

The rise of the AfD: A social media analysis

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In 2017, a far-right party entered the German parliament for the first time in over half a century. The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) became the third largest party in the government. Its campaign focused on Euroscepticism and a nativist stand against immigration. To spread this message, the AfD relied on social media channels. This paper seeks to understand the AfD's social media strategy over the last years and measure its effectiveness. For this reason, we collected over 12,000 posts from Facebook political pages and over 500 million tweets related to German politics. The data confirms the AfD's superior online popularity in comparison to the rest of the German political parties. We further analyzed the difference between the right-wing party's 2017 manifesto and its discourse on social media. The results suggest that on social media the AfD avoided dealing with its economic proposals and focused on pushing its anti-immigration agenda to gain popularity.

1. Introduction

The rise of the Alternative für Deutschland presented a schism in German politics. It originally emerged as an anti-Euro party and then gradually adopted the language of right-wing populists (Schmitt-Beck 2017). The AfD has advocated for anti-Euro, anti-immigration and anti-refugee policies, which had been taboo topics in German politics. Its anti-establishment rhetoric parallels that of other EU right-wing populist parties, such as the National Front in France, the Party for Freedom in Netherlands and the Lega Nord in Italy. The surge in far-right voting in Europe calls for a better understanding of the roots of this new political wave.

The AfD was founded in February 2013 as a eurosceptic party by a group of university professors and former politicians. Their proposals centered in economic liberalism, ordoliberalism and the idea of a free market. The originally single-issue party soon found support from right-wing groups and started shifting toward an anti-immigration ideology. Before the AfD, right-wing populist parties had achieved limited electoral success. The AfD overcame this burden by distancing itself from the past and presenting itself as a party with economic expertise and scientific authority (Grimm 2015). Moreover, it was able to stabilize a nation-wide organization (Berbair et al. 2016). In the 2013 federal elections, the AfD missed the 5% threshold to enter parliament by only 0.3%. Nevertheless,

by the next year, the party obtained seven seats in the European Parliament and later secured the entry into three state parliaments.

The rapid increase in the polls would not have been possible without the supporters behind the AfD. At its beginnings, the AfD's constituents consisted of well educated, high-income citizens (Bergmann et al. 2016). Following 2014, there was a great surge of low-income earners as supporters of the AfD (Niedermayer & Hofrichter 2016). According to the latest study —the 2017 election report from the Infratest dimap Institute¹— the major group that voted for the AfD consisted of men from East Germany. Kim (2018) investigated why lower socio-economic groups like blue-collar workers and unemployed support a party with radical market-oriented policies, which would not benefit them. Kim argues that the AfD strategically avoided discussing the party's economic proposals to avert divisions between its supporters.

Figure 1 tracks the poll numbers of the six main German political parties provided by the Forsa Institute. Preferences for the AfD went from 5% in 2015 to 15% in 2018, tripling its support base. The inflection in the opinion polls started in September 2015, at the beginning of the *refugee crisis*. The AfD's popularity grew during one year, and afterwards the polls remained stable. After the 2017 federal elections, the AfD's poll numbers continued to increase, which suggests approval from the supporters on the party's work in parliament.

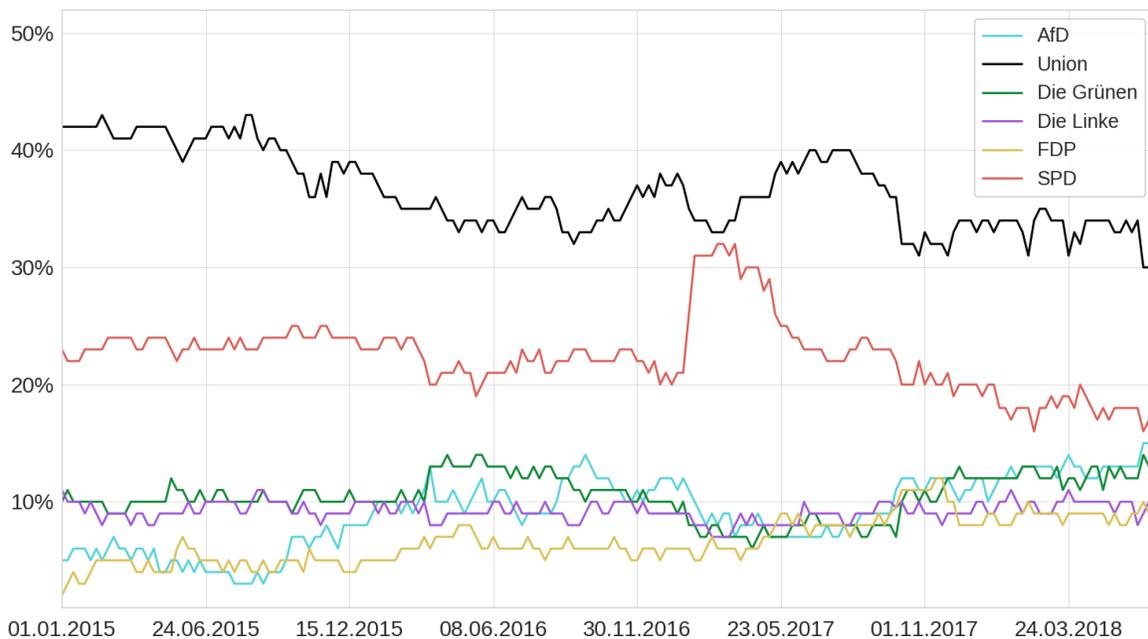


Figure 1 Polls provided by the Forsa Institute. Union is the combination of CDU and CSU.

¹ <https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundesweit/wahlreport-deutschland/2017/>

2. The AfD's Strategy

Social media has been an important communication channel for the AfD since its foundation. It provided a space into public opinion outside of mainstream media. According to the AfD speaker Christian Lüth, the party concentrated on Facebook from the beginning². During the past years, the AfD has been effective on social media as reported on different media platforms^{3 4 5 6} and on previous research: Arzheimer (2015) analyzed Facebook posts from 2013 and 2014 and ascertained that the AfD had more populist rhetoric on Facebook than on the other communication channels; Schelter et al. (2016) evaluated the Facebook posts of six political parties in Germany for 2014 and 2015 and reported that social media constituted a major success factor of the AfD; and Hegelich (2018) explored the social media campaigns in the months before the 2017 German federal election.

From the literature, we deduct three main points that explain the AfD's effectiveness on social media:

- **Alternative media:** The AfD has relied on social media platforms to spread its message. The party leaders have blamed mainstream media for presenting them in a negative light and obscuring their intentions. Using social media as an alternative media, the AfD reached a part of the German population that felt disenchanted with already established communication channels. Indeed, a study from the Otto-Brenner-Stiftung (Decker et al. 2017) confirmed that followers of the AfD have less trust in the German media. Hence, they prefer to obtain information from social media platforms. Furthermore, a 2018 Pew Research Center report⁷ ascertained that people with populist preferences in Germany have lower trust in media. The right-wing political party has taken advantage of this fact by employing a strong social media campaign.

- **High online activity:** The AfD's strategy is to make use of social media as much as possible and have its content go viral. To achieve this, the AfD regularly asks its supporters to share the online content. Furthermore, the provocative tone it uses⁸ together with its critical position on political correctness (Nestler & Rohgal 2014) makes the users more prone to engage and reply with positive or negative comments. Another factor that stimulates high user response is the negative

² <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/gezielte-grenzverletzungen-so-aggressiv-macht-die-afd-wahlkampf-auf-facebook-1.3664785-2#redirectedFromLandingpage>

³ <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/ueber-den-erfolg-der-afd-durch-soziale-medien-14545155.html>

⁴ https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/die-afd-und-die-sozialen-medien-provokation-als-online.2897.de.html?dram:article_id=381230

⁵ <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/datenanalyse-wie-die-parteien-wahlkampf-in-social-media-machen/20151802.html>

⁶ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/09/26/germanys-far-right-party-afd-won-the-facebook-battle-by-a-lot/?utm_term=.22a29b72742d

⁷ http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/13/2018/05/27124059/PJ_2018.05.14_Western-Europe.FINAL.pdf

⁸ <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/afd-strategiepapier-101.html>

and aggressive tone in AfD’s anti-establishment and anti-immigrant stances given that Fan et al. (2013) showed that hate spreads faster on social media.

- **Online Manipulation:** The right-wing party was not alone in spreading its message as pro-AfD social bots were active on Facebook⁹ and Twitter (Neudert et al. 2017). Social bots (Ferrara et al. 2016) are automated fake accounts that try to look like real users and whose purpose is to viralize topics and manipulate trends. Even though Neudert et al. (2017) found low levels of automation in the time of the 2017 German federal election, they recognized that social bots in their sample were working in favor of the AfD. Although it is not possible to track the origin of these bots, two online communities — Infokrieg and Reconquista Germania— had the explicit goal of trolling social media in support of the AfD¹⁰. It is difficult to quantify whether the online manipulation attempts had a real impact on public opinion. However, they certainly contributed to boosting AfD’s message online.

These three points align with the social media activity of other populist parties in Europe (Schmidt 2018, Mazzoleni & Bracciale 2015, Dittrich 2017, Schmid et al. 2018). Social media has given populist actors freedom to articulate their ideology and spread their message (Engesser et al. 2017). It has taken the role in populist movements as the people’s voice (Gerbaudo 2018) facilitating the reinforcement of an anti-establishment ideology common to populist parties (Meny & Surel 2002). Furthermore, there are no gatekeepers on social media who fact-check the information, which gives populists “fertile space” to spread their rhetoric (Khosravini 2017).

In the following sections, we quantify the AfD’s success on social media over the last years. First, we explain the data collection procedure and subsequently, we present the main findings.

3. Data Collection

In order to analyze AfD’s social media campaign, we collected data from Facebook and Twitter using the application programming interfaces (APIs) of each platform. We focused not only on AfD, but also on the other six main political parties in Germany: CDU, Germany’s main conservative party; CSU, the sister party of the CDU in Bavaria; Bündnis90/Die Grünen, the green party in Germany; FDP, a neo-liberal party; SPD, Germany’s social-democratic party; and Die Linke, the radical left party. This allowed us to compare and measure AfD’s effectiveness on social media.

From Facebook, we retrieved the posts of the political parties in the period from January 2015 to May 2018. This amounted to a total of 12,912 posts. The data included all of the comments and reactions on the posts and their respective comments. The number of posts is smaller in comparison to those shown in the research of Arzheimer (2015) and Schelter et al. (2016). This is

⁹ <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/digitaler-wahlkampf-frauke-petry-und-die-bots-14863763.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/26/germany-far-right-election-afd-trolls>

due to changes in the Facebook API. Previously, the API provided the drafts, status changes and post modifications. Our data only includes the final posts written by each party since we are not interested in quantifying every modification made by the page administrators.

On the other hand, we collected the tweets from the political parties' Twitter accounts for a one-year period, starting in July 2017. We included tweets from users that mentioned or retweeted the tweets from the parties. This dataset comprises 1,961,318 tweets. Moreover, we decided to gather tweets with politically-relevant hashtags and tweets from prominent actors and opinion setters in German politics. These accounts included politicians, journalists, media portals and political organizations. Overall, we gathered 554,354,763 tweets.

We obtained the tweets from the parties using Twitter's Search API, which allows accessing the last 3,200 tweets from an account. We gathered the rest of the tweets by implementing an automated procedure that continuously accesses data from Twitter's Streaming API. In contrast to the Search API, the Streaming API allows retrieving near real-time tweets based on certain criteria, such as hashtags, keywords or geolocations. The limitation of this API is that it only provides a sample of the complete tweets. The enterprise version of the API, called Firehose, makes it possible to query the whole Twitter history, but its cost is restrictive. Morstatter et al. (2013) analyzed the differences between Firehose and the Streaming API and showed that there exists a bias in the sample from the public API. Nevertheless, given the size of our Twitter data, we consider it to be a representative sample of the online political conversation on Twitter for one year.

4. Findings

4.1. Facebook

For the past years, German political parties have used Facebook as their main form of online communication. They interact with users by creating posts with their views and ideology on group pages. From the seven parties, the AfD has the page with the most fans, with two times as much fans than the pages of CDU and SPD, the current ruling parties. After initially losing support in early 2015, the AfD's number of fans increased sharply at the same time of the *refugee crisis* (Dittrich 2017). In one year, AfD's fan number almost doubled from around 140,000 to 260,000 followers. This parallels the increase in support for the AfD on the opinion polls. Both online and offline, the AfD became a political force in Germany.

Table 1 presents the results from the Facebook data. The data shows that the most active party was the AfD, with 2,363 posts. At the same time, it was the one that received most comments. Each post had an average of 420 comments. By comparison, the CDU page had an average 160 comments per post. Comments can have a positive or negative connotation. Hence a high number

	posts	comments	shares
<i>AfD</i>	2,363	994,191	2,891,377
<i>CDU</i>	1,690	272,155	153,131
<i>CSU</i>	2,162	406,804	634,153
<i>Die Grünen</i>	1,127	142,473	411,073
<i>Die Linke</i>	1,367	140,489	437,920
<i>FDP</i>	2,211	118,277	192,974
<i>SPD</i>	1,992	247,095	421,025

Table 1 Facebook statistics for the German political parties in the period from January 2015 to May 2018.

of them does not directly translate into party support. We observe negative comments both in favor and against the posts' messages. Sentiment analysis of the comments' corpus data would not suffice to determine support since the methods can only classify text into positive and negative categories. The context is necessary to understand the nature of the comments.

The number of shares is a more representative measure of party reachability. When a user shares a post, it appears on the timeline of the user's Facebook friends. Posts with more shares have reached more users on the platform. The data shows that the number of shares from the AfD's posts is larger than the sum of the shares from the rest of the parties. This is a clear signal of the extended reach of the AfD on Facebook and its online popularity.

For both comments and shares, the CSU occupies the second place. The CSU is a conservative party that only operates in the state of Bavaria, whereas the CDU is its counterpart in the rest of Germany. The CSU is more conservative than the CDU in the social matters and is closer to the political spectrum of the AfD (Franzmann 2014). The results suggest that users with right-wing ideologies have been more politically active online. Although the CSU performed well on Facebook activity, it has lost voter support over time. Since 2015, the CSU has gone down ten points in the opinion polls.

Figure 2 shows the number of posts per month for the pages of the German parties. The pattern is similar for all of the parties. The large peak on the plot corresponds to the month of the 2017 parliamentary elections. In the months following the election, the AfD continued to post content on Facebook, whereas the activity from the rest of the parties decreased. The AfD understands that their social media strategy is working and continues to push their message on Facebook.

We further analyzed the posts created by the AfD. The format of these posts consists of a message and an image that combines a short text with a picture. The tone of these messages is provocative and sometimes even sensationalist. The discussed topics are controversial, which makes users more susceptible to engage with the posts and express their opinion.

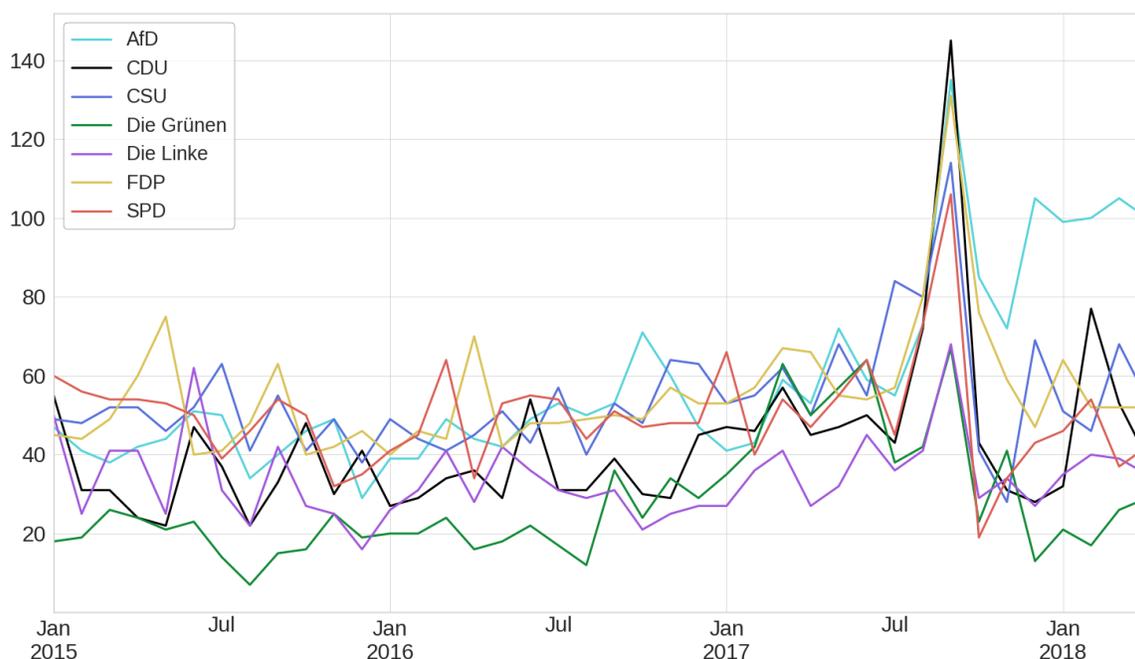


Figure 2 German political parties' Facebook activity: Number of posts per month between January 2015 to May 2018.

In order to do a quantitative analysis on the posts, we preprocessed the texts by removing stop words and punctuation marks. The most frequent nouns are AfD, Germany, politics, EU, Merkel, Euro, German people, SPD and citizen. Indeed, the general message is that while the AfD is on the side of Germany and its citizens, it is against the euro and the establishment parties, represented by *Merkel* and *SPD*. Another word appearing on several posts is the verb *teilen* (to share). It was the fifth most used verb from the posts and is part of AfD's strategy to viralize its content by explicitly asking their fans to share it.

4.2. Twitter

All of the German political parties have a Twitter account to interact with politicians, journalists and other users. In contrast to Facebook, the AfD is the party with the least followers on Twitter¹¹. Nevertheless, this does not imply that they are less successful on this platform. For example, on the day of the 2017 federal election more than 50% of the political conversation on Twitter was related to the AfD. Figure 3 shows the number of tweets that included a political party's name on September 24, 2017.

As with Facebook, we picked three corresponding measures on Twitter: number of tweets, mentions and retweets (Table 2). We divided the number of tweets into two categories: all of the tweets

¹¹ <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/659207/umfrage/anzahl-der-twitter-follower-von-parteien-in-deutschland/>

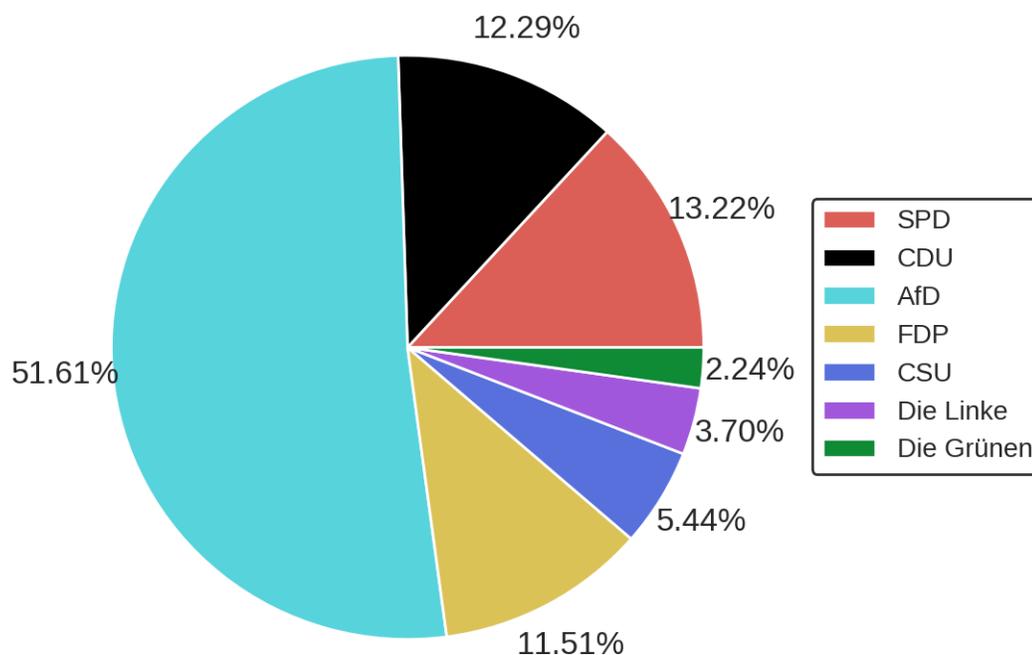


Figure 3 Percentage of tweets that included the name of a German political party on election day (24 September 2017).

	tweets	original tweets	mentions	retweets
<i>AfD</i>	9,193	2,112	368,005	231,123
<i>CDU</i>	4,911	3,097	345,192	40,879
<i>CSU</i>	2,886	1,622	233,012	15,932
<i>Die Grünen</i>	2,492	1,295	157,213	42,709
<i>Die Linke</i>	6,809	1,776	208,047	46,413
<i>FDP</i>	3,149	1,730	189,687	32,596
<i>SPD</i>	7,480	1,782	260,056	41,082

Table 2 Twitter statistics in the period from July 2017 to July 2018.

including retweets and original tweets, which are those with only content from the party account. In the case of the mentions (using @ and the screen name of the account), we did not count retweets that included a mention to a political party. Additionally, if a tweet mentioned more than one party, each mention counted as one. It is necessary to remark that the mentions and retweets in our data come from the sample that the Streaming API provides. Hence, the quantified data does not represent the complete volume of mentions and retweets.

On Twitter, AfD was also the most active party with the largest number of tweets. 77 percent of these tweets were retweets and most of them from other AfD regional Twitter accounts or AfD politicians. SPD and die Linke followed a similar pattern. On the other hand, CDU sent more

original tweets than the other parties, with 66 percent of the tweets being original content. Figure 4 shows the tweet activity over the one-year period. The AfD is most of the time more active than the other parties. With the exception of the AfD, the activity of the parties went up during September, the month of the elections and sharply went down afterward. In contrast to the post activity in Facebook, the AfD did not continue to tweet at the same pace as during the months before the election.

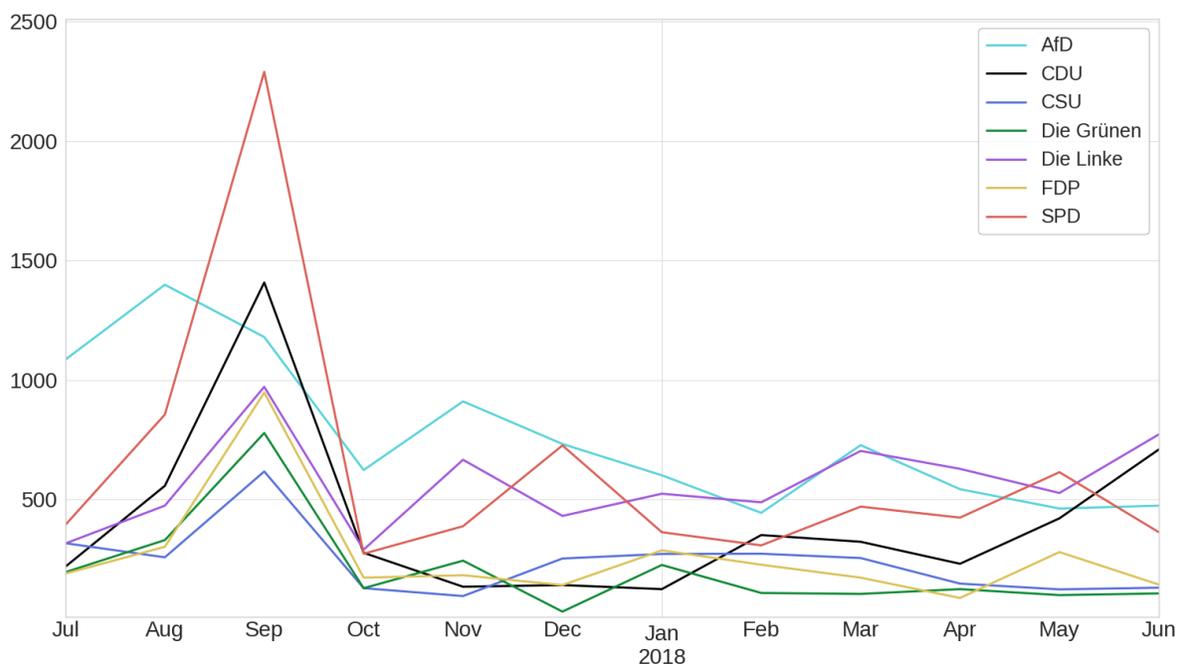


Figure 4 German political parties' Twitter activity: Number of tweets per month during a one-year period.

Similar to Facebook comments, mentions allow users to reply to a tweet or send a message directly to the party account. The AfD received the most mentions and CDU was a close second place. Even though Die Grünen has the most followers, it had the lowest number of mentions. The differences between the party mentions are not as prominent as with the retweets. Similar to the shares on Facebook, the number of retweets on the AfD's tweets is higher than the combined retweets of the other parties. It must be noted that a retweet can only originate from the account's original tweets. In average, AfD's original tweets were retweeted 109 times, whereas the CDU only 13 times. This corresponds to a difference of one complete order of magnitude.

The format of the AfD's original tweets is similar to the Facebook posts: A message together with a picture. Most of the tweets have a link to a corresponding Facebook post. However, given the character limitation, the message is shorter on Twitter. In contrast to these posts, the tweets include

hashtags. The top used hashtags by the AfD Twitter account are AfD, TrauDichDeutschland, BTW17, Bundestag, Merkel, SPD, Gauland, CDU, FDP and GroKo. TrauDichDeutschland is AfD’s campaign slogan, BTW17 refers to the 2017 election, Gauland is the leader of the AfD, and GroKo is the grand coalition between CDU, CSU and SPD.

4.3. Discourse Comparison

We explored the difference between what the AfD presents to its followers online and what the party’s political intentions and motives are. We took the 2017 party manifesto¹² as a reference to the party’s ideology and proposals. For this analysis, we only considered the Facebook posts created in the same one-year period during which we collected the Twitter data. We compared the topics between the different communication channels with the help of topic modeling.

Topic modeling algorithms are based on statistical models that discover topics from a text corpus. We selected Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) given its extensive use in the literature and the possibility of finding topics automatically (Blei et al. 2003). LDA takes a group of documents and treats each document as a combination of topics. Each topic is then defined by a combination of words. After creating a list of topics, the trained model assigns to a document the probability of belonging to each topic. For each document, the probabilities sum up to one.

In our data, we treated each post and tweet as a document. For the manifesto, we divided the text into paragraphs and defined each of them as a document. The corpora comprise 9,213 tweets, 1,113 posts and 395 paragraphs. A preprocessing step consisted in eliminating stop words, punctuation signs and using the Snowball stemming algorithm on the words. We additionally removed the “RT” from the retweets.

For LDA to work, the number of topics (K) has to be predefined. We decided to train on twenty topics. Moreover, the model needs two hyperparameters: α , the prior of the topic distribution; and β , the prior of the word distribution. We set $\alpha = K/20$ and $\beta = 0.01$ as suggested by Griffiths & Steyvers (2004). For the implementation, we relied on *nltk*, a Python toolkit for natural language processing.

Since topics are created algorithmically, the interpretation of each topic relies on human curation. To compare the three corpora, we selected the topics that had a direct connection to the economy or immigration (shown in the Appendix). We then calculated the percentage of documents belonging to these categories. For this, we summed up the probabilities of each document from the selected topics and then divided by the number of topics. Table 3 shows that in the manifesto the topics of economy and immigration are treated equally, whereas on Facebook and Twitter the immigration

¹² https://alternativfuer.de/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2016/05/2016-06-27_afd-grundsatzprogramm_web-version.pdf

	economy	immigration
Manifesto	21%	19.2%
Facebook	4.5%	16.1%
Twitter	4.7%	25.7%

Table 3 Percentage related to topics discussing economy or immigration in different channels of communication.

topic dominates the conversation. On Twitter, immigration represents one-quarter of the corpus. Since our qualitative analysis showed that the tweets and posts are closely related, we assume that the retweets in the Twitter data contributed to the 6% difference between the two platforms. With this analysis, we quantitatively proved that the AfD hid their economic proposals on the online platforms and focused on immigration topics, which validates the analysis by Kim (2018).

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we showed that the AfD was the German political party, whose online activity spread the most in social media. Since its foundation, AfD has used social media as its main communication tool and not only during election time. Moreover, we illustrated the differences between the AfD’s social media discourse and its manifesto. Although we avoid assigning a direct connection between poll gains and social media dominance, we conclude that the AfD succeeded in spreading its message. A message that includes previously considered taboo topics, which the AfD brought into public opinion and which have even had an influence on the parliament’s agenda. The success of the AfD’s social media campaign together with a large media coverage was essential in spreading and stimulating anti-establishment feelings, which partially explain the rise of a far-right party in Germany.

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Appendix

Party Manifesto				
Economy				
Produkt	Wettbewerb	Bank	Euro	Wirtschaft
Mindestlohn	Marktwirtschaft	Waffenrecht	Kosten	Politik
Betriebe	Geld	Technisch	Währungsunion	Deutschland
Lebensmittel	Marktteilnehmer	Eigenkapital	Eurozone	Mensch
Verantwortung	Planwirtschaft	Wissensvermittlung	Kredit	Alternativ
Immigration				
Kriminalität	Asyl	Identität	Islam	
Polizei	Flüchtling	Kultur	Muslim	
Wohnraum	Rückkehr	illegal	Mosche	
Ausländerbehörde	Entwicklungshilfe	Asylzuwanderer	Grundrecht	
Einwanderungsbedingt	Herkunftsland	religiös	integriert	
Facebook				
Economy				
Euro				
Million				
Steuerzahl				
Wohlstand				
sozial				
Immigration				
Migrant	Muslim	Übergriff	Asylbewerber	
Italien	Islam	Sexuell	Türkei	
illegal	Islamist	Köln	Abschiebung	
schleppen	Gefahr	Frau	Syria	
Grenzen	Terroranschlag	Messerattacke	Flüchtling	
Twitter				
Economy				
Geld				
Euro				
Steuerzahl				
Kosten				
Energiewände				
Immigration				
illegal	Straftat	Muslim	Islam	
Grenzen	Islamist	Mord	Islamisierung	
Asylbewerber	Terroranschlag	Übergriff	Heimat	
Abschiebung	Flüchtling	Sexuell	judisch	
Migrant	Anschlag	Messerattacke	friedlich	