concepts’ (Freedden, 1998). The core of populism is the people, with the elite acting as its opposite or antagonist. Decker (2013) adds to this by stating that populism can be easily combined with other ideologies such as communism, ecologism, nationalism or socialism (Decker, 2013). Wiles (1969) identifies populism as moralistic rather than programmatic, meaning it rather makes moral judgements than following a particular program, relying on the normative distinction between the elite and the people (Wiles, 1969).

According to these characteristics the German political party AfD can be identified as a right-wing populist party. While it is important to note that the AfD, both internally and with its supporters accommodates different political currents, the party can overall be classified as right-wing populist (Häusler, 2018; Steiner & Landwehr, 2018; Lewandowsky, 2015; Berbuir et al, 2015). The AfD is the most right-wing party in the German parliament and its support ranges from slightly right of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) to far right-wing extremists and nationalists with a shared dislike of social liberalization, differentiation and recognition processes of minority rights and multiculturalism (Häusler, 2018; Steiner & Landwehr, 2018). The AfD makes use of a loosely defined narrative of the people, as described in the definition of populism by Mudde (Lewandowsky, 2015; Berbuir et al, 2015; Mudde, 2004). Additionally, the AfD uses anti-establishment rhetoric and there is a distrust of the established political parties that the AfD describes as acting against the interest of the people (Lewandowsky, 2015; Berbuir et al, 2015; Steiner & Landwehr, 2018). This is in line with the

antagonistic groups and the distinction between ‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite’ that Mudde (2004) describes in his definition of populism (Mudde, 2004).

The AfD combines their populist narrative with elements of nationalism and euroscepticism, highlighting the findings of Decker (2013), that populism can easily be combined with other ideologies (Berbair et al, 2015; Decker, 2013). Finally, the AfD does not fundamentally oppose the political system and does not aim to change German politics through violent revolution, but rather through reforming the current political system in their favor, in line with the findings of Mudde (1996), that populists are reformist rather than revolutionary (Steiner & Landwehr, 2018; Mudde, 1996).

### **3.2. Causes for Populism and Hypotheses**

This section will give an overview of the relevant academic literature regarding the causes for the support of populism. This will include literature on the support for populism in general as well as specific literature to the case of Germany. Then hypotheses are formulated from the mechanisms described in the literature.

Studies have found that the economic situation of an individual or a region can have an impact on whether they vote in favor of a populist party (Franz et al, 2018; Fritsch et al, 2021; Gozgor, 2022). Regions that are left behind economically are more prone to populism (Fritsch et al, 2021). Especially regions that used to matter in the past but are now in long term decline are prone to populism. This does not only apply to regions with low welfare but also regions that are in long term decline of relative welfare (Fritsch et al, 2021). Regions in Germany where the disposable household incomes are below the national average show higher voting behavior in favor of populism (Franz et al, 2018). In Germany the division between the east and west, still to this day contributes to this. It is often the case that the eastern parts of Germany are still less economically developed than the western parts (Franz et al, 2018; Fritsch et al, 2021). In the context of economic situation, however, unemployment is not found to be a contributing factor to voting behavior in favor of populism (Franz et al, 2018).

Economic crises can lead to higher support for right-wing populism. A study by Funke et al. (2016) found that in the aftermath of financial crises, where there is high policy uncertainty, far-right populist parties votes tend to increase by up to 30% (Funke et al, 2016). Right-wing populist parties often shift the blame for such crises to outside factors such as minorities or foreigners. A study by Gozgor (2022) has found that in addition to the economic situation,

economic uncertainty increases voting behavior in favor of populism (Gozgor, 2022). Voters will vote for populist parties due to their anti-establishment narrative and wanting to punish corrupt elites (Gozgor, 2022). While the economic situation plays a role, so does an individual's perceived economic situation and outlook into the future. From this, hypothesis 1 can be formulated as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The support for populism will be higher with those individuals in a less favorable economic situation.

Similar to this, studies by Spruyt et al. (2016) and Westle (2020) have found personal discontent with politics and societal life in general to increase voting behavior in favor of populism (Spruyt et al, 2016; Westle, 2020). Additionally, those who are dissatisfied with democracy are found to be more likely to support populism (Schröder, 2018). This applies especially to those part of stigmatized groups that struggle to find a positive social identity and those that feel little political efficacy. The narrative that populism uses, and the blaming of corrupt elites for societal problems allows for such individuals, that struggle with societal changes or societal life in general to shift responsibility for their struggles to factors that are outside of their control (Spruyt et al, 2016). Populism can frame personal issues as part of or caused by a conflict between two groups, for example the people and corrupt elites, taking pressure to solve the issue from the individual (Spruyt et al, 2016). Through the use of empty signifiers, populism can unite various otherwise contradictory societal issues or groups under one umbrella (Laclau, 2005). Through this, individuals that are discontented with politics and societal life can feel part of a group which may lessen the burden of their issues by framing their individual problems as shared problems (Spruyt et al, 2016). The narrative offered by populist parties, as well as the framing of individual problems as shared problems and use of empty signifiers can give these individuals the feeling of a shared group identity (Laclau, 2005; Spruyt et al, 2016). These factors can lessen the burden experienced by the individual.

The effects of globalization seem to have an impact on voting behavior in favor of populism. Kriesi et al. (2006) in their study differentiate between globalization winners and losers (Kriesi et al, 2006). Winners in this case refer to entrepreneurs and qualified employees in sectors open to international competition and all kinds of cosmopolitan citizens. Losers refers to entrepreneurs and qualified employees in traditionally protected sectors, unqualified employees and citizens who identify strongly with their national community (Kriesi et al, 2006). An increasing amount of people in Europe no longer have the skills or knowledge that are necessary to get a rewarding job and the number of relatively rewarding jobs that have low skill requirements is shrinking (Spruyt et al, 2016). In an increasingly globalized society, those

that fit less into the category of the cosmopolitan citizen may be seen as more irrational and close-minded (Dench, 2006). This, together with feelings of being overwhelmed by societal changes and a lack of a positive social identity can lead to feelings of vulnerability (Spruyt et al, 2016). These losers of globalization and international competition are more likely to support and vote for populist parties as well as more likely to fit into the above-described group of individuals that struggle with finding a positive social identity (Spruyt et al, 2016). A study by Rodrik (2021) finds that globalization shocks increase voting behavior in favor of populism (Rodrik, 2021). Trade, financial globalization and immigration can each influence the support of populism and generally, the support for populism increases in response to globalization shocks (Rodrik, 2021).

In the case of Germany and taking the refugee crisis into account, immigration seems to be an especially important aspect for the support of populism. Support for the AfD increased rapidly during the refugee crisis (Schröder, 2018; Hansen & Olsen, 2024). For immigration, however, the number of actual migrants in the region seems to have less of an impact on populist voting behavior than factors such as changes in volume of immigration or the identity of source countries (Rodrik, 2021). The increase in support for populism seems to be especially high when there is a rapid increase of low-skilled migrants, migrants from countries with a different racial, ethnic or religious background and when there is a high level of spatial segregation (Rodrik, 2021; Enos, 2017). A perception of the loss of national culture plays into this as well. From this, hypothesis 2 can be formulated as follows:

Hypothesis 2: The support for populism will be higher with those who feel discontent with politics.

Age and gender can have an impact on voting behavior. Support for the AfD is higher in regions where there is an above-average number of older people (Franz et al, 2018). Young men and older men are more prone to vote for right-wing parties or support populism (Arzheimer, 2009). From this, hypothesis 3 can be formulated as follows:

Hypothesis 3: The support for populism will be higher among older individuals than among younger individuals.

In addition, education level plays a role as well. The support for the AfD is highest in regions with a high concentration of people that are employed in the manufacturing sector (Franz et al, 2018). Arzheimer (2009) finds that those with low levels of formal education, those working routine nonmanual jobs and those working in the manufacturing sector are more prone to vote in favor of right-wing populist parties (Arzheimer, 2009). Spruyt et al. (2016) find that those

that are less educated are more likely to find themselves in a situation where finding a rewarding job is difficult (Spruyt et al, 2016). In a situation of increasing competition and a widening gap between the rich and poor, those that are less educated or less suited for these conditions are more likely to experience social, economic or political vulnerability, that can lead to the support of populism (Spruyt et al, 2016). Less educated individuals also report higher feelings of discontent with politics (Coffé & Michels, 2014). This makes them more prone to support the anti-establishment narrative of populism. From this, hypothesis 4 and hypothesis 5 can be formulated:

Hypothesis 4: The support for populism will be higher among those that are less educated.

Hypothesis 5: The support for populism will be higher among those working in lower skilled jobs.

Finally, the division between East and West Germany can still be felt today. As described earlier, the Eastern German states are often still less economically developed than the Western German states (Franz et al, 2018; Fritsch et al, 2021). In addition to economic factors, studies have found other differences between East and West Germany as well. Mollenkopf & Kaspar (2005) find, that while there are many similarities between Eastern and Western Germany, there are still substantial differences in socio-demographic conditions such as education or income (Mollenkopf & Kaspar, 2005). Pickel & Pickel (2023) find that, while there is no lack of legitimacy of democracy in Eastern Germany, there is a difference in individuals' satisfaction with democracy between Eastern and Western Germany with individuals from Eastern Germany overall being less satisfied with democracy (Pickel & Pickel, 2023). These differences can be explained by a combination of feelings of disadvantage, lack of recognition and perceptions of inequality (Pickel & Pickel, 2023). These factors can be associated with the above-described mechanisms that may contribute to the support of populism. Thus, from this hypothesis 6 can be formulated:

Hypothesis 6: The support for populism will be higher in Eastern Germany compared to Western Germany.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

In this chapter the methodology for this paper will be outlined and explained. The dataset that was used, the operationalization of the relevant concepts and the methods for data analysis will be explained. Limitations of this approach will be outlined. This paper adopts a quantitative research approach. The level of analysis is the individual.

### **4.1. Dataset**

The dataset that is used in this paper is from the representative survey Politbarometer in Germany. Politbarometer is a survey that is conducted by the Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V. in Germany on a biweekly basis and then added up annually (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024). Politbarometer captures German voters' perceptions of current relevant events, political parties, politicians and other societal developments (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024). The survey consists of closed questions with a set of predefined responses. Participants are chosen at random from all German states through a random phone number generator. Data collection is done through three channels: landline and mobile telephone interviews and online surveys with an invite through text message (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024). Participation in the survey as well as the data are anonymous. In each year there are around 30.000 participants in the survey in total. The results are weighted to German national statistics on the distributions of gender, age and education and are representative of the total population of eligible voters in Germany (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024). The margin of error is between 2% and 3% (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024). The raw data set is available online for use for further research through GESIS (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024; GESIS, 2024).

Participants are questioned in which German state they are voting as well as what party they would vote for (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024). This allows the data to be analyzed on relevant characteristics such as German state and party preference and voting behavior. In addition, Politbarometer measures over 300 variables annually (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024), giving it enough scope to accurately address the research question. Overall, this dataset is deemed appropriate for the scope of the research of this paper since it incorporates relevant criteria and is representative of the population eligible to vote in Germany.

## 4.2. Operationalization

This section will explain how the relevant concepts will be operationalized to be measured later in the analysis. The relevant variables will be measured according to the corresponding questions in the Politbarometer survey.

Firstly, the dependent variable, support for populism, will be operationalized as votes for the AfD. The dependent variable will be dummy coded, where 1 represents voting for the AfD and 0 represents all other parties making it a dichotomous variable meaning that a binary logistics regression can be used for the analysis. As described in the theoretical framework, the AfD fits into the criteria of a right-wing populist party which is why the operationalization is seen as appropriate. In the German political landscape, the AfD also represents the strongest and most relevant force of populism, with other parties not meeting the 5% hurdle (Deutscher Bundestag, 2024). The Politbarometer survey does not include the election results directly but rather asks the participants who they would vote for (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024). In the case of an upcoming election the question is worded as who a participant would vote for in the upcoming election, while in other years, where there is no relevant election, it is worded as who participants would vote for if there was an election on the next upcoming Sunday. For the analysis the response to this question in the survey will be used to measure the support for populism.

The results from the Politbarometer survey represent the current feelings of the voting population in Germany and are generally accurate to the results of elections. As a reference, for the 2017 federal election Politbarometer predicted the AfD to reach 11% and in the election, they received 12,6%, SPD was predicted to reach 21,5% and in the election they reached 20,5%, FDP was predicted 10% and reached 10,7%, with the other parties sharing the same trend of the predictions being a maximum of 1-2% off from the actual results (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2017; Die Bundeswahlleiterin, 2017). This accuracy is deemed appropriate for the scope of this research and allows for an analysis of the current feelings of the voting populations. The variation in the results can partially be explained by the longer timeframe over which the Politbarometer survey collects data. In addition, using the Politbarometer survey rather than the election results makes it possible to analyze years in which there was no election and still get an accurate prediction of the support for the AfD.

The independent variables will be measured according to multiple corresponding questions in the Politbarometer survey. To measure the economic situation the Politbarometer survey asks

participants the question of how they would assess their own current economic situation. Possible responses are ‘good’, ‘partially good/partially bad’ or ‘bad’ (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024). Additionally, the question of how participants think their economic situation will be in one year's time will be included in the analysis to capture individuals' outlook into the future and possible economic uncertainty. Possible responses are ‘better’, ‘the same’ or ‘worse’ (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024).

To measure discontent with politics and societal life two questions from the Politbarometer survey will be included. The question of how participants would assess the current government's performance will be included. Possible responses are that it ‘does mostly good work’ or ‘does mostly bad work’ (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024). The question of how satisfied respondents are with current democracy is included as well, where possible responses are ‘mostly satisfied’ or ‘mostly dissatisfied’ (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024).

For education level, multiple questions will be included in the analysis. In the Politbarometer survey participants are asked what their highest school diploma is (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024). If the participant has a higher diploma, they are additionally asked if they possess a university degree or similar. Otherwise, participants are asked if they completed an apprenticeship. Participants' current employment and occupational sector are included in the analysis as well.

Age will be included in the analysis. Politbarometer measures age in brackets of 5 years from 20 to 49 and 10 years from 50 to 80, with the exceptions of the brackets 18 to 20 and 80 years and older (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024). Finally, gender will be included, where Politbarometer gives the options of male or female.

Table 4.1. gives an overview of the independent variables (IV), Measurement level (Measure) and dependent variable (DV) with the corresponding theory and hypothesis:

Theory	Hypothesis	IV	Indicator	Measure	DV	Source
Economic situation (Funke et al, 2016; Franz et al, 2018; Fritsch et al, 2021; Gozgor, 2022)	Support for populism will be higher with those in a less favorable economic situation	Economic situation	Own current economic situation; Prediction of own economic situation in 1 year	Nominal	Support for populism	Politbarometer survey
Discontent with politics (Laclau, 2005; Kriesi et al, 2006; Rodrik, 2021; Spruyt et al, 2016; Westle, 2020)	Support for populism will be higher with those who feel discontent with politics	Discontent with politics	Assessment of current government performance; satisfaction with democracy	Nominal	Support for populism	Politbarometer survey
Age on support for populism (Arzheimer, 2009; Franz et al, 2018)	Support for populism will be higher among older than among younger individuals	Age	Age	Nominal	Support for populism	Politbarometer survey
Education (Arzheimer, 2009; Coffé & Michels, 2014; Spruyt et al, 2016; Franz et al, 2018)	Support for populism will be higher among those that are less educated	Education level	Apprenticeship completed; University degree obtained	Nominal	Support for populism	Politbarometer survey
Occupation (Arzheimer, 2009; Coffé & Michels, 2014; Spruyt et al, 2016; Franz et al, 2018)	Support for populism will be higher among those working in lower skilled jobs	Occupation	Occupational sector	Nominal	Support for populism	Politbarometer survey
Division between East and West (Franz et al, 2018; Fritsch et al, 2021; Pickel & Pickel, 2023)	Support for populism will be higher in Eastern Germany than Western Germany	German state	German state (East or West)	Nominal	Support for populism	Politbarometer survey

Table 4.1: Overview of Theory, Hypothesis and variables.

### 4.3. Data Analysis

This section will explain how the data will be analyzed. The aim of the analysis is to find variables that can explain the support for populism in Germany and the variation in support for the AfD between the eastern and western German states. The level of analysis is the individual. The aim is to find possible correlations between the independent variables, as expressed in the previous sections, and the dependent variable, support for the AfD. The most recent available dataset from the Politbarometer survey will be used in the analysis, being the dataset from 2023 (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen Mannheim, 2024). SPSS Statistics software will be used to conduct the analysis. This allows for the large datasets to be analyzed efficiently and is therefore deemed appropriate for the scope of this research.

In the first step, the distribution of the independent variables across the German states will be analyzed using descriptive statistics. This is done to find potential similarities and differences across the German states that can then potentially explain the variation in the support for populism. In the second step, the dataset will be analyzed using binary logistics regression. This is appropriate since the dependent variable will be dummy coded into 1 for support of AfD and 0 for all other parties, as described in the operationalization, making it a dichotomous variable where a binary logistics regression can be used. This is done to be able to single out the support for the AfD and test it against all other parties. Independent variables will be included as indicated by table 4.1. in the operationalization section. All nominal independent variables will be defined as categorical variables in SPSS. A dummy variable will be included for the German states that tests East Germany against West Germany to find differences between the eastern and western states, where East is coded as 1 and West as 0. The assumptions for the binary logistics regression were tested. The used model will be tested for goodness of fit using a Chi-squared test.

#### **4.4. Limitations**

This section will outline possible limitations of this research approach. Firstly, the research relies on survey data from the representative Politbarometer survey. This means that the limitations of survey data apply to this research, including selection errors and non-response errors. Many questions such as the assessment of a participant's own economic situation are highly subjective, where one participant could have a different perception of what good or bad means in that context than another. Despite this limitation the data is deemed appropriate for this research as it still captures the feelings of the voting population.

Secondly, a limitation of this research is the structure of some of the questions in the Politbarometer survey. While this research can give relevant insights into the support of populism in Germany, the way some of the questions are structured does limit the accuracy in some areas. This mostly concerns the education level and occupational sector. For the education level, the survey only asks participants whether they have completed an apprenticeship or obtained a university degree. It does not however differentiate between the types of apprenticeship or university degree. For the university degree the survey does not differentiate between a bachelor's or master's degree or PhD. For the apprenticeship only the apprenticeship is considered and not for example whether an individual completed a Meister (master craftsmen) certificate as well.

For the occupational sector there is a similar issue. While, overall, the dataset can give a good indication of the support of populism, the structure of how occupational sector is categorized does limit the accuracy. For example, there is no difference made between whether an individual works an office job or a manual job and sectors such as law enforcement or healthcare are not considered. There are four rather small categories for public service, but only three rather broad categories, simple job, higher-level job and management position, that combine a multitude of jobs into each.

Thirdly, a constraint is the availability of data. Data for the Politbarometer survey is collected on a biweekly basis (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024). There are several questions that are not asked every week as the survey would otherwise be too long. This however means that for the data analysis some variables that could be interesting in the analysis could not be included due to a lack of overlap between the relevant weeks in which they were collected. The current research approach, however, still included all the most relevant variables that are necessary to address the hypotheses and answer the research question.

Another limitation of this research is that while the analysis does look at the individual level, it only does so on a general level. The findings are thus significant in explaining the variation in support of populism on a societal level but give little insight into the exact reasons for why an individual, who is for example discontent with politics in Germany or in a less favorable economic situation would support the AfD. A more qualitative research approach would be necessary to give insights into the exact reasons for why an individual is discontented with politics, for example.

Finally, the AfD uses an anti-establishment and anti-media narrative (Lewandowsky, 2015; Berbuir et al, 2015; Steiner & Landwehr, 2018). This could lead to the more hardcore supporters not being willing to answer a survey such as Politbarometer. Especially far right supporters of the AfD would likely not be willing to participate. Despite this limitation, the dataset can still give an accurate prediction of what factors could lead to the support of populism and the AfD in Germany.

Despite the acknowledged limitations, this research can still give relevant and important insights into the factors that can explain the support of populism in Germany and explain the variation between East and West Germany.

## **Chapter 5: Analysis and Findings**

This chapter will present the results and findings of the data analysis. The analysis was conducted from the 2023 Politbarometer survey dataset (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen Mannheim, 2024). Firstly, several descriptive statistics were used to show the distributions of the independent variables across the German states. Secondly, a binary logistics regression was used for the model, using SPSS Statistics Software for the analysis. The model uses support for the AfD as a dependent variable to find factors that can explain the support for the AfD. Independent variables were included as indicated in table 4.1. in the methodology chapter. Finally, the findings will be discussed in relation to the hypotheses.

### **5.1. Descriptive Statistics Overview**

This section will give an overview of the distributions of the independent variables that were used in the binary logistics regression model across the German states. The dataset was analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS. Only valid responses to the questions were considered in the analysis and percentages, meaning responses such as not specified were excluded.

Firstly, gender is rather equally distributed between East and West Germany with slightly more respondents being male, where there are 57% male respondents and 43% female respondents in West Germany and 54% male respondents and 46% female respondents in East Germany. In East Germany the distribution between men and women is slightly more balanced than in West Germany.

There is a difference in age of respondents between East and West Germany. Figure 5.1. shows the distribution of age of respondents across East and West Germany in percent:

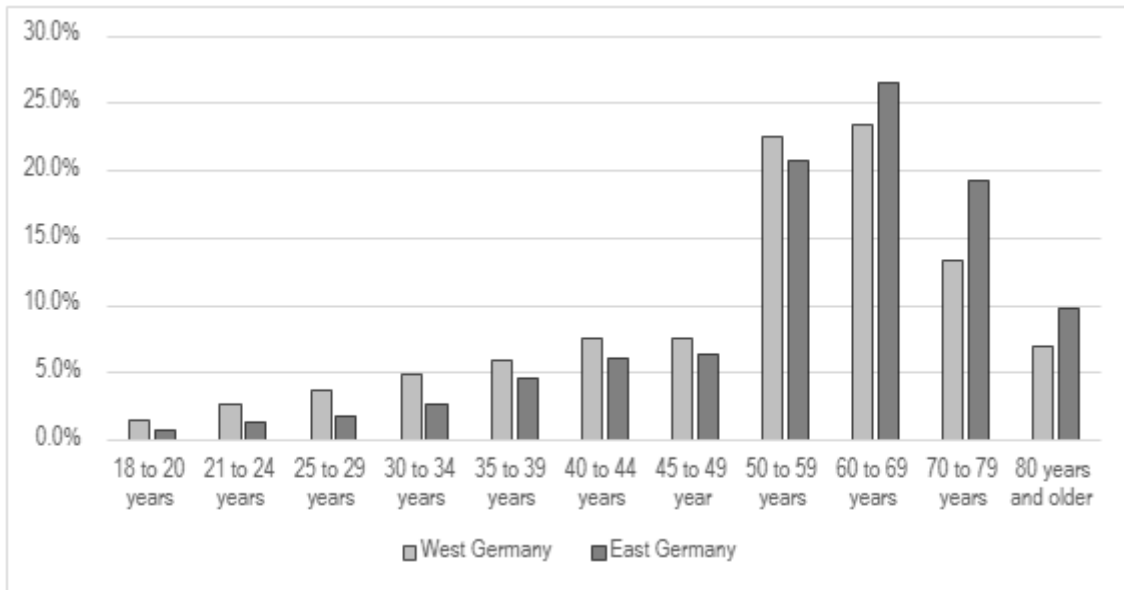


Figure 5.1: Age distribution of respondents across East and West Germany in %.

In West Germany, 7,8% of respondents are below 30, while in East Germany only 3,8% of respondents are below 30. In West Germany 26,0% of respondents are between the age of 30 and 49, while in East Germany only 19,7% of respondents are between the age of 30 and 49. The age groups of 50 to 59 years and 60 to 69 years make up the largest groups of the respondents in both East and West Germany. In East Germany 20,8% of respondents are in the group of 50 to 59 years old, which makes up 22,5% in West Germany. In East Germany 26,5% of respondents are in the groups of 60 to 69 years old, while in West Germany there are 23,5% in that group.

There are more respondents in the age groups 70 to 79 and 80 years and older in East Germany than in West Germany. The age group of 70 to 79 years makes up 19,7% of respondents in East Germany, while in West Germany there are only 13,4% of respondents in that group. In the age group of 80 years and older there are 9,8% of respondents in East Germany and only 6,9% in West Germany. While in both East and West Germany, the groups of 50 to 59 and 60 to 69 are the largest groups, East Germany is lower in all age groups below 60 years old and higher in all age groups above 60 years old than West Germany. This suggests that East Germany has an overall older population than West Germany, with more older people and fewer younger people than West Germany.

There is a difference in education level between East and West Germany. In East Germany 78,4% of respondents have completed and apprenticeship, while only 68,0% of respondents in West Germany have completed and apprenticeship. The number of respondents that have obtained a university degree is similar between East and West Germany, with 39,7% of

respondents having obtained a university degree in East Germany and 41,6% in West Germany. It is important to add that completing an apprenticeship and obtaining a university degree are not mutually exclusive, meaning that a respondent can have done both. The higher number of people that completed an apprenticeship in East Germany is in line with the finding concerning the occupational sector.

There are some differences between East and West Germany in the occupational sector of respondents. Figure 5.2. gives an overview of the occupational sector of respondents in East and West Germany in percent:

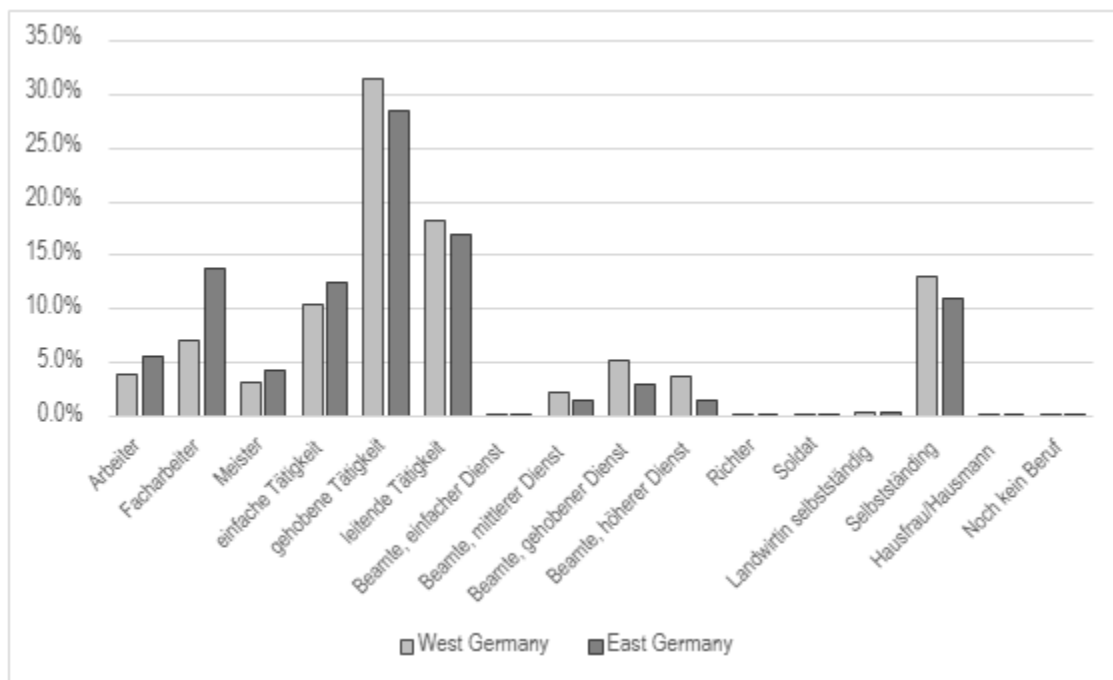


Figure 5.2: Occupational sector distribution of respondents across East and West Germany in %.

The largest difference between East and West Germany is in the number of specialized workers (Facharbeiter), with 13,8% of respondents in East Germany and only 7,2% in West Germany. This could explain the higher number of individuals having completed an apprenticeship in East Germany, as specialized workers need to have completed an apprenticeship. In East Germany there are also more wage workers (Arbeiter) and master craftsmen (Meister), with 5,6% wage workers in East Germany and 3,9% in West Germany, and 4,4% master craftsmen in East Germany and only 3,2% in West Germany. This suggest that East Germany has a higher proportion of manufacturing industry compared to West Germany. There are more respondents working a simple Job (einfache Tätigkeit) in East Germany than in West Germany, with 12,5% in East Germany and 10,5% in West Germany. In both East and West Germany, the largest group of respondents are working in higher-level jobs (gehobene Tätigkeit), with 31,4% in higher level jobs in West Germany and 28,4 in East Germany. 18,2% of respondents are

working in management positions (leitende Tätigkeit) in West Germany and 17% in East Germany. In East Germany there are slightly fewer people working in higher-level jobs and management positions than in West Germany, with the difference however only being small.

West Germany has an overall higher number of public servants in all categories (Beamte, einfacher Dienst; Beamte, mittlerer Dienst; Beamte, gehobener Dienst; Beamte, höherer Dienst) with a total of 11,4% of respondents in public service positions in West Germany and only 6,4% in public service positions in East Germany. The difference in public service employees could partially be explained by all the federal ministries being in West Germany (Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, 2024), meaning that most of the public servants working for federal institutions will be working in West Germany. West Germany has a slightly higher number of self-employed (Selbstständig) individuals with 13,1% of respondents being self-employed in West Germany and 11,0% being self-employed in East Germany. The number of judges (Richter), soldiers (Soldat) and stay at home wives/husbands (Hausfrau/Hausmann) is similar between East and West Germany, with 0,1% judges and 0,2% soldiers in both East and West Germany and 0,2% stay at home wives/husbands in West Germany and 0,1% in East Germany. Finally, the number of respondents that do not yet have an occupation (Noch kein Beruf) is similar as well, with 0,2% in West Germany and 0,1% in East Germany.

There are differences in how respondents assess their own current economic situation between East and West Germany. Figure 5.3. gives an overview of how respondents in East and West Germany assess their own current economic situation in percent:

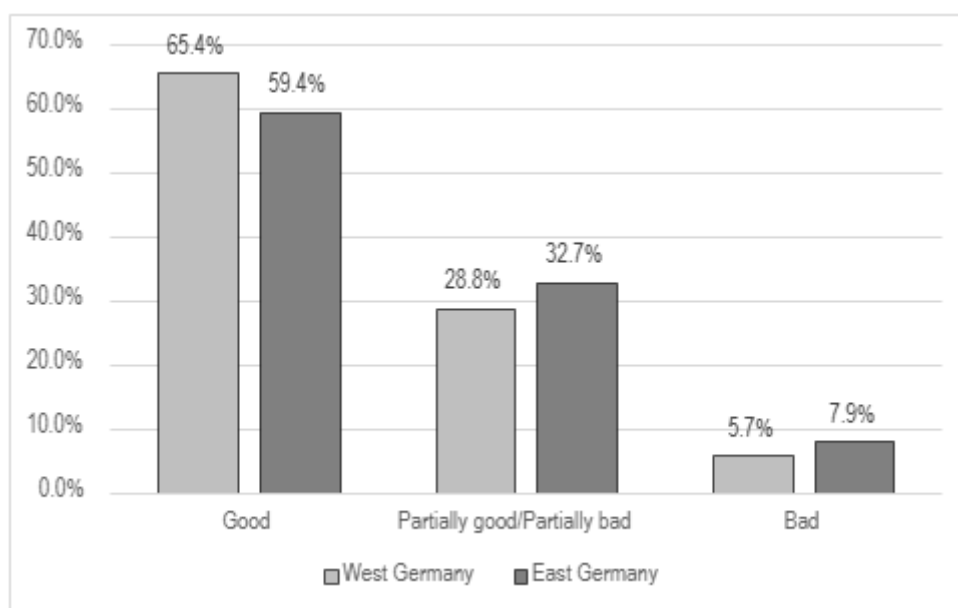


Figure 5.3: Assessment of own current economic situation in %.

In both East and West Germany, the main portion of respondents indicated their own current economic situation to be good. The number is higher in West Germany, with 65,4% indicating their economic situation to be good in West Germany and only 59,4% indicating their economic situation to be good in East Germany. There are more respondents that indicate their own current economic situation to be partially good and partially bad in East Germany than in West Germany, with 32,7% of respondents in East Germany and 28,8% in West Germany. There are also more respondents the indicated their economic situation to be bad in East Germany, with 7,9% indicating their economic situation to be bad in East Germany and only 5,7% in West Germany. This suggests that while overall the main portion of respondents in both East and West Germany is in a good economic situation, there are more individuals in a partially good and partially bad or bad economic situation in East Germany.

For the prediction of the own economic situation in one year there are similar differences between East and West Germany. Figure 5.4. shows and overview of respondent's prediction of their own economic situation in one year in percent:

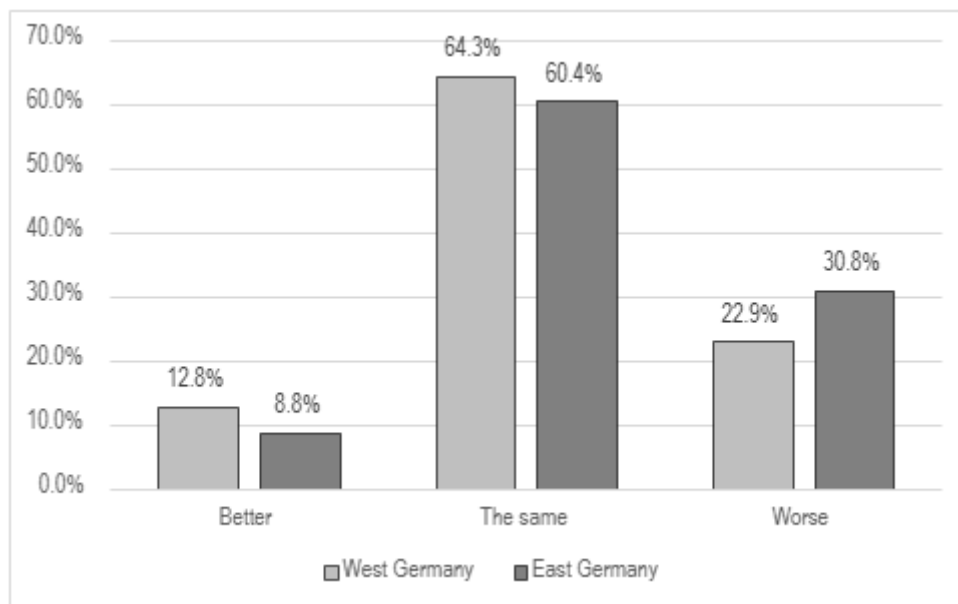


Figure 5.4: Prediction of own economic situation in 1 year in %.

The main portion of respondents in both East and West Germany predicts their own economic situation to be the same in one year, with 64,3% predicting their own economic situation to be the same in one year in West Germany and 60,4% in East Germany. There are more individuals who predicted their own economic situation to be better in one year in West Germany than in East Germany, with 12,8% in West Germany and only 8,8% in East Germany. Additionally, there are more individuals who predicted their own economic situation to be worse in one year in East Germany than in West Germany, with 30,8% in East Germany and 22,9% in West

Germany. Overall, fewer individuals in East Germany predicted their economic situation to be better in one year than in West Germany and more individuals in East Germany predicted their economic situation to be the same or worse in one year than in West Germany.

The responses to the assessment of the own current economic situation and own economic situation in one year suggest that overall people in East Germany are worse off economically than people in West Germany. Figure 5.3. and 5.4. also suggest that there are more individuals in economic decline in East Germany than in West Germany.

There is a difference in how respondents assess the performance of the current government between East and West Germany. Figure 5.5. shows an overview of respondent's assessment of the current government's performance in percent:

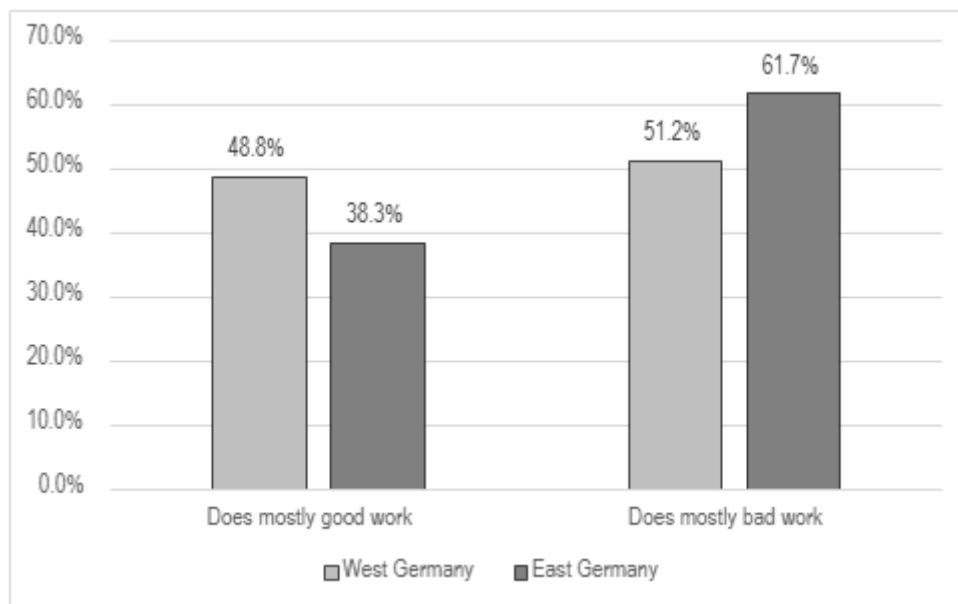


Figure 5.5: Assessment: Does the current government do its job well? In %.

Overall, in both East and West Germany, more respondents indicated that the current government does mostly bad work than that it does mostly good work, with the responses being more balanced in West Germany. While in West Germany, 48,8% of respondents think that the current government does mostly good work, only 38,3% of respondents in East Germany think that the current government does mostly good work. More respondents in East Germany think that the government does mostly bad work, with 61,7% in East Germany and 51,2% in West Germany.

There is also a significant difference in respondents' satisfaction with democracy between East and West Germany. Figure 5.6. gives an overview of respondent's satisfaction with democracy between East and West Germany in percent:

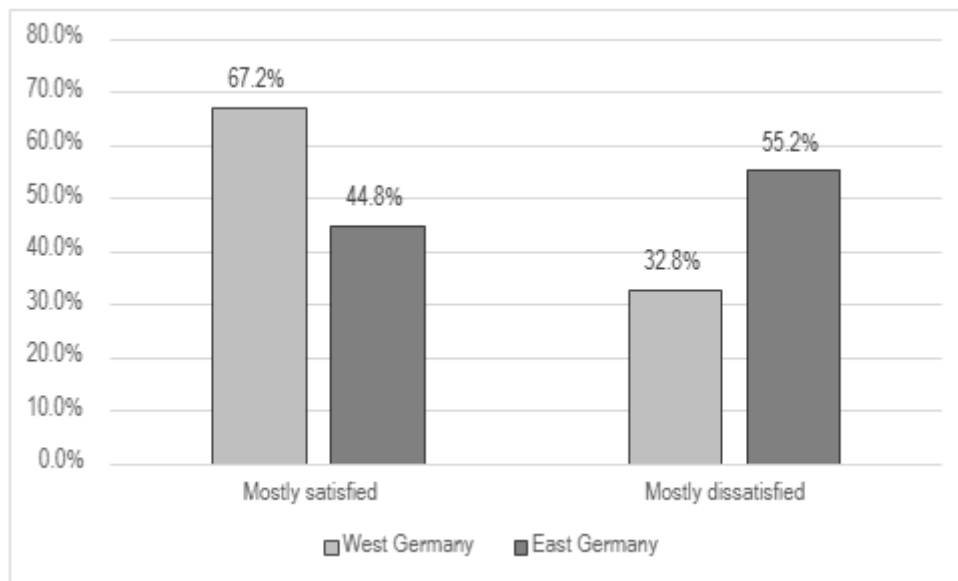


Figure 5.6: Satisfaction with democracy in %.

In West Germany 67,2% of respondents are overall mostly satisfied with democracy in Germany while in East Germany only 44,8% of respondents are mostly satisfied with democracy. In East Germany 55,2% of respondents are mostly dissatisfied with democracy, while only 32,8% of respondents in West Germany are mostly dissatisfied with democracy. Overall, most of the respondents in West Germany are mostly satisfied with democracy in Germany while in East Germany most of the respondents are mostly dissatisfied with democracy.

The responses from Figure 5.5. and Figure 5.6. suggest that overall, more individuals are discontent with politics in East Germany than in West Germany.

Finally, for the dependent variable, support for the AfD, there is a difference between East and West Germany as well. Figure 5.7. shows the support for the AfD in East and West Germany in percent:

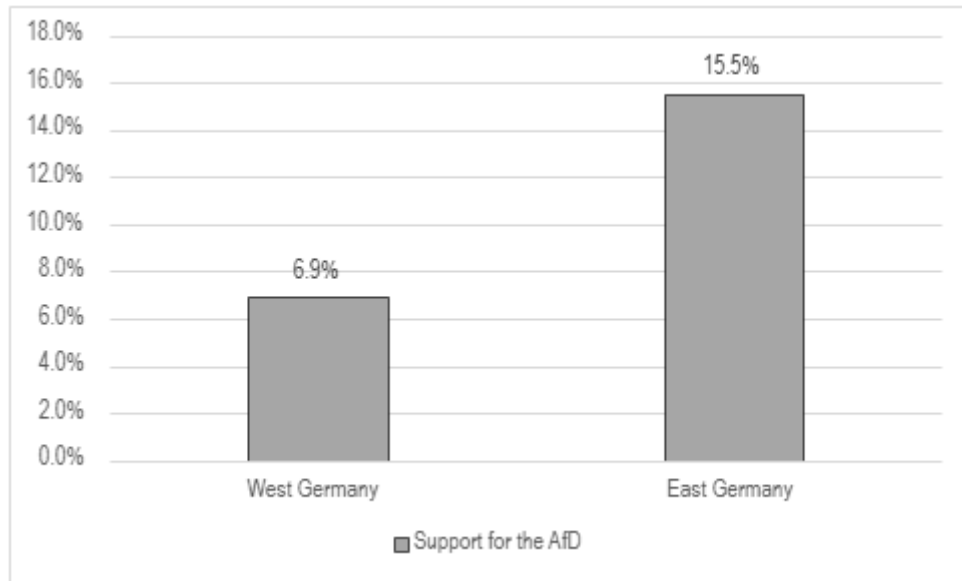


Figure 5.7: Support for the AfD in %.

In West Germany 6,9% of respondents indicated that they would vote for the AfD if there was an upcoming election the next Sunday and in East Germany 15,5% of respondents indicated that they would vote for the AfD. In East Germany the support for the AfD is over double that of in West Germany.

## 5.2. Binary logistics regression model

For the binary logistics regression model a total of 2927 cases were included in the final analysis, of which 213 supported the AfD. This is due to not all relevant variables overlapping because of the biweekly data collection method used in the Politbarometer survey and not all questions in the survey being asked every week, meaning that the dataset must be narrowed down from the initial 27.123 cases due to availability constraints in the data. The number of cases is appropriate to give accurate results for the analysis. A Chi-square test was performed which indicated significance, meaning that the proposed model fits the data well. An additional Nagelkerke R Square test indicated good fit. The assumptions for using a binary logistics regression were tested and indicated that the proposed model is appropriate for the data with no problematic correlation between independent variables.

The dependent variable was dummy coded for support for the AfD, where supporting the AfD was coded as 1 and all other parties as 0. Independent variables included in the analysis were: German State (East or West), occupational sector (Beruflicher Status), education level (Abgeschlossene Lehre/Abgeschlossenes Studium), age (Alter), gender (Geschlecht), assessment of own current economic situation (Beurteilung eigene wirtschaftliche Lage heute), prediction of own economic situation in one year (Beurteilung eigene wirtschaftliche Lage in 1 Jahr), assessment of whether the current government does their job well (Macht die Regierung ihre Arbeit gut?) and satisfaction with democracy (Demokratiezufriedenheit). The names of the independent variables were translated from German, with the original names that are used in the Politbarometer survey in brackets. These factors allow for a good overview to test the previously formulated hypotheses. Table 5.1. shows the results of the analysis of the binary logistics regression model:

<b>IV</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>S.E.</b>	<b>Exp(B)</b>
German state (East/West)	0,452**	0,176	1,572
Occupational sector	---	---	---
Facharbeiter(1)	1,232	0,778	3,429
Meister(2)	1,491	0,806	4,443
einfache Tätigkeit(3)	0,773	0,756	2,165
gehobene Tätigkeit(4)	0,437	0,682	1,548
leitende Tätigkeit(5)	0,660	0,687	1,935
Beamte, einfacher Dienst(6)	5,378**	2,005	216,561
Beamte, mittlerer Dienst(7)	0,540	0,854	1,715
Beamte, gehobener Dienst(8)	-0,311	0,825	0,733
Beamte, höherer Dienst(9)	0,170	0,871	1,186
Richter(10)	-15,699	21346,083	0,000
Soldat(11)	-16,319	18524,241	0,000
Landwirtin selbständig(12)	0,399	1,063	1,491
Selbstständig(13)	0,941	0,690	2,561
Hausfrau/Hausmann(14)	-13,607	23150,446	0,000
Noch kein Beruf(15)	-16,701	19402,525	0,000
Apprenticeship completed	-0,209	0,192	0,811
University degree obtained	0,025	0,218	1,025
Age	---	---	---
21 to 24 years	-0,544	1,404	0,580
25 to 29 years	-4,395*	2,104	0,012
30 to 34 years	-1,636	1,249	0,195
35 to 39 years	-0,758	1,203	0,469
40 to 44 years	-1,204	1,213	0,300
45 to 49 years	-1,007	1,205	0,365
50 to 59 years	-0,361	1,179	0,697
60 to 69 years	-0,820	1,183	0,440
70 to 79 years	-0,852	1,193	0,426
80 years and up	-1,064	1,236	0,345
Gender	-0,411*	0,185	0,663
Assessment of own current economic situation	---	---	---
Assessment of own current economic situation partially good/partially bad	0,091	0,182	1,095
Assessment of own current economic situation bad	-0,200	0,358	0,819
Prediction of own economic situation in 1 year	---	---	---
Prediction of own economic situation in 1 year same	0,076	0,342	1,079
Prediction of own economic situation in 1 year worse	1,070***	0,340	2,914
Does the current government do its job well?	3,075***	0,474	21,654
Satisfaction with democracy	1,662***	0,210	5,270

Table 5.1: Results of binary logistics regression in SPSS. Reference categories used: For occupation: wage worker; For age: 18 to 20 years; For own current economic situation: good; For economic situation in 1 year: better. Coding for other variables is indicated in the analysis below.

Firstly, the difference between the German states was found to be significant at the 99% confidence level. East was coded as 1 and West was coded as 0. The correlation coefficient is positive, indicating that the probability that an individual supports the AfD was significantly higher in East Germany compared to West Germany. The standard error is 0,176. Based on the odds ratio, individuals in East Germany are 57% more likely to support the AfD.

For the occupational sector, public servants in simple jobs (Beamte, einfacher Dienst) were found to be significant at the 99% confidence level. The correlation coefficient is positive, indicating that the probability that an individual working a simple job in the public service is more likely to support the AfD. The standard error is 2,005. This is rather high, indicating a lower accuracy of the prediction. The odds ratio is at 216,561, which is a very large result that may indicate an error. After checking the data, it was found that this occupational sector group only included 2 cases, which is too few for an accurate analysis and could indicate the result being due to random chance or an outlier. Therefore, this result cannot be considered as accurately representing this group.

For age the group of 25 to 29 years is found to be significant at the 95% confidence level. The correlation coefficient is negative indicating that the probability that an individual between the age of 25 and 29 is significantly less likely to support the AfD. The standard error is 2,104, indicating a rather low accuracy of the prediction. The odds ratio indicates that individuals between 25 and 29 are 99% less likely to support the AfD.

Gender is found to be significant at the 95% confidence level. Female was coded as 1 and Male was coded as 0 in the analysis. The correlation coefficient is negative, indicating that the probability that a female individual supports the AfD is lower than a male individual. The standard error is 0,185. Based on the odds ratio, women are found to be 34% less likely to support the AfD than men.

The prediction of the own economic situation in one year to be worse was found to be significant at the 99,9% confidence level. The correlation coefficient is positive, indicating that if an individual predicts their own economic situation to be worse in one year, they are more likely to support the AfD. The standard error is 0,340. Based on the odds ratio, individuals who predicted their own economic situation to be worse in one year are 191% more likely to support the AfD.

The assessment of the current government's performance was found to be significant at the 99,9% confidence level. The response that the government does mostly bad work was coded as 1 and the response that it does mostly good work was coded as 0 in the analysis. The

correlation coefficient is positive, which indicates that individuals who assessed the current government to do mostly bad work are more likely to support the AfD. The standard error is 0,474. The odds ratio is very large at 21,654, which indicates that individuals who assessed the current government to do mostly bad work are 2065% more likely to support the AfD than those who assess the current government to do mostly good work. While the odds ratio is very large, this could be due to extremely low support of the AfD among those who assess the current government to do mostly good work. The standard error is not problematically large. In addition to this, 1528 respondents assessed the current government to do mostly good work, and 1399 respondents assessed the current government to do mostly bad work, which is enough cases in each category to get accurate results for the analysis to consider this finding as accurate.

Finally, satisfaction with democracy was found to be significant at the 99,9% confidence level. The response of mostly dissatisfied was coded as 1 and the response of mostly satisfied was coded as 0 in the analysis. The correlation coefficient is positive, which indicates that individuals who are mostly dissatisfied with democracy in Germany are more likely to support the AfD. The standard error is 0,210. The odds ratio indicates that individuals who are mostly dissatisfied with democracy in Germany are 427% more likely to support the AfD. This rather large odds ratio could potentially be explained by a very low number of individuals who are mostly satisfied with democracy supporting the AfD.

Education level was not found to be significant. Neither completing an apprenticeship nor obtaining a university degree was found to be a significant indicator of support for the AfD. Additionally, the assessment of the own current economic situation was not found to be significant. For the occupational sector there were four other notable possible outliers due to limited numbers of cases in that category, namely judges (Richter), soldiers (Soldat), stay at home wife/husband (Hausfrau/Hausmann) and no occupation yet (Noch kein Beruf). As can be seen in Figure 5.2., there are only very few cases in these categories in the dataset, which is partially due to not many individuals falling into these categories in Germany in general, making it harder to get accurate predictions for those specific occupations.

### **5.3. Analysis and Discussion**

This section will discuss the findings of the descriptive statistics and binary logistics regression in relation to the hypotheses and research topic.

#### ***Economic situation***

Hypothesis 1 predicts the support for populism to be higher among those in a less favorable economic situation. The analysis did not find individuals that assess their current economic situation as bad to be more likely to support the AfD. Individuals that predict their economic situation to be worse in one year, however, are found to be more likely to support the AfD. The findings suggest that being in economic decline is a more important factor for the support of populism than the actual current economic situation.

Based on the findings of the descriptive statistics analysis, both in East and West Germany, most respondents assessed their current economic situation to be good, even though the proportion is slightly lower in East Germany. Despite this however, almost a third of the respondents in East Germany and almost a quarter of the respondents in West Germany predicted their economic situation to be worse in one year, indicating economic decline. Overall, more individuals in East Germany predict their economic situation to be worse in one year than in West Germany and fewer individuals predict their economic situation to get better. While the current economic situation is not found to have a significant impact on the support of populism, economic decline does, therefore partially supporting hypothesis 1.

#### ***Discontent with politics***

Hypothesis 2 predicts the support for populism to be higher among those who feel discontent with politics. The analysis found both individuals who assess the current government to do mostly bads work as well as individuals, who are mostly dissatisfied with democracy in Germany to be more likely to support the AfD, therefore supporting hypothesis 2.

The descriptive statistics analysis indicates a large difference between East and West Germany. Over halve of the respondents from East Germany indicated that they are mostly dissatisfied with democracy in Germany, while about two-thirds of the respondents from West Germany indicated that they are mostly satisfied. Respondents from East Germany are also less satisfied

with the current government than respondents from West Germany indicating more individuals discontent with politics overall in East Germany.

### *Age*

Hypothesis 3 predicts the support for populism to be higher among older than among younger individuals. The analysis found the age group of 25 to 29 years old to be significantly less likely to support populism. Other age groups were, however, not found to be significant. The descriptive statistics analysis found East Germany to have an overall older population than West Germany and the group of 25- to 29-year-olds is only about half as large in East Germany as in West Germany. While this could partially explain some of the variation, it is not enough evidence to support hypothesis 3. While the analysis did find the age group of 25 to 29 years old to be less likely to support populism, this is only one group, which is some evidence in support of hypothesis 3, but not enough evidence to fully support hypothesis 3. Gender was however found to be significant, with men being more likely to support populism.

### *Education level and occupational sector*

Hypothesis 4 predicts the support for populism to be higher among those that are less educated. The analysis did not find education level to be significant, therefore, not finding evidence to support hypothesis 4. This could partially be due to the Politbarometer survey not asking for respondents' highest degree or education level but rather if they have or have not completed an apprenticeship or obtained a university degree (Forschungsgruppe Wahlen e.V., 2024). These are not mutually exclusive, meaning that in some cases the responses could overlap, meaning a respondent has answered yes to both.

Hypothesis 5 predicts the support for populism to be higher among those working in lower skilled jobs. The analysis did not find the occupational sector to be significant for the support of populism. The analysis therefore did not find evidence to support hypothesis 5.

### *German state*

Hypothesis 6 predicts the support for populism to be higher in East Germany than in West Germany. The analysis found that respondents from East Germany are significantly more likely to support the AfD than those from West Germany, therefore confirming hypothesis 6. The

descriptive statistics analysis also found the support for the AfD in East Germany to be over double that of West Germany.

To address the research question of what factors can explain the support for populism in Germany, based on the descriptive statistics and binary logistics regression analysis, several factors were identified that can explain the variation in support. The most significant factors that were found are dissatisfaction with democracy in Germany, discontent with politics and the current government and being in economic decline. The distribution of these factors between East and West Germany can explain the difference in support of the AfD.

## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This research aimed at explaining the support for populism in Germany and the variation in support between the eastern and western German states. Based on a quantitative analysis of the 2023 dataset from the representative Politbarometer survey in Germany using a binary logistics regression, it can be concluded that discontent with politics and the government, dissatisfaction with democracy and being in economic decline are contributing factors for the support of populism. The varying distributions of these factors can help to explain the variation in its support between East and West Germany. The results indicate that individuals who are discontent with the current government, dissatisfied with democracy in Germany or predict their own economic situation to get worse show higher support for populism. Additionally, in the eastern German states these factors are found to be much more present than in the western German states, with the most notable difference being satisfaction with democracy. Over half of the respondents in East Germany indicated dissatisfaction with democracy, while in West Germany, about two-thirds are satisfied with democracy.

These findings are in line with previous research and theory on the support of populism. The findings regarding the economic situation are in line with the findings of Fritsch et al. (2021) who find that regions that are left behind economically or are in economic decline are more likely to support populism (Fritsch et al, 2021). It is also an indicator that supports the findings of Gozgor (2022), that economic uncertainty increases voting behavior in favor of populism and the findings of Funke et al. (2016), that in times of crises and policy uncertainty, support for populism increases (Gozgor, 2022; Funke et al, 2016).

The findings that individuals who are discontent with politics are more likely to support populism are in line with the findings of Spruyt et al. (2016) and Westle (2020), who find personal discontent with politics to increase voting behavior in favor of populism (Spruyt et al, 2016; Westle, 2020). The narrative that populism uses is likely to resonate with individuals who feel discontent with politics, framing often complex or personal issues as shared problems and uniting different grievances under one umbrella through the use of empty signifiers (Laclau, 2005; Spruyt et al, 2016). The findings that those who are dissatisfied with democracy are more likely to support populism are in line with the findings of Schröder (2018) (Schröder, 2018). The differences between East and West Germany regarding satisfaction with democracy support the findings of Pickel & Pickel (2023), that find individuals from Eastern Germany to be less satisfied with democracy (Pickel & Pickel, 2023).

The research clearly illustrates the importance of discontent with politics and the individual economic situation on voting behavior but raises some questions regarding factors such as education, age or occupation on the support of populism, neither of which were found to be significant in the analysis. This goes against some of the theoretical findings of other research in the field, such as those of Franz et al. (2018), who find the support for the AfD to be higher in regions with an above-average population of older people (Franz et al, 2018). This could possibly be explained by the way that their study was conducted. Franz et al. (2018) analyzed support for the AfD on a regional basis, rather than looking at the individual level. This could mean that there are other factors, which may be economic for example, that can explain the support for the AfD in those regions. The lack of evidence for the analysis could indicate that it is not necessarily the older individuals that support the AfD but rather a mix of individuals from all age groups.

An additional factor may be that these above-described regions are not attractive for younger individuals to live in, which could be due to various reasons such as economic decline for example, leading to younger people moving away or just no new younger people moving to those regions. This would drive up the average age in those regions. The main driver for the support of populism could then be another factor such as discontent with politics, economic decline or economic uncertainty (Spruyt et al, 2016; Funke et al, 2016; Gozgor, 2022).

The findings also do not align with Arzheimer (2009), who finds that especially young men and older men support populism (Arzheimer, 2009). Gender was however found to be significant, with men being more likely to support populism. This is in line with the findings of Arzheimer (2009), that men are more likely to support populism (Arzheimer, 2009). A more precise analysis would be necessary to conclusively analyze gender and age-based differences in voting behavior in favor of populism and the AfD.

While education was not found to be significant for the support of populism, Coffé & Michels (2014) find that less educated individuals are more likely to be discontent with politics, hinting that possibly education is less of a factor for the support of populism than other factors such as discontent with politics (Coffé & Michels, 2014).

A possible explanation could be that Germany has a good welfare system, meaning that the experienced vulnerability described by Spruyt et al. (2016), stemming from difficulty finding a job is at least partially buffered by the welfare state (Spruyt et al, 2016). Those who have difficulty finding a job can still rely on the welfare state, possibly lessening their burden. In addition, unemployment was found not to contribute to the support of populism (Franz et al,

2018). These factors could indicate that the case of Germany is different from cases used in other studies, such as Flanders which was used in the research by Spruyt et al. (2016).

The lack of evidence from the analysis for the occupational sector having an impact on support of populism goes against the findings of Franz et al. (2018), that the support for the AfD is highest in regions with a high concentration of people that are employed in the manufacturing sector, and the findings of Arzheimer (2009), that those working routine nonmanual jobs and those working in the manufacturing sector are more prone to support populism (Franz et al, 2018; Arzheimer, 2009). This could possibly be explained by other factors that are present in these regions, other than the occupational sector, but further research would be needed to get insights into this.

Due to some limitations of how questions in the Politbarometer survey are structured, mainly referring to those related to education level and occupational sector, it would be recommended to further research the effects of education and occupational sector on the support for populism using a more comprehensive approach for measuring these factors.

This research contributes to the study of populism in Germany by highlighting factors that contribute to the differences in support of populism between the eastern and western German states. Despite some limitations, this research can give important insights to researchers and policymakers into the factors that contribute to the support of populism in Germany. This research looks at the individual but can only give insights into voting behavior on a general level. Further research is needed, especially into the reasons for discontent with politics and low satisfaction with democracy in Germany. This could further our understanding of what drives individuals towards voting behavior in favor of populism. A more qualitative research approach could give important insights into the exact reasons for the support of populism. Focus groups or semi-structured interviews with individuals who would support the AfD could be good approaches to find the exact reasoning behind the support for the AfD.

Finally, for policymakers it is recommended to further investigate the reasons for low satisfaction with democracy and the current government and devise policies to address these issues. The findings of the analysis indicate that the support for the AfD is caused by some level of discontent with politics or economic vulnerability, meaning that policies to address these possibly vulnerable groups and improve the situation could lessen the support for the AfD.

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