


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Electoral Strategy or Historical Legacy? The CDU's Reactions to Far-Right Parties in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1964–1990

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## Abstract

This article investigates how established political parties react to the emergence of a far-right party. Prevailing approaches explain established parties' reactions either as based on a spatial model of politics or as determined by historical trajectory and political culture. Neither approach sufficiently accounts for how party leaders choose between these competing motives for actions or how their strategizing might evolve over time. To complement existing approaches, I suggest understanding the emergence of far-right parties as a problem of interpretation. How parties react to far-right emergence depends on what kinds of heuristics they draw on to make sense of the phenomenon of far-right voting. To validate my approach, I study different stances Germany's center-right Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands (CDU) has taken toward two far-right parties in postwar West German history: the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD), from 1964 to 1969, and the Die Republikaner (REP) from 1983 to 1990. Using archival material documenting internal deliberation, I argue that the social sciences have played a crucial role for how CDU leaders have evolved in their interpretation of far-right emergence. In the 1960s, party leaders drew from external social expertise on the far-right to discount the idea that the NPD was a resurgence of Nazism. In the 1980s, they were concerned with a reform project of their own party, leading them to grasp the REP through heuristics provided by scholarship on electoral strategizing. This resulted in a shift in strategies of repression against the NPD to strategies of demarcation versus co-optation against the REP.

**Keywords:** West German Party System; Far-right parties; CDU; NPD; REP

## Introduction

How do established mainstream parties react to the emergence of a far-right party? Increasingly over the last three decades, but also in the aftermath of World War II, far-right parties have celebrated electoral successes across Europe. As far-right parties have entered European party systems, established political parties have encountered them in a variety of manners, ranging from a strong demarcation, including attempts to effect legal

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prohibitions, to co-optation of specific right-wing themes, such as immigration and security, and even cooperation, for instance through partnerships for coalition governments (Downs 2001; Heinze 2018; Mudde 2019). This variety of responses raises the question of how party leaders come to adopt a certain strategy toward an emerging far-right party.

Two sets of approaches have explained established mainstream parties' reactions. First, approaches building on spatial models of politics have argued that parties react by adjusting their positions on a left-right ideological policy axis. According to these approaches, mainstream center-right wing parties, in particular, will decide whether to differentiate themselves from a far-right party or, rather, to co-opt their policies, if they expect to gain substantial votes from such a move (Bale 2003; Kitschelt and McGann 1995; Meguid 2005). Going beyond electoral strategy, a second line of research considers further factors determining mainstream parties' reactions, specifically, how different aspects of political culture, such as those tied to the electoral system or political institutions, matter for what kind of actions mainstream established parties might take (Minkenberg 2013). Research conducted in this vein has emphasized a country's specific historical experience with the right wing as a crucial aspect of political culture (Art 2007; McGowan 2002). While this second line of research has added important insights to the potential complexity of parties' motivations when dealing with a far-right party, it has not paid attention to the question of how parties choose between different strategies, nor has it delved into how parties' reactions evolve over time. Approaches in this vein hence still fall short in explaining an empirical variety of reactions by established mainstream parties.

I suggest focusing on how party leaders make sense of an emerging-far-right party. Inspired by recent advances in party research (de Leon et al. 2015; Mudge 2018) I propose conceiving of parties as sites for social interaction, in which party leaders negotiate different strategies for action by drawing on culturally and historically specific resources that provide party actors with the necessary heuristics to make sense of the social world. To demonstrate the usefulness of this approach, I study the reactions of the West German center-right party—*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands* (CDU)—in two moments of right-wing ascendancy in the history of West Germany. The first moment is the emergence of the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD) in the 1960s, and the second is the emergence of the *Die Republikaner* (REP) in the 1980s. Across these two instances, the CDU shifted in its approach to far-right emergence: It moved from a rationale of repression focused on the far-right party to strategies of demarcation from and co-optation of far-right policies that demanded adjustments of the CDU. Based on an analysis of archival material documenting the CDU's internal deliberation, I explain this shift through the evolution of political heuristics and their negotiation. I show how CDU leaders' reactions to the NPD were shaped by specific conceptual and data collection tools provided to them by the social sciences and public opinion surveys. These tools were mostly focused on the NPD and its voters; they aimed to provide alternative explanations that did not frame these voters as prompting a resurgence of the Nazi party *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP). In contrast, internal discussions of how to react to the REP were firmly entrenched in discussions of a necessary reform of the party and the need to secure voters' support beyond the party's traditional electorate. Discussions of how to react to the REP revolved around demarcation versus

co-optation and mostly neglected social sciences research on the specific dynamics of this far-right emergence.

Overall, this historicizing approach to parties' sense-making stresses how party leaders problematized the emergence of a far-right party in different ways. While it cannot explain which of these strategies "worked" (Downs 2002; van Spanje and Weber 2019)—as this would require insight into voters' perceptions—it can complement explanations of why mainstream parties have adopted different strategies in practice, based on these problematizations.

### Existing Approaches to Parties' Reactions toward a Far-Right Party

Scholars in the political sciences have used two different approaches to study how mainstream parties react to an emergent far-right party in European multiparty systems: One group closely sticks to a spatial model of politics, and another group emphasizes different aspects of political culture.

The first set of approaches is associated with the spatial model of politics introduced by economist Anthony Downs (1957). Downs's model assumes voters are distributed on an ideological continuum from left to right, according to their political preferences. Striving to maximize their votes, parties position themselves on the left-right dimension where they expect most voters' political preferences to be located (*ibid.*). While Downs focused on two-party systems, scholars adapted his model to specifically investigate party dynamics in European multiparty systems in Europe (Arzheimer and Carter 2006; Duverger 1954). Through this spatial lens, the emergence of a far-right party can be interpreted as a "shock" to the distribution of existing parties across the left-right continuum. Particularly challenged by this new entry are the proximate parties with contiguous electorates—namely the center-right parties—at risk of losing segments of their voters to the newly emerged far-right party (van der Brug et al. 2005: 538). They can react to this external shock by adjusting their policy position, either adopting a more conservative policy stance—hence "moving to the right" in an attempt to co-opt the policy space occupied by the far-right party—or opting for a more liberal policy stance, hence "moving to the center" and compensating votes lost on the right with votes gained at the center (Adams 2012; see also Downs 1957: 118–22). After extensive criticism of oversimplification, scholars introduced several specifications to Downs's model, for instance accounting for multidimensionality of the political space (Meguid 2005; Wagner and Meyer 2017).

Despite these refinements, a problem remaining with such line of thinking is that qua assumption of the model, it can only account for one type of motivation—vote-maximizing—and one type of reaction to the emergence of a far-right party, namely a move on the left-right policy dimension. However, far-right parties are not like any other party. In most European polities, they are attributed the role of a pariah, whose policies and public presentation violate a perceived consensus of values. The question of cooperation with a newly emerging far-right party hence raises other concerns for political actors, such as keeping a "clean record" of noncooperation with a far-right actor, international reputation, or "democratic responsibility" that cannot be subsumed under electoral strategy (Downs 2001).

A second group of approaches in the political sciences has developed typologies of possible reactions of a mainstream party that go beyond what the spatial model can account for (Bale 2003; Bale et al. 2010; Downs 2001; Heinze 2018). These approaches distinguish between strategies of “disengagement” and “engagement” (Downs 2001: 26). Within the range of disengagement, Heinze (2018: 288), for example, elaborates on six different strategies mainstream parties can adopt: (1) ignore; (2) legal restrictions (such as outlawing or raising the threshold for representation); (3) cordon sanitaire (blocking coalitions); (4) demonize; (5) defuse (the issues on which the far-right mobilized); and (6) hold (affirm one’s own policy standpoints). To explain why a certain mainstream party chooses one option rather than another, approaches in this second group consider aspects of political culture not accounted for by spatial model approaches, including the existence of specific legal tools confronting antidemocratic forces (Minkenberg 2001), individual and collective attitudes within parties (Bale et al. 2010; Heinze 2018), and dominant cultural tropes that influence parties’ reactions (Downs 2001; Minkenberg 2013). Particular attention is paid to the history of the right wing in a specific context. Based on comparative studies, scholars argue that German mainstream parties have been particularly restrictive in their reactions to far-right emergence because of a “culture of contrition” pervading politics, linked to its Nazi history (Art 2007).

This second set of approaches has extended our thinking about the potential influences on mainstream parties’ reactions. As this brief discussion has shown, these approaches pursue the intuition that a reaction to a far-right party can be motivated by electoral strategy, but there might also be more to it. However, while indicating multiple dimensions of strategy adoption, these studies are not well equipped to explore how parties and party factions adjudicate between these different motivations and translate them into strategies. To move forward, an alternative approach is needed that looks at meaning-making processes within parties.

### Parties as Meaning-Makers

A variety of scholarly traditions have taken a party-centered approach to explore political dynamics (see de Leon 2014; Mudge and Chen 2014). For this specific study, I draw on a recent line of scholarship that emphasizes parties’ roles as entrepreneurs of meaning (de Leon 2010; de Leon et al. 2009; Desai 2002). Inspired by political theorist Antonio Gramsci, these scholars emphasize the idea that parties propose a specific social imaginary, in which they emphasize certain social cleavages (and relegate others), create political identities, and also propose a vision of how political, economic, and social worlds are related (de Leon et al. 2015: 2). Parties strive to establish their specific social imaginary through rhetorical, as well as institutional and organizational, means, including policy making, state infrastructure, party-owned media, and so forth.

In my own approach to parties, I explore how party leaders produce and negotiate different interpretations of the social within their internal deliberations. I hereby follow a conceptualization recently suggested by Stephanie Mudge (2018), who has paid particular attention to the infrastructures of knowledge production and expertise within or connected to parties. These infrastructures may include institutions, such as party foundations and research institutes, but

also activities such as working groups or individual social scientists (ibid.: 26). As historical constellations evolve, party leaders continuously update their interpretations to make sense of the political contexts in which they are engaged (see also Camic et al. 2011).

From this lens, the emergence of a far-right party constitutes an interpretive problem for mainstream parties. A mainstream party might interpret this emergence using different heuristics that include electoral strategic considerations (in a Downsian sense), but they are not limited to these. Other heuristics that might play a role include the party's understanding of this new party actor and its voters, but also understandings of the political space, more generally, and their own role in it. In the following, I will show that the social sciences played an important role in providing party leaders with heuristics to make sense of the far-right phenomenon. While Mudge (2018) focuses on the composition of expertise, I pay particular attention to how power struggles within parties have enabled, but also limited, the influence of the social sciences.

## Data and Method

I study how the center-right CDU in West Germany has problematized and acted upon the emergence of two far-right parties in West German history: the NPD in the 1960s and the REP in the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> I chose to concentrate on the CDU,<sup>2</sup> as it was leading the government in both moments of far-right emergence, with chancellors Kurt Georg Kiesinger (in office: 1966 to 1969) and Helmut Kohl (in office: 1982 to 1998) as heads of government. It was hence the CDU first and foremost that was expected to react to the emergence of the far-right party by foreign and domestic political actors.

Indeed, as existing approaches have pointed out, different factors of the political and electoral system have played a crucial role in how the CDU leadership has reacted to emerging far-right parties. First, the federal system of West Germany shaped a certain dramaturgy of reaction to far-right parties, in which party leaders observed the performance of far-right parties in regional parliamentary elections at the level of the "Länder,"<sup>3</sup> continually discussing and evaluating potential strategies. Both far-right parties had first electoral successes at the regional level and subsequently ran for federal elections, in 1969 and 1990, respectively. Furthermore, the legislative tools of the "Wehrhafte Demokratie" ("Militant Democracy") established by German lawmakers after World War II shaped how CDU leaders thought about potential reactions. Determined to learn from the Weimar experience,

<sup>1</sup>In 1949 already, a far-right party, the *Sozialistische Reichspartei* (SRP), was founded and succeeded in entering regional parliaments in Lower Saxony and Bremen in 1951, before it was banned by the German Constitutional Court in 1952. Political leaders opted for a ban with no controversial discussion because they understood the SRP as immediate successor of the NSDAP with no political legitimacy (Frei 1996). I therefore did not include the CDU's reaction to the SRP in the current study.

<sup>2</sup>The CDU and the *Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern* (CSU) form one faction at the federal level. The CSU operates in Bavaria, while the CDU operates in all other federal states.

<sup>3</sup>The Federal Republic of Germany is a federal state that consisted of 11 constituent states (referred to as "Länder") before 1990. The Länder have their own electoral legislations and hold elections every four to five years, independent of the federal elections.

“Militant Democracy” provided political actors with a range of possible measures for protecting the polity from extremist forces. As its most drastic measure, it had introduced the possibility of banning antidemocratic groups and parties (Jaschke 1991). Yet, as is evident from the shift of the CDU’s reaction to far-right emergence, the party leadership evolved considerably in how they navigated the specific political context and the tools at their disposal. An approach focused on parties’ internal deliberations can elucidate dynamics of these shifts, linking them to evolving problematizations of far-right emergence.

To unpack deliberation processes of party leaders concerning far-right parties, I gathered a corpus of different materials. First, my analysis is based mainly on documentation of direct deliberation within the Bundesvorstand,<sup>4</sup> the party’s highest deliberative organ on the federal level that consults and decides on political matters. I conducted discourse analysis of all minutes from discussions on the NPD from 1963 to 1970 and on the REP from 1983 to 1990. While the Bundesvorstand’s importance varied under different chancellorships, in both period of interest it served as a central forum for party leaders to discuss current political events, such as elections results at the regional and national level, and to develop the party’s responses (Bösch 2002: 98, 125). The minutes thus afford great insight into how the NPD and the REP were understood and discussed within the CDU leadership. For the 1960s, I drew from literal transcripts of the discussions. For the 1980s, I analyzed literal transcripts of chancellor Kohl’s opening speeches of the Bundesvorstand sessions, as well as written minutes from the ensuing discussions. Time spans when the issue of far-right emergence was discussed in the Bundesvorstand varied: In the case of the NPD the discussion lasted from 1966 to 1969. For the REP, it mostly took place in 1989.

Second, to complement and contextualize the discussions within the Bundesvorstand, I also considered further documentation of internal party communication, such as communication between the CDU and the regional associations concerning the NPD and the REP, speeches on the topic at the national party conventions and in parliament, and documents on campaigning strategy and cabinet sessions. I also consulted memoirs and publications of important CDU leaders on the topic, such as those written by Helmut Kohl, Franz-Joseph Strauß, and Heiner Geißler.

Third, to understand what kinds of resources party members had at their disposal to understand the far-right party, I explored the data collection on right-wing parties in the CDU’s archive, relying on their own filing system under categories such as “NPD,” “REP,” or “extremism.” These files comprise academic articles, reports and strategy papers from working groups, and so forth. Finally, I complemented these sources with newspaper articles on the NPD and the REP, again relying on the collection in the CDU’s party archive.

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<sup>4</sup>The Bundesvorstand meets at least six times a year. It consists of (if CDU members) the Chancellor of Germany, the President of the Bundestag, the chair of the CDU/CSU faction in parliament, the president of the European parliament, and the chair of the European People’s Party. Further permanent members include the CDU chair, the Secretary General, the four deputy chairs, the treasurer, the honorary chairs, 26 elected members, and the chairs of the regional state parties.

## The CDU's Reaction to the NPD: Preventing the (Re)naissance of the Nazis

The NPD was founded at the end of 1964 in Hannover, Lower Saxony. This emergence came at a time that brought renewed discussions about German national identity and the legacy of the Holocaust prompted by different historical events such as the Eichmann trial in 1961, the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials from 1963 to 1965, and parliamentary debates about the statute of limitations for Nazi crimes (e.g., *Der Spiegel* 09/13/1965). The foundation of the NPD hence caused a substantial stir. Journalists voiced concern about this new party and portrayed it as a successor to the NSDAP (e.g., *Die Zeit*, 05/14/1965, *Der Spiegel* 04/04/1968).

Indeed, the NPD was a fusion of different, thus far fairly unsuccessful, right-wing parties, such as the *Deutsche Reichspartei* (DRP) and die *Deutsche Partei* (DP) (Niethammer 1969: 66), some of whose representatives had been members of the NSDAP. While in the beginning, the party still maintained a fairly moderate impression with Friedrich-Georg Thielen—a former CDU politician—as its chair, it further radicalized toward aggressive nationalist and revisionist rhetoric when Adolf von Thadden became leader of the party in 1967 (Bergsdorf 2007: 35). Within six months of its foundation, the NPD managed to present a candidate in almost all constituencies for the federal parliamentary elections in October 1965, quite a remarkable success for such a young party.

Apart from the *Sozialistische Reichspartei* (SRP), right-wing parties had played a minor role in the political landscape of the West German Republic (Kreutzberger 1983: 20). Some scholars attribute this to a successful strategy used by Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and the CDU of the 1950s, who integrated different right-wing and conservative parties into a bourgeois bloc under the CDU's leadership, through governmental coalitions, but also by recruiting party elites into the CDU (Bösch 2001: 397). This strategy, however, seemed to have failed in preventing the NPD from emerging, whose continuous electoral successes demanded a rethinking of far-right emergence by the CDU leadership.

### Nazis Remain Nazis

Despite the public panic, the CDU leadership only started to seriously address the issue of the NPD when the latter had a major electoral breakthrough in November 1966. In two subsequent regional elections, the NPD overcame the 5 percent hurdle and entered regional parliaments: first in Hesse (7.9 percent), then in Bavaria (7.4 percent). The CDU also had to deal with a government crisis at this time: CDU-Chancellor Ludwig Erhard resigned over a conflict with the *Freie Demokratische Partei* (FDP) that ended the current government coalition. In November 1966, CDU leaders elected Kurt Georg Kiesinger as new chancellor, who quickly set up a coalition with the center-left *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD)—the first “Große Koalition” (“Grand coalition”) between the two center parties, CDU and SPD (1966 to 1969).

Still preoccupied with establishing the new government, Kiesinger and the newly appointed minister of the interior, Paul Lücke (CDU), came up with a first remedy against the NPD success: They advocated opposing the NPD through an electoral

reform. This was not a new idea. In fact, since the beginning of the 1960s, CDU leaders had suggested the introduction of a majoritarian, first-past-the-post voting system, which they felt would help consolidate the party's electoral majority (Hildebrand 1984: 352). The rise of the NPD, in that sense, occasioned another opportunity for CDU leaders to reiterate the necessity of this reform. Elaborating on this strategy in the Bundesvorstand, Kiesinger suggested that the NPD was a "Splitterpartei" ("splinter party"), a problem that had already haunted the Weimar Republic (1918 to 1933). "Who knows, if there had been a majoritarian voting system in the Weimar Republic, history might have taken another path!" Kiesinger exclaimed in such a vein (Bundesvorstand, 11/29/1966). He thus referred to what had become a common explanation for the failure of the Weimar Republic: namely a growing of antidemocratic forces within parliament, favored by a proportional voting system (e.g., Allemann 1956).

The project of electoral reform was never realized, as SPD leaders opposed it, and Kiesinger would abandon such plans in early 1968. Interestingly, though, in these early discussions of the NPD's rise, one can observe an initial problematization of far-right emergence. Kiesinger conceived of the NPD and its voters as a rise of anti-democratic forces that constituted a historical legacy of the Third Reich. While problematic, in the view of Kiesinger and other CDU leaders, such a resurgence of Nazi political elites could be easily solved through electoral reform. Following from this stance, Kiesinger was not particularly concerned with a further analysis of NPD's initial success: In sessions of the Bundesvorstand he neither initiated a discussion about a potential prohibition nor talked about possibilities for cooperating with the party leaders of the NPD. Moreover, no one in the Bundesvorstand challenged Kiesinger's analogy to Weimar or the rise of the NSDAP. The majority of the CDU leaders saw the NPD as successor of the NSDAP.

### ***Normalizing Extremist Actors***

However, the historical analogy to Weimar soon became inconvenient for the CDU leadership. On the one hand, in the perspective of some CDU leaders, the rise of the NPD had to be seen as protest of conservative voters against what they perceived as an unnecessary holding on to history and the prohibition of national self-esteem. A constant reference to Weimar (and Nazism) when dealing with questions of German identity, these CDU leaders worried, might have unnecessarily furthered this impression (e.g., Bundesvorstand, 06/21/1965). On the other hand, others feared that labeling the NPD as Nazi successors might provoke an intervention by the victory powers, if support for the party grew. As ex-Chancellor Adenauer had warned several times during the sessions of the Bundesvorstand in 1966, the foreign powers might be alienated by the electoral successes of the NPD (Bundesvorstand, 02/16/1966, 03/14/1966). As the NPD continued to be successful in regional elections throughout 1967,<sup>5</sup> the CDU leadership was hence compelled to come up with new interpretations of this right-wing emergence.

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<sup>5</sup>They obtained 5.8 percent of the votes in regional elections in Schleswig Holstein and 6.9 percent in Rhineland-Palatinate in April, 7 percent of the votes in Lower Saxony in June, and 8.8 percent of the votes in Bremen in October.



In this situation, the social sciences offered valuable inspiration for the party leadership. The party's own foundation, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), established in 1955 and charged with the mission of observing and archiving material on the political process, came to play a key role connecting the CDU leadership with social scientists. In the aftermath of the initial NPD electoral successes, the foundation started to collect information on this new party and commissioned several studies to be conducted about the NPD by political science institutes (letter to Paul Lücke, 05/12/1966, see also minutes of Präsidium session 03/17/1967). The KAS also consulted with social scientists on potential strategies against the NPD and initiated conferences bringing together party leaders from CDU and SPD, social scientists, and journalists. For instance, a large conference entitled "Aktuelle Erscheinungsformen des Rechtsradikalismus" ("Contemporary Forms of Right-Wing Radicalism") took place on January 19, 1967, in the Haus Lerbach of the *Gustav-Stresemann-Institut*. Invited were representatives of CDU and SPD, social scientists, leaders of public opinion survey institutes and publishing houses, representatives of trade unions and churches, and representatives from major TV stations and newspapers.

CDU leadership proved receptive to these consultations. One set of resources circulated by the KAS amongst CDU leaders were the comparative studies of programs by the right-wing parties NSDAP, SRP, and NPD, compiled by lawyer and FDP member Walter Smoydzin. In his follow-up analysis of these comparisons—the book *Die NPD – Partei mit Zukunft? (NPD – Party with a Future?)*, published in 1969—Smoydzin concluded that the NPD should not be seen as a succeeding organization of the NSDAP. Because political culture had changed since Weimar, he argued, new explanations for right-wing extremism were needed (Smoydzin 1969: 85). In this regard, CDU leaders grew particularly fond of one theory, also put forward by social scientists: the "normal extremes" explanation of far-right emergence. In my search on correspondence about the NPD in the CDU's party archives, I found numerous copies of the essay "Theorie des Rechtsradikalismus in westlichen Industriegesellschaften" ("A Theory of Right-Wing Radicalism in Western Industrialized Societies") (1967) by Erwin Scheuch and his colleague Hans-Dieter Klingemann, sociologists at the *Institut für Sozialforschung* in Cologne. In this essay, the authors advanced the idea that right-wing extremism was a "normal pathology." Constant structural changes in Western societies produced ruptures in people's livelihoods. People reacted by casting a vote for extreme parties, far-right or far-left, to express their anger and confusion about these ruptures, the authors argued. In this sense, the first economic downturn of the postwar period occurring between 1966 and 1967, which overcast the political success story of the "economic miracle," could be interpreted as a major factor in mobilizing NPD vote. Yet, as the authors emphasized, the phenomenon of right-wing voting was not a specifically German phenomenon, but could also be observed in other industrialized nations, such as France, England, and the United States.

Perusing the CDU's internal deliberation during 1967, one can see how these interpretations provided by the social sciences shaped the CDU leadership's view of the NPD. In several sessions of the Bundesvorstand in 1968, CDU leaders explicitly rejected the NPD-NSDAP analogy. For example, Helmut Kohl, Minister President of Rhineland-Palatinate, compared the NPD to Poujadism in France,

alluding to the electoral successes of a French populist, right-wing movement led by Pierre Poujade in the 1950s. The fact that a far-right movement could obtain so many votes in France, he argued, clearly showed that nationalist tendencies amongst a certain percentage of the population were not solely a German phenomenon. “Certainly, there are some old Nazis, but these do not account for more than a quarter of the NPD’s voters,” decried Kohl in the Bundesvorstand. “But the NPD—it is Poujadism as well! And Poujadism, because it is so anchored in social structure, you cannot just get rid of overnight!” (Bundesvorstand, 05/10/1968).

This heuristic of “normal pathology” impacted how CDU leaders devised strategies against the NPD. Namely, they started to dismiss the possibility of banning the NPD, an option repeatedly raised by the media (e.g., *Rheinische Post*, 03/29/1966, *Frankfurter Presse* 02/10/1967). Instead, CDU leaders started to take a closer look at far-right voters and their motivations for voting.

### **A Turn to the Far-Right Voter**

As the minutes from internal deliberation reveal, the question of what motivated NPD voters became a more controversial topic during 1967 and 1968. Kiesinger emphasized repeatedly that voters only expressed a momentary dissatisfaction (Bundesvorstand, 01/29/1968). “We must not treat these people as Neo-Nazis, but as human beings who are motivated by intelligible anger,” he affirmed in the Bundesvorstand (Bundesvorstand, 05/10/1968). Picking up on this idea, members of the CDU leadership started to use the term “Protestwähler” (“Protest voters”) (Bundesvorstand, 12/04/1967) or “Trotzwähler” (“voters out of defiance”) (Bundesvorstand, 05/10/1968) to describe NPD voters. Conversations now often turned on the need to understand these voters and their reasons for protesting.

In these ensuing discussions, members of the Bundesvorstand had a new source of data at their disposal: public opinion surveys. These surveys were issued by a range of different institutions, such as the *Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach* (IfD),<sup>6</sup> *Institut für Angewandte Sozialwissenschaft* (infas), and *Erforschung der öffentlichen Meinung, Marktforschung, Nachrichten, Informationen und Dienstleistungen* (Emnid). They revolutionized how parties could apprehend electorates and their motivations, also in relation to the electorate of the far right. For example, the IfD’s director, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, presented survey results about the NPD’s electorate at a conference at the house Lerbach in January 1967 (see also Maier and Bott 1968). Similarly, Emnid and infas published studies on the NPD in January and February 1967, of which I found several copies in the CDU’s party archives. The Emnid study focused on attitudes of NPD voters, presenting results on questions like, “Are you satisfied with the current party system?,” “Are you satisfied with the current economic situation?,” and “If it was 1933 again, would you vote for a man like Hitler?” Based on such data, the study concluded that NPD voters were mostly dissatisfied with the current party system and its economic and foreign policymaking (Emnid January/February 1967).

<sup>6</sup>The CDU had a long-standing relationship with the Institute at Allensbach, in particular, and had started to integrate into their consulting the party’s campaigning strategies in the mid-1950s already (Bösch 2002: 197).

Another study by infas analyzed demographic characteristics of NPD voters. It concluded that while there were certain patterns—men were more likely to vote for the NPD than women, and certain professions more than others—the NPD support overall was far more spread out than earlier support had been for far-right parties, both in relation to socioeconomic and educational backgrounds of supporters (infas February/March 1967).

From their internal deliberations, one can clearly see how the CDU leadership started to grapple with such new information. Some party leaders argued that the CDU had to be more attentive to the sorrows of people, as expressed in these opinion studies. A younger group within the CDU leadership—including leaders such as Helmut Kohl or Egon Klepsch, Chair of the CDU's youth organization *Junge Union* (JU)—was eager to make use of new analytic tools to devise policy strategies against the NPD. For instance, Kohl suggested that the confessional composition of voters mattered most in explaining specific regional patterns of the NPD's success and that the CDU should think about how to compensate for a lack of Church infrastructure in these places (Bundesvorstand, 05/10/1968). Other explanations CDU leaders advanced were the alienation of farmers, the resentment of certain middle-class professions, local cultures of right-wing voting, as well as a general political alienation (Bundesvorstand, 05/10/1968, see also 07/17/1967).

Drawing from the categories provided to them by public opinion surveys, CDU leaders argued intensively about NPD voters' possible motivations. Often, these discussions remained inconclusive, as members of the Bundesvorstand accused each other of being unable to interpret study results correctly (see Bundesvorstand, 10/05/1968). However, these debates attest to a transformation in the CDU leadership's dealing with NPD supporters: They no longer thought of them as Nazis opposed to democratic representation; rather, they started to understand them as voters with grievances who might be convinced to vote otherwise in future elections. Such a shift also manifest itself in strategies implemented against the NPD on the ground: The party headquarters and the KAS engaged in educative efforts addressed to NPD voters. They developed discussion guides to help members of their local associations confront NPD supporters on the ground and make them reconsider their voting choices. For example, "Nicht randalieren, sondern argumentieren" ("Don't agitate; rather, discuss") (1967), a collection of guidelines published and sent out by the CDU headquarters, included concrete recommendations for how to moderate discussions with NPD supporters.

Overall, one can see from internal deliberations throughout 1967 and 1968 that CDU leadership took up heuristics provided by the social sciences, such as the "normal pathology" conceptualization and results from survey studies, to problematize far-right emergence in a new way: attention shifted from the NPD party leaders to its voters. CDU leaders advocated for communication and education of NPD voters as the most appropriate measures for countering the electoral success of the NPD. Soon, however, another development would revive the tropes of Weimar.

### ***Student Riots and the Need for a Democratic Middle***

Starting in 1967 and throughout 1968 and 1969, West Germany experienced a wave of student protests. Leftist student groups organized marches and sit-ins in cities all

over the country to protest the *Notstandsgesetze* (*German Emergency Acts*), authoritarian structures in higher education, and what they perceived as a culture of silence tabooing any discussion of the parental generation's involvement in Nazi crimes. The CDU leadership found itself at the forefront of this confrontation; it was seen as the epitome of conservatism by many protestors. As becomes evident from examining records of the Bundesvorstand sessions of 1968, CDU leaders grappled with experiences of accusation and overt hostility (Bundesvorstand, 05/10/1968).

This political confrontation with the 1968 protest movement changed CDU leaders' perspectives on the NPD. In summer 1968, to the surprise of the press (e.g., *Der Spiegel*, 12/23/1968), the question of a party ban was brought back on the agenda by the CDU minister of the interior, Ernst Benda (Hoffmann 1999: 96). As CDU leaders saw themselves confronted by political forces from both ends of the political spectrum, these two matters became increasingly linked. "It is wrong to only discuss the NPD, while neglecting what is happening on the left!" thus urged Ernst Lemmer, the CDU special representative for Berlin, during a Bundesvorstand session in January 1969 (Bundesvorstand, 01/16/1969). In ensuing fierce discussions about the ban within the Bundesvorstand, several party leaders insisted that, if a ban for the NPD was initiated, one had to ban an organization on the left, as well. An aggressive counterrhetoric came to replace the more analytic approach to the NPD voter that had prevailed previously in internal deliberations.

While the question of right-left equivalence seemed uncontroversial, the ban was not. Some CDU leaders argued that a ban of the NPD might be necessary after all—and herein again referred to Weimar as an historical analogy (Bundesvorstand, 05/10/1968)—while others attempted to reiterate the idea of the "normal extremes." In September 1968, for instance, Kiesinger argued in the Bundesvorstand that the NPD was just (another) radical right-wing party, similar to the right-wing parties that had emerged in France and the United States as well and dismissed the comparison with Nazism as deliberate defamation attempt by the foreign press (Bundesvorstand, 09/20/1968). Other CDU leaders explicitly rejected the option of a ban arguing that the NPD had to be countered through "political means," meaning that the CDU had to fight the NPD at the polls (e.g., Gerhard Stoltenberg in the Bundesvorstand, 01/16/1969). In this renewed discussion about a ban, once again the three interpretations of the far right—as successor of the NSDAP, as "normal extreme," or as expression of a temporary dissatisfaction of voters—were confronted within the CDU leadership.

Kiesinger at first appeared divided on the question of concrete strategy: While repeatedly expressing his skepticism toward the feasibility of a ban, he still instructed Benda to draft a ban petition. Ultimately, in 1969, he rejected the option of a ban. It was questionable, he explained, if the material collected about the NPD was sufficient to issue a ban. Moreover, the NPD was losing support according to recent surveys. Nevertheless, the CDU should take seriously its role as guarantor of democratic stability, demonstrating to the electorate that it was willing to fight anti-democratic agitation both left and right. "From the beginning of the Federal Republic, we have seen that there have always been us, the democratic parties on the one side," he affirmed in the Bundesvorstand, "and the others on the other side" (Bundesvorstand, 01/16/1969). Kiesinger thus made the encounter of the NPD a question of the fight of democratic against undemocratic forces in the West

German polity, while also decoupling it from the Weimar analogy. In the following months, CDU leaders seized on the idea of a democratic/extremist distinction, portraying the CDU as sole guarantor of a democratic “Mitte” (“middle”) (e.g., speech by General Secretary Heck at the party’s national convention in November 1968; see also *Deutschland Union Dienst*, 10/10/1968, Bundesvorstand, 01/16/1969, 03/06/1969). In line with this new interpretation, CDU leadership instructed their regional associations to concentrate on a personalization of the election campaign in 1969 and emphasize law and order, yet, to no longer approach the NPD or its voters, specifically (e.g., Letter to regional associations, 03/26/1969).

In examining the CDU’s reactions to the NPD’s ascendancy in the 1960s, one can see how the party leaders’ problematization of the NPD evolved: In conversation with the social sciences, they discarded an interpretation in strict analogy to the NSDAP’s rise in the Weimar democracy, replacing it with the heuristic of “normal extremes.” As discussions of the Bundesvorstand revealed, to translate insights from survey studies into political strategy was more complicated, and controversies about such translations remained unresolved. In contrast to what approaches of a spatial model would suggest, however, at no point did CDU leaders talk about specific policy adjustments in either direction of a left-right spectrum. The emergence of the student movement led CDU leaders to return to a repressive stance against the NPD. They settled on an interpretation of the NPD as political extremism that could be fought most effectively in an indirect way: Namely, the CDU had to convince voters that they were the only reliable provider of good government and preservation of democratic stability. At the end of 1969, the CDU had thus implemented a problematization of the NPD as “normal” phenomenon, without taking further interest in NPD voters’ motivations.

The NPD only obtained 4.3 percent of the votes in the national elections and did not enter the national parliament. It subsequently disappeared from the political stage. It is hard to gauge the impact of the CDU’s strategizing in the NPD’s demise, especially because in the end the CDU came to adopt a rather hands-off approach, neither accommodating nor explicitly fighting the NPD. Scholars attribute the demise of the NPD to processes that lie beyond the scope of this paper: For instance, they point to the economic recovery in the late 1960s that appeased grievance voters, the violent clashes around NPD conventions that brought the party into discredit (Bergsdorf 2007: 37), and the CDU’s conservative turn after the elections in 1969, through which they could (re)gain voters from the NPD (Kreutzberger 1983: 22; Stöss 1989: 141).<sup>7</sup>

### The CDU’s Reaction to the REP: A Question of Self-Positioning

While during the 1970s, no far-right wing party had considerable electoral success, the 1980s brought the ascendancy of a new right-wing party (Stöss 1989). In November 1983, the REP was founded in Munich by two MPs of the Christian Social Union (CSU), the Bavarian sister party of the CDU. The REP’s leader, Franz Schönhuber, a former TV moderator, had gained national prominence

<sup>7</sup>There were even attempts by the regional association in Lower Saxony to integrate NPD leaders into the CDU ranks (Bösch 2001: 401).

through publication of his autobiography *Ich war dabei (I Was There)*, in which he described his experiences in the Nazi SS organization during World War II in a revisionist way.

Despite this reference, the emergence of the REP was no longer seen as a resurgence of Nazi supporters. Instead, journalists debated why far-right slogans still mobilized voters. As in the 1960s, one factor discussed was the deteriorating economic situation. The unemployment rate had risen to an all-time high of 9 percent between 1983 and 1988, which had ended decades of full employment. Journalists argued that people expressed their unease about such developments by voting for the REP (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 02/04/1989). Another major politicized issue during the 1980s was immigration. In public perception, different types of migrants—the “Aussiedler”<sup>8</sup> and asylum seekers—were conflated to substantiate the impression of foreigners “swamping the country.” Through their outrageous and openly nationalist slogans, scholars argued, leaders of the REP managed to mobilize on such fears (e.g., Funke 1989; Jaschke 1994).

The REP was initially present mainly in Bavaria, where it obtained 3 percent of the votes in the regional elections held in March 1986. Yet, in 1989 it managed to transcend such local anchorage, succeeding in the Berlin elections (7.5 percent) in January, as well as European elections (7.1 percent) in June, which made the REP an urgent problem for the CDU leadership.

### Programmatic Renewal during the 1970s

To understand how the CDU reacted to the REP, one has to contextualize this reaction within the party’s efforts for programmatic renewal during the 1970s. Given the dramatic decline of voter support and its loss of government in 1969, the CDU launched a process of modernization and programmatic renewal (Schönbohm 1985). This brought to the fore a new kind of party leader—the reformer—embodied most emblematically by the two general secretaries, Kurt Biedenkopf (in office: 1973 to 1977) and Heiner Geißler (in office: 1977 to 1989). Both CDU politicians were steeped in academia, eager to engage with scientific analyses to identify the reasons underpinning an increase in swing voters, but also political apathy and disengagement (Buchhaas-Birkholz 1981; Sarcinelli 1980) that caused the CDU’s continuous electoral decline. Whereas Biedenkopf envisioned new forms of economic policy making to secure stability, Geißler identified social policy making as a way to innovate party politics (see his *The New Social Question* [1976]). He argued it was among underorganized social groups—women, the unemployed, and the disabled—that the CDU could gain voting support, by designing social policies in their support.

However, fierce opposition against such reform plans mounted from a conservative faction within the CDU, represented most prominently by the regional chairmen of the CDU, such as Alfred Dregger, Hans Filbinger, and Wilfried Hasselmann, as well as CSU-Chair Franz-Joseph Strauß. During the 1970s, this

<sup>8</sup>“Aussiedler” include expellees and German ethnic migrants who have lived for generations in Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union. From 1987 to 1992, approximately 1.5 million migrated to Germany (Worbs et al. 2013).

conservative faction grew increasingly powerful within the party, strengthened by their strong electoral performance on the regional level (Jäger and Link 1987: 38). Instead of what they perceived as a “swing to the left,” planned by reformers such as Biedenkopf and Geißler, these conservative leaders advocated for a return to traditional values, such as an appreciation of national identity and patriotism. This conflict between the conservative faction and the reformers in the 1970s would have a strong impact on internal party discussions about how to confront the REP in the 1980s.

### Defusion and Demarcation

In the Bundesvorstand, the issue of how to react to the REP was not really broached until the REP had its first electoral success outside Bavaria in the elections of Berlin on January 29, 1989. In the following session, Secretary General Geißler took the floor and urgently advised his colleagues that the CDU should not feel pressured to hectically take up a more conservative position in migration and asylum politics to appease what appeared to be the protest of voters of the far right. “I don’t think that the problem of the Republikaner can be reduced to any German-national or national problems, even if these questions might play a role,” he affirmed in the Bundesvorstand. “Rather,” he continued, “they [the REP] have cleverly appealed to social welfare fears and resentment against foreigners . . . in reality, this concerns a number of policy fields and not just this one [immigration]” (Bundesvorstand, 01/31/1989). Geißler cautioned his colleagues not to participate in the politicization of immigration pushed for by the REP and instead to approach this far-right emergence with a more wholistic policy strategy.

This stance toward the REP has to be seen as continuation of Geißler’s efforts to reform the party. In 1985, Geißler introduced a specific theory to describe the political space, which he termed “Lagertheorie” (“a theory of political camps”). According to this theory, the establishment of the Green Party in the West German party landscape at the beginning of the 1980s, and its emerging cooperation with the SPD, had occasioned the emergence of two political blocs: one progressive bloc of the SPD and the Green Party on the left of the political spectrum, and a liberal-conservative bloc of the CDU and the FDP on the right (Tschirschwitz 2017: 359). Geißler referred to “Lagertheorie” to underscore his idea that the CDU should devise more progressive social policies, in an attempt to appeal to swing voters at the center who were undecided between the progressive and the liberal-conservative bloc. In relation to the REP, an implementation of “Lagertheorie” meant a continuation of this orientation toward the center and a simultaneous strong demarcation from this new party to the right of the CDU. As Geißler insisted during a session of the Bundesvorstand in April 1989, any orientation toward the right would afford the CDU a 2 to 3 percent gain of votes, but consequently would also inflict a loss of 6 to 8 percent at the center because swing voters would be deterred by such nationalistic tones (Bundesvorstand, 04/16/1989, see also *Der Spiegel*, 02/05/1989). In his view, the CDU should avoid the mistake of the SPD who, by cooperating with the Green Party to their left, had enabled the

permanent establishment of this new party (Bundesvorstand, 03/13/1989; see also Tschirschwitz 2017: 456).

Geißler also took practical measures to commit his party to a strong demarcation from the REP. He initiated an official position paper on the REP, published by CDU headquarters in early May 1989, in which the REP was attributed an ideological proximity to nationalist extremism and racism (CDU Bundesgeschäftsstelle, 05/18/1989)<sup>9</sup> and pushed through a decision by the CDU presidium that prohibited cooperation between the CDU and the REP at any level (*Der Spiegel*, 08/20/1989). In this stance toward the REP, Geißler was supported by a couple of other members of the Bundesvorstand, such as the chairman of the Christian Democratic Employee' Association, Norbert Blüm, and the minister president of Baden-Wuerttemberg, Lothar Späth. The conservative faction within the CDU leadership, however, angrily contradicted his analysis of this new far-right emergence.

### **“No Democratically Legitimated Party to the Right of the CDU”**

When Helmut Kohl became chancellor in 1982, the conservative faction had hoped for a fundamental reorientation in politics. In his government statement, Kohl had announced a “geistig-moralische Wende” (“a mental and moral turn”), which—apart from a prioritization of economic growth—also meant an embrace of more conservative stances in questions of culture and national identity (Dubiel 1999: 187–88; Olick 2016: 390–91). Yet, by the mid-1980s, many of the CDU's conservative leaders accused the government of not having done enough to implement such turns. In their perspective, this failure explained the emergence of the REP (Jaschke 1994).

In line with this accusation, Strauß, figurehead of the conservative faction and minister president of Bavaria, suggested an interpretation of the REP's emergence that opposed the CDU leadership and especially the reformers. In the context of a regional election campaign in Bavaria in 1986, he coined the strategy of “to the right of the CDU/CSU there should not be a democratically elected party” (ACSP 1987), which became a highly cited dictum to describe CDU strategy in their reactions to far-right emergence for years to come. In the eyes of Strauß and other leaders of the conservative faction, the CDU was responsible for representing the political opinions of all voters on the right of the political spectrum, nationalist and ultraconservative included. To achieve this representation, the CDU had to include some more conservative policy suggestions in their government program. As Strauß made clear, this strategy was meant to directly refute Geißler's “Lagertheorie.” “Geißler does not believe that there are votes to gain to the right of the CDU,” Strauß thus wrote in his memoirs “He wrongly assumes that these voters have no other choice than the CDU. He does not see that if the CDU is taking on a race with the SPD on the left, inevitably a vacuum arises on the right” (Strauß 1989: 510). To avoid such vacuum, the CSU led the election campaign in Bavaria, advocating openly populist and anti-migration positions in which they mobilized terms such as “Asylantenschwemme” (“glut of asylum seekers”) (Jaschke 1994: 47). Despite—or, as some scholars say,

<sup>9</sup>See also his strategy paper “Malzkaffee-Partei - braun, billig, von vorgestern” (“The Malt Coffee Party: Brown, Cheap, and Outdated”) (*Der Spiegel*, 03/19/1989).



because of such politicization of the immigration issue (Funke 1989)—this uptake of migration politics during the electoral campaign, the REP scored an impressive 3 percent in the Bavarian election of 1986.

Despite such mixed results, Strauß's strategy "no democratically legitimated party to the right of the CDU" was enforced by the conservative faction when the REP succeeded in the Berlin elections in January 1989.<sup>10</sup> In the subsequent session of the Bundesvorstand, conservative leader Alfred Dregger, openly disagreed with Geißler's preceding analysis cited in the preceding text. "Clumsy terms like multicultural society" had to be avoided at all costs, he said, referring to public statements by Geißler, and the CDU had to seriously take up the issue of immigration to avoid future electoral defeats (Bundesvorstand, 01/31/1989). Only through a sharpened conservative profile could the party establish itself as a clear alternative to the SPD, but also to the Republikaner, Dregger further affirmed in press statements (*Deutschland Union Dienst*, 06/21/1989). Several members of the Bundesvorstand agreed and lauded his analysis, referring to the "comprehensible fear of strangers." Against the reformers, conservative leaders hence argued that the only way to prevent the establishment of a far-right party such as the REP was to co-opt their policy positions. When the REP continued to be successful throughout the first half of 1989—they had considerable successes in communal elections in Saarland and Rhineland-Palatinate and obtained 7.5 percent of votes in the European elections of June 1989—some conservative hard-liners went even further, demanding that the party should not exclude potential government coalitions between the CDU and the REP in the future (*Der Spiegel*, 05/28/1989).<sup>11</sup> The majority of the CDU leadership, however, largely rejected these advances for coalitions.

### **Spatialization and an Ambivalent Relationship to the Social Sciences**

What is remarkable in the CDU's internal discussions about the REP is the great extent to which CDU leaders had adopted a spatial interpretation of politics. Both the reformers and the conservative faction agreed that the CDU had to change its policy position to react to the emergence of the far right—even though they were divided on the question of how this shift should look like.

Why CDU leaders embraced spatial heuristics so vigorously can be explained by the evolution of the relationship between the social sciences and the CDU leadership. First, as mentioned already, the CDU had started to think about electoral strategy more systematically in the 1970s. It had empowered intellectuals such as Biedenkopf and Geißler as party leaders, who in turn furthered in-house capacities for analyzing the political process, for instance through restructuring the party's headquarter, the *Bundesgeschäftsstelle*, and introducing departments and staff explicitly assigned to conducting research (Bösch 2002: 124). This concern for strategy made CDU leaders especially receptive to spatial models of politics because

<sup>10</sup>Chancellor Kohl attempted to mediate between the factions affirming the dictum of "There should be no democratically legitimated party to the right of the CDU," but at the same time insisting that REP voters should be won back through good policy making by the CDU—which in his eyes had proved effective in the fight against the NPD in the 1960s (Kohl 2004: 841; Bundesvorstand, 02/13/1989).

<sup>11</sup>See also the letter to the Präsidium in June 1989 by Heinrich Lummer, senator of Berlin (Letter to the Präsidium, 06/09/1989).

these models offered a way to conceive of societal transformations and their repercussions for the structure of political representation in a way that enabled the CDU to react to such transformations. For example, Geißler's "Lagertheorie" can be seen as inspired by scholarship on the West German party system that conceived of the political arena spatially (e.g., Stöss 1983). Comparing the CDU's reactions to the NPD to reactions to the REP, one can see how this uptake of spatial analytical models led CDU leaders to frame the problem of far-right emergence differently: They shifted from discussing far-right voting to discussing their own position. In this sense, the professionalization of analysis of political process within the CDU favored the adoption of specific scientific, namely "strategic," models over others.

A second major factor transforming the relationship between the CDU and the social sciences was the politicization of the latter during the 1970s, which further prevented CDU leaders from picking up alternative explanations for far-right voting. Most research on far-right extremism during the 1970s was conducted within the paradigm of fascism theories that relied, in turn, on Marxist and cultural theories (e.g., Kühnl et al. 1969; see also Olick 2017: 281).<sup>12</sup> In the 1980s, scholars in this tradition evolved their explanations. Drawing upon theories of grand societal transformation, they theorized right-wing extremism as a reaction to institutional and socioeconomic crises brought about by globalization. According to these scholars, this resulted in the growth of extraparliamentary, but also antipolitical, movements comprising right-wing extremism, but also apathy, new forms of religiosity, and alternative subcultures (e.g., Heitmeyer 1988; Kreutzberger 1983; Leggewie 1989). In relation to the rise of the REP, specifically, scholars worried that increased precarization had increased the appeal of right-wing extremism among workers who had formerly voted for the political Left (Kreutzberger 1983: 42). Indeed, studies at the time showed that while approximately 60 percent of REP voters were former supporters of the CDU, at least 20 percent had formerly voted for the SPD (Stöss 1989: 220).

These explanations provided by the social sciences pointing to deeper social transformations rather than to policy preferences behind voting choices could have complicated the adoption of the spatial model of politics by the CDU leadership. Occasionally, members of the Bundesvorstand expressed doubts concerning the dominant analysis. After the Berlin elections, Senator Ulf Fink, for instance, emphasized that the REP had been particularly strong in former strongholds of the Left, which—in his words—needed to be analyzed much more closely if the CDU wanted to draw conclusions from its electoral defeat (Bundesvorstand, 01/31/1989, see also 06/19/1989). Overall, however, the idea of far-right voting as a phenomenon transcending the left-right policy dimension was not really pursued in discussions of the Bundesvorstand. Apart from the preoccupation with electoral strategy, this neglect can be explained by the fact that even the CDU reformers perceived the social scientists discussing these new approaches to right-wing extremism as partisans

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<sup>12</sup>A further example of the politization of the social sciences also became manifest in the "Historikerstreit" ("Historians' Dispute"), in which scholars discussed whether the Holocaust was comparable to other forms of genocide. This debate was highly politicized, pitting progressive intellectuals against revisionists in politics (Berg 2003: 28).

of the leftist bloc.<sup>13</sup> Geißler in particular often disavowed leftist intellectualism, even attacking it in highly polemical fashion (Kraatz and Peters 2013; Tschirschwitz 2017: 194). While Geißler thus did adopt concepts developed by social scientists and even consulted with sociologists such as Helmut Schelsky (Tschirschwitz 2017: 86), a representative of the German variant of “neoconservatism” (Lorig 1988: 89), he did not pick up the ideas of left-leaning social scientists, even if they could have substantiated his positions on social policy making. In that sense, as the social sciences had grown more polarized, so had their consultation by party leaders. As a result, the CDU’s discussion of potential explanations for the rise of the REP remained strangely constricted.

In the summer of 1989, accusations by the conservative faction against Geißler mounted. In August, Kohl, who had remained fairly uninvolved in fights within the conservative faction, did not nominate Geißler for another term as secretary general. While Kohl repeatedly emphasized that this should not be understood as taking sides in what he called a useless “Standortdebatte” (“debate about policy position”) (Bundesvorstand, 06/19/1989, 08/28/1989), some scholars have interpreted his decision as a concession to the conservative wing (Jaschke 1994: 45).<sup>14</sup>

Soon after, the controversies about the REP sunk in a swirl of events that took place in the context of German reunification. This gave the CDU, and especially Helmut Kohl, the opportunity to reinvent themselves as leaders of the unification process, temporarily appeasing the party’s worries about electoral demise (Bundesvorstand, 10/09/1989; Bösch 2002: 54–55). Moreover, the REP’s momentum also seemed lost in these new political circumstances: The party did not manage to achieve the necessary 5 percent of votes in the subsequent parliamentary election in 1990. They had some further successes in regional elections in Baden-Württemberg 1992 and 1994. By the mid-1990s, however, the party had largely disappeared from the political stage. In December 1992, after fierce and controversial debates, the CDU and SPD agreed on the so-called Asylkompromiss (“Asylum Compromise”), which fundamentally restricted the legitimate reasons for which applicants could be granted asylum in Germany. Some scholars take the CDU’s fervent advocacy for such change in migration policy as the REP’s ultimate political legacy (Minkenbergh 2001). While CDU leaders did not draw a clear connection between the REP and the Asylkompromiss in internal conversations, spatial thinking, at least, had made co-optation through policy adjustment to the right a conceivable reaction to far-right emergence.

## Conclusion

How parties react to the far right depends on what they believe to be the reasons explaining far-right voting. Comparing how CDU leaders problematized far-right emergence in the 1960s and the 1980s, a clear transformation becomes apparent: In the 1960s CDU leaders were preoccupied with understanding who had voted for the NPD and why because they aimed to overcome an interpretation of NPD

<sup>13</sup>Some, like Wilhelm Heitmeyer, indeed worked as consultants for the SPD.

<sup>14</sup>Others, however, have explained this through a long-lasting conflict between Kohl and Geißler (Dreher 1998: 396).

voters as supporters of Nazism. While this led them to refrain from using repressive strategies in a first instance, the discussion of a party ban was back on the table at the moment the NPD seemed likely to enter parliament in 1969. In the 1980s, CDU leaders interpreted the REP in relation to the CDU and its policy orientation. The rise of the REP was understood either as a symptom of modernization or as a “swing to the left” by the CDU’s leadership. Following from such problematizations, CDU leaders discussed whether to demarcate from or co-opt policy positions of the REP.

This shift in strategies has sometimes been explained by the weakening influence of the historical legacy of Nazism on West German politics (Leggewie 1987; McGowan 2002). While certainly the emergence of a right-wing actor posed different challenges for German politicians in the 1960s as compared to the 1980s, the analysis here has shown that how party leaders problematized far-right emergence in these two different historical contexts depended on what kind of heuristics were made available to them by the social sciences. When reacting to the NPD, CDU leaders drew from external expertise provided by the social sciences and survey institutes, whose scholars applied new tools to uncover characteristics of NPD voters. In their internal discussions, CDU leaders attempted to assemble this new information into interpretations of the right-wing phenomenon that allowed them to move away from the idea of a Nazi resurgence. In contrast, when reacting to the REP, internal discussions of the CDU had revolved for a long time along a necessary reform of the party. Although party reformers were highly connected to academic scholarship, they were mostly attuned to approaches that could inform their strategic reinvention efforts. This explains why they picked up on a spatial model of politics and also referred to this model in their discussions about the REP. Moreover, CDU leaders did not consider alternative explanations of right-wing voting developed at the time because they were produced by scholars the CDU perceived as part of the leftist progressive political bloc. In this sense, the analysis presented has shown not only how historical context enables but also how it limits the uptake of social science concepts in parties’ meaning-making.

More generally speaking, a historical approach to parties’ meaning-making complements existing approaches to explaining established mainstream parties’ reactions in two important ways. First, it elucidates the power of heuristics in how party leaders conceive of their options for taking action. While terms of political geography, such as “right-wing” and “left-wing,” had of course existed in the 1960s, party leaders did not yet think of them in terms of a policy space in which they could position their party strategically. In that sense, the discussion here has shown that the spatial heuristic is only one, albeit prevalent, way that party leaders can make sense of far-right emergence. Second, the historical approach can help adjudicate which aspects of political culture become salient in party deliberation. While far-right emergence in West Germany had always been discussed in relation to Nazi history, in the 1960s, mainstream parties shared concerns about a potential resurgence of Nazi supporters, while in the 1980s the reference to Nazism had become a tool to demarcate one’s party from the REP, by way of analogy. Further studies might reveal how different historical legacies, such as colonialism, have shaped how mainstream political actors have understood and reacted to far-right emergence.

Beyond explaining empirical variation, an approach focused on sense-making can help evaluate mainstream parties' reactions to the current contemporary far right. It can bring to light assumptions undergirding these reactions and hence also point to limitations in how established mainstream parties, but also society more generally, confront the phenomenon of far-right voting.

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Minutes from the 1980s have been published in form of Helmut Kohl's opening speeches to the Bundesvorstand. Additionally, I have relied on the minutes of discussion for the 1980s Bundesvorstand sessions, provided to me by the ACDP. All translations from the minutes are mine:

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