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# Discontent in 'left-behind places'? How perception of space and local political climate matter for the success of right-wing populism in rural areas of Germany

Larissa Deppisch[a] and Andreas Klärner[a]

**ABSTRACT**

The 'geography of discontent' debate argues that discontent in 'left-behind places' is the root of the rise of right-wing populism in rural areas. Based on a qualitative analysis of group discussions, we examine why the right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) is successful in some structurally weak rural areas, but not others. And why does it succeed in some structurally strong areas, yet fail in others? The derived heuristic model suggests that the interweaving of discontent with the limitation of opportunity structures and a centre-right local political climate explains high AfD vote shares in rural areas.

**KEYWORDS**

Geography of discontent; left-behind places; right-wing populism; *Alternative für Deutschland*; rural areas

**JEL** D72, O18, P16, R00

**HISTORY** Received 19 June 2025; in revised form 4 November 2025

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Whether it is Brexit (Brooks, 2020), Donald Trump's election as president in 2016 (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) or the electoral success of right-wing populist parties in Europe (Schraff & Pontusson, 2024), each time an election result is announced, scholars and the general public puzzle over how to explain the rise of right-wing populism. Right-wing populist parties claim to represent 'the people' against the 'corrupt elite' (populist core ideology) and use emotionalising rhetoric (populist communication strategy), as well as opting for right-wing policies such as reducing the immigration of foreigners (Mudde, 2007; Wolf, 2017).

The current debate on the 'geography of discontent' (McCann, 2020; McKay et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2024) puts forward the hypothesis that the rise of populism is rooted in the social processes of globalisation and the economic shift from an industrial to a service-based society. Since at least the 1970s and 1980s, trade, the relocation of business processes, and automation have led to a reduction in wages or available jobs, especially for industrial workers (Broz et al., 2021; Florida, 2021). This applies to non-metropolitan and rural areas in particular (Broz et al., 2021). Those regions may experience economic stagnation, leaving them trapped in their development (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2024).

Poor economic prospects for the population, according to the 'geography of discontent' hypothesis, lead to outflux and thus to a reduction in demand, resulting in a decline in local infrastructure, such as the closure of supermarkets, schools or vacant buildings that fall into disrepair (Deppisch, 2021). Neoliberal austerity policies, which do not guarantee the maintenance of these infrastructures through state funding, are also considered to be a contributing factor (Naumann, 2021). For the remaining residents, this means a comprehensive restriction of regional opportunity structures, that is, structures that influence the possibilities to live and shape one's life and prospects (Bernard et al., 2023).

Further on, this structural development can take the form of a place-based collective memory, hereby places represent collective histories, memories of a better past, and are incorporated into the spatialised identity (Greve et al., 2023; Kevický, 2024). The impression of marginalisation, a sense of loss, can also develop among those 'left behind' (Haarteveld et al., 2022), because the infrastructural situation perceived by the population in everyday life can be evaluated as the outcome of the modern welfare state and thus interpreted as poor government performance (Stroppe, 2023). This creates the impression of being viewed by the government as 'the places that don't matter' (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018, p. 189) or being 'left

**CONTACT** Larissa Deppisch larissa.deppisch@thuenen.de
[a]Thünen-Institute of Rural Studies, Johann Heinrich von Thünen Institute, Brunswick, Germany
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behind' (Dijkstra et al., 2020; MacKinnon et al., 2022). It can also be seen as a violation of the basic social promise of 'no man left behind', which has its historical roots in the US armed forces, but has since evolved into a welfare state promise for the entire territory of a nation (Pike et al., 2024). With this in mind, it is said that people 'left behind' develop resentment against politicians, and especially in rural areas against urbanites (Cramer, 2016), going through an emotional downward spiral, forming a (collective) embitterment that finds its outlet in taking revenge by voting for right-wing populist parties (Hannemann et al., 2024).

In this article, we take up the debate on the 'geography of discontent' with the aim of contributing to the question of what characterises rural areas in Germany with high support for right-wing populism from the perspective of the population. Why is the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) successful in winning votes in some 'left-behind' rural regions but not in others? In Section 2, we take a look at the current state of the art and present evidence for and against the 'geography of discontent' hypothesis. Based on the identified research gaps, we develop our qualitative exploratory approach, which we elaborate on in Section 3 with regard to data and methods. In Section 4, we present our heuristic model, which we derived from the data, and demonstrate the relevance of discontent with spatial characteristics, but also of the local political climate. In Section 5, we conclude and reflect on our findings.

## 2. STATE-OF-THE-ART AND RESEARCH APPROACH

In the following we discuss empirical evidence supporting the 'geography of discontent' hypothesis, situating it within the modernisation loser thesis framework and contrasting it with the cultural backlash thesis. We will then identify gaps in the state of research and present the approach of our own study.

### 2.1. The 'geography of discontent': a spatial take on the modernisation loser thesis

We view the 'geography of discontent' hypothesis as a spatial interpretation of the modernisation loser thesis. This thesis argues that, in light of the described structural changes, voting for right-wing populists may appear attractive to individuals in lower social classes, since these parties claim to stand up for 'the people' in the sense of the 'little man', to secure low- or mid-skilled jobs in the nation through protectionist economic policies (Guriev & Papaioannou, 2022; Lengfeld, 2017). Several survey-based studies support this claim. In the case of Germany, for example, a high probability of voting for the AfD goes hand in hand with a low professional status and formal education (Lux, 2018). Other factors driving support for the AfD include feelings of disadvantage (Lux, 2018), perceptions of job insecurity (Hartmann et al., 2022; Hilmer et al., 2017) and fears of social decline (Sachweh, 2020). Studies using spatial data also find evidence for this proposition, as lower income levels and a high share of low-skilled employment play a role for supporting right-wing populists in the US (Florida, 2021) and Italy (Urso et al., 2023). Moreover, social dissatisfaction, in addition to political discontent and subjective happiness, influences voting for anti-political-establishment parties of Europe (Koeppen et al., 2021).

Recent studies provide evidence supporting the modernisation loser thesis in its spatial version, the 'geography of discontent' hypothesis. A first indication is that right-wing populist support concentrates in rural areas, as was the case in the 2016 (Broz et al., 2021) and 2020 (Florida, 2021) US presidential elections, but also in Portugal (Magalhães & Cancela, 2025), Italy (Urso et al., 2023) and Poland (Herodowicz et al., 2021). For Germany, several studies show a correlation between high AfD election results and rurality in general (Bergmann et al., 2017; Franz et al., 2018; Richter & Bösch, 2017) or in fairly rural areas in eastern Germany in particular (Deppisch et al., 2022). Furthermore, ageing populations are associated with populist attitudes in eastern Germany (Dvořák et al., 2024) or with right-wing populism support in the US (Broz et al., 2021), the Netherlands (Haarteveld et al., 2022), or Germany (Franz et al., 2018). Findings from eastern Germany indicate a connection between high right-wing populist election results and population decline (Franz et al., 2019; Höhne et al., 2025). Outflux can be interpreted as a sign that the area is perceived as unattractive, as people might be leaving because they do not see future prospects, such as employment, there.

Moreover, correlations between strong right-wing populist support and economic structural characteristics underpin the thesis of 'revenging left-behind places', as the support for Trump in 2016 was particularly strong in counties with long term decline in manufacturing employment (Broz et al., 2021) or in the 2020 elections associated with economic stagnation and increased inequalities (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023). For Europe, too, the rise of right-wing populism correlates with economic decline (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023). Differentiating, it was shown that high right-wing populist support is associated with regional reliance on employment in the manufacturing industry or economic stagnation in peripheral European Union (EU) states, and for core EU states with relative economic decline (Schraff & Pontusson, 2024). In the Czech Republic, populist parties have stronger support in the old industrialised regions with a higher level of unemployment (Kevický, 2024) and populist attitudes are also more common in areas with lower income levels (Dvořák et al., 2024). In Germany, strong right-wing populist support is also found in areas with a poor economic situation (Bergmann et al., 2017; Franz et al., 2019; Kurtenbach, 2019), or a high share of industrial jobs, which, while not in decline, are affected by structural change and therefore potentially a source of concern about future job losses (Bergmann et al., 2023). Irrespective of industrialisation, it was found that right-wing populists are more likely to be elected in German regions that are experiencing long-term economic decline (Greve et al., 2023).

Not only the economic decline of a region, but also the comparison with other regions with better development, has been proven to play a role. For Europe, high right-wing populist support was found above all in peripheral EU states that fall behind core EU states, and within the core states themselves, in regions performing worse than the richest region of the same country (Schraff & Pontusson, 2024). This could be a sign of feeling disadvantaged by politics, as in Portugal, where the radical right is strong in rural regions whose residents perceive the areas as politically neglected (Magalhães & Cancela, 2025).

Furthermore, residents can attribute infrastructural decline to being politically neglected. Correlations between weak services of general interest and high or rising levels of right-wing populist election results, such as in Germany (Diermeier, 2020) or Italy (Urso et al., 2023), support this thesis. The fact that European regional development funding is associated with less populist support (Gold & Lehr, 2024), could also be seen as evidence that the feeling of being considered by politics is significant. A qualitative analysis of a region in eastern Germany also shows that the rise of the right-wing populist party AfD is accompanied by a chronification of embitterment with feelings of disillusionment with politics prevailing in the everyday lives of the participants (Hannemann et al., 2024).

However, some of the results are ambivalent. Although relatively high proportions of populist attitudes are found in rural and economically less prosperous regions, feelings of disadvantage and social composition (gender, age, education, income) are more explanatory (Hebenstreit et al., 2024). Furthermore, no infrastructure effects were found for right-wing populist support in Germany (Greve et al., 2023) or the Netherlands (Haarteveld et al., 2022), contradicting the 'geography of discontent' hypothesis.

## 2.2. Cultural backlash driving populism: beyond the 'geography of discontent'

The modernisation loser thesis is often countered by the thesis of a cultural backlash against modern values (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). This indicates that right-wing populists appear as a good choice, as they represent a national-conservative position and promise to preserve 'the people' in the sense of a culturally or ethnically homogeneous community (Wolf, 2017). In Germany, for example, many studies prove that right-wing attitudes, such as the rejection of refugees, are the key factors for supporting the AfD (Baron, 2018; Hambauer & Mays, 2018; Hansen & Olsen, 2024; Rippl & Seipel, 2018; Schröder, 2018). Historical continuity of election results is also considered as evidence, that is, when areas with high AfD election results also had above-average results for right-wing extremist parties in the past (Cantoni et al., 2019; Franz et al., 2018; Richter & Bösch, 2017).

This thesis is also considered spatially when the cultural backlash is interpreted as an uprising of the traditional 'somewheres', rooted in suburbia and small towns, against the progressive 'anywheres' of the metropolitan centres (Goodhart, 2017). The cultural backlash thesis may apply when studies considering spatial data indicate that the US regions where Trump won many votes are also characterised by a large share of white residents (Broz et al., 2021; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023), less educated people (Broz et al., 2021; Florida, 2021) and religiosity or gun ownership per capita (Florida, 2021). In Europe, the impact of economic decline on support for right-wing populism is particularly strong in areas with high levels of immigration (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023). For Slovakia, it was also found that apart from some rural areas in the east, the populist radical right finds strong support mainly in regions where Slovaks live and in regions with a high share of the Roma minority, while the populist right receives low electoral results in regions with a high proportion of Hungarians (Kevický, 2024). As for Germany, the effect of poor economic situation on high AfD election results intersects with right-wing attitudes (Kurtenbach, 2019). In western Germany, populist attitudes correlate with stronger outgroup hostility, lower levels of education, and stronger anti-European sentiment, while spatial factors play no role at all (Dvořák et al., 2024). These studies point out that the 'geography of discontent' hypothesis does not tell the whole story of the rise of right-wing populism, and that we should pay more attention to cultural values.

## 2.3. Research gap and our approach

Reflecting on the 'geography of discontent' studies presented, the following research gaps stand out: Although rural areas are often identified as hotbeds of AfD support (Bergmann et al., 2017; Franz et al., 2018; Hebenstreit et al., 2024; Richter & Bösch, 2017), they are rarely examined in a focused and nuanced way. Research in human geography has called for the proclaimed political uniformity of rural areas to be discarded (Mullis & Miggelbrink, 2021), urging scholars to consider the variety of areas when studying right-wing populism (Deppisch et al., 2022; Förtner et al., 2021). We address this need for differentiation by focusing on rural areas and selecting cases that vary in socio-economic status and AfD electoral outcomes. This enables us to answer the research questions: Why does the AfD gain support in some structurally weak rural areas but not others? And why does it succeed in some structurally strong areas, yet fail in others? To answer these questions, we draw on two concepts: perception of space and local political climate.

Many of the studies on 'geography of discontent' work with spatial data only and thus assume that material structures are perceived as the quantitative spatial data evaluates them. While these studies have the advantage of being able to make statements about large areas, we question the certainty of this assumption. When it comes to meaning and evaluation by individuals, only what people perceive as real is decisive for their actions (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). Therefore, we opt to examine the perception of space directly using a qualitative approach. According to Löw (2008), space is constituted through the processes of (1) positioning bodies, for example, a person in a bus

that is travelling from A to B; and (2) cognitive synthesis in perception. When an individual perceives their environment, it involves not only seeing, hearing and feeling, but above all the attribution of meaning (Barrett et al., 2010; Lazarus, 1991). As the attribution of meaning always takes place through social interactions with others (Blumer, 1994), we use group discussions as data material.

We ask the groups, for example, about everyday supply to capture the perception of space in terms of infrastructure. In this manner, we contribute to the expansion of research in two ways. Firstly, the potential connection between infrastructure weakness and the success of right-wing populist parties is rarely explicitly analysed. Secondly, infrastructures are operationalised very differently. Indicators as diverse as the mean car travel time to the nearest speed train station (Greve et al., 2023) to the average distance to an elementary or a secondary school, shop, general practitioner, bars or library (Haarteveld et al., 2022) are used. This variety raises questions about whether researchers' expectations match what people consider important, so our approach lets participants define which infrastructures matter and why.

To consider the cultural backlash thesis, meaning the influence of cultural values such as attitudes towards refugees, we also examine the local political climate. In research, the term 'political climate' is often used to describe the prevailing public opinion in a given area (see for example Bonaparte et al., 2017; Bozorgmehr et al., 2023; Soffer, 2019) and can be measured in polls such as democratic elections or surveys. In the case of Germany, the political climate is often examined comparatively between eastern and western Germany. For instance, in 2024, approval of xenophobia is with around 30% in eastern Germany noticeably higher than in the western Germany with 19%. Over the period from 2002 to 2024, levels have generally remained high, with eastern Germany fluctuating between roughly 20% and 40%, compared with about 17% to 23% in the western Germany (Decker et al., 2024).

We extend this concept to the local level. By 'local political climate' we mean the prevailing public opinion in a municipality. When speaking of public opinion, we follow Cramer's (2016) understanding 'as more than just what polls measure. It is also the understandings that emerge from communication among people' (p. 19). Group discussions are particularly well suited for this purpose, especially in rural areas. This is because participants there are subject to a particular social pressure to conform to the position they perceive as locally hegemonic. As participants will likely meet again in everyday life, there is a tendency to avoid disagreeing too strongly on negative issues.

## 3. DATA AND METHODS[1]

Due to the exploratory setting, we use a qualitative approach based on Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the following, we describe the selection of case study municipalities, the gathering of the group discussion data and the characteristics of the participants, as well as our data analysis. Due to the pseudonymisation of participants for reasons of research ethics, the names of the municipalities and districts are pseudonymised and personal data that could reveal the identity of the participants are omitted. Furthermore, all participants were informed about their rights and their consent to data processing was recorded in writing.

### 3.1. Selection strategy of the case study regions

The 'theoretical sampling' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45) of case study municipalities followed a contrasting strategy. On the one hand, we searched for minimal contrast by comparing cases which are similar to enrich theoretical details as well as to encounter unexpected differences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 45–56). On the other hand, we searched for the maximum contrast by comparing cases with different structural characteristics to broaden the scope of theoretical categories or to find unexpected similarities between structurally different cases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 45–56). Thus, we chose 10 municipalities in districts with similar as well as different socio-economic situations (Thünen Institute Research Field Rural Areas, 2024) and AfD election results (The Federal Returning Officer, 2024a; The Federal Returning Officer, 2024b) (Table 1). As the applied typology of rural areas assesses the socio-economic situation in relation to that of all regions in Germany, all eastern German rural districts are classified as less well-off (Thünen Institute Research Field Rural Areas, 2024). The election results were set in relation to the mean value of the east–west-specific socio-economic type (approximately 1 SD (standard deviation) above or below the mean), enabling a comparison to be made with regions that had below-average AfD election results in eastern Germany. In all other cases, the classification also corresponds to the federal average. Due to the lack of variance in quantitative assessments, we could not consider the infrastructural situation (for details, see Appendix A in the supplemental data online).

We selected municipalities that corresponded approximately to the district average in terms of AfD election results and to the desired contrast in socio-economic terms. In addition to demographic and economic data, the selection was based on the insights of district representatives regarding demography, economy, infrastructure, and local political climate.

### 3.2. Data-gathering and characteristics of the participants

In preparation for the group discussions, we spoke with representatives of the municipalities (mainly mayors) who often gave us access to neutral facilities for conducting the group discussions, such as local municipal facilities. The discussions also took place in rooms of associations, the local church or restaurants. For the group discussions (oriented on Barbour, 2018; Kühn & Koschel, 2018) we aimed to recruit participants with different socio-demographic backgrounds to capture potentially different perceptions. Accordingly, we chose several recruitment options, such as

**Table 1.** Characteristics of the cases.

| Pseudonym | Socio-economic situation | *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) election result[a] | Macro-region |
|---|---|---|---|
| L+1 | Less well-off | Over average | Eastern Germany |
| L+2 | Less well-off | Over average | Eastern Germany |
| L+3 | Less well-off | Over average | Western Germany |
| L–1 | Less well-off | Under average | Eastern Germany |
| L–2 | Less well-off | Under average | Eastern Germany |
| L–3 | Less well-off | Under average | Western Germany |
| L–4 | Less well-off | Under average | Western Germany |
| W+1 | Well-off | Over average | Western Germany |
| W–1 | Well-off | Under average | Western Germany |
| W–2 | Well-off | 2017: over average, 2021: under average | Western Germany |

Note: [a]Unless otherwise stated, the classification refers to both the 2017 and 2021 federal elections.

distributing leaflets to local associations, inserts in municipal newspapers, press releases, and ads in internet portals. Although we recruited as broadly as possible, participants included more men, predominantly middle-aged to older people, and mainly different segments of the middle class[2] (see Appendix B in the supplemental data online). The underrepresentation of lower social classes likely contributed to the scarcity of reported personal experiences with poverty, thereby limiting our findings.

In order to collect data on participants' perceptions of space, the guideline (see Appendix C in the supplemental data online) included questions about participants' views of the infrastructures and economic situation in relation to their everyday lives. To get a sense of the local political climate, we also handed out visual stimuli depicting regional AfD election posters featuring anti-gendering statements,[3] opposition to benefits for refugees, or the promise to provide more security in urban areas for women. Also, slogans proclaiming support for medium-sized companies as well as rural areas were included. To critically assess whether the local political climate of the group discussion is reflected in the voting tradition, we analysed state and federal election results at the district level from 1990 to 2021. We have categorised the participants' statements and stories about the political views, as well as the voting traditions, into centre-left and centre-right – oriented on the political science work on classifying the German party landscape (Fuhse, 2004; Switek et al., 2017). While centre-left parties take liberal-progressive positions and demand economic social justice, centre-right parties are mostly conservative-(authoritarian), opting for little market regulation.[4] The AfD is not considered to be in the centre but on the far right end of the political spectrum, specifically right-wing populist with extremist tendencies (Pfahl-Traughber, 2019). However, the participants focused on cultural issues. The group discussions were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed as follows.

### 3.3. Data analysis

The analysis is based on an inductive coding strategy (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 30, 37, 106–113), which involves assigning abstract terms to text sequences, capturing their symbolic meanings (Miles et al., 2014, pp. 71–72). Glaser and Strauss (1967, p. 30, 106) call these terms 'categories', whose text sequences are always compared with each other in order to identify the central aspects of the category, and to check whether the new sequence has a new aspect. If this is seldom the case, 'theoretical saturation' – and, thus, no need to further code sequences assigned to this category – has been reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 108, 111–112). Accordingly, theoretical saturation indicates the end of the coding process. A further step of the analysis process is the reduction, meaning combining categories that are theoretically related to one another to abstract 'concepts' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 110–111). (For all used categories and concepts, see Appendix D in the supplemental data online.)

Parallel to the coding process, we wrote 'memos', meaning texts of our ideas on specific categories, including on their characteristic aspects, central contents, and interrelations. Analysing the interrelations between concepts revealed where participants disagreed and which concept dominated the discussion. All steps of the analysis were conducted using the software MAXQDA. This analysis forms the basis for the written elaboration of the theory that is developed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 107, 113), which we present below.

## 4. RESULTS

In the following, we elaborate on the heuristic model (Figure 1 and Table 2) grounded on the group discussion data. This model explains why the AfD is successful in some structurally weak respectively strong rural areas but not in others. Thereby, we show the connection between the perception of space and support for the AfD as well as the role played by the local political climate. The three paths of the model are outlined below.

### 4.1. From content with perceived space to low AfD support

Participants of the municipalities W–1 and W–2 perceive them as flourishing and attractive, as they report

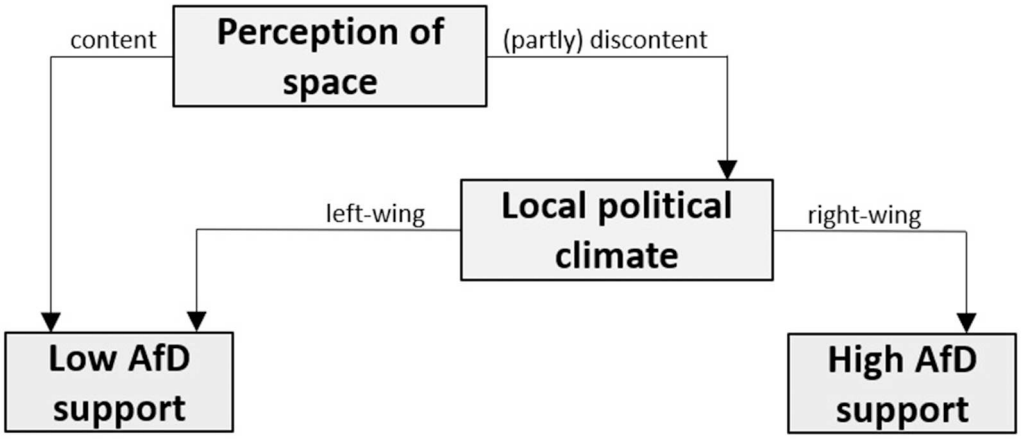


**Figure 1.** Heuristic model explaining *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) vote differences in rural areas.
Source: Authors.

**Table 2.** Assigning groups to the paths of the model.

| | Groups |
|---|---|
| *Perception of space* | |
| Content | W–1, W–2 |
| Partly discontent | L+3, L–1, L–2, W+1 |
| Discontent | L+1, L+2, L–3, L–4 |
| *Local political climate* | |
| Centre-left | L–1, L–2, L–3, L–4 |
| Centre-right | L+1, L+2, L+3, W+1 |

significant influx and returnees. However, the participants also report a downside to the municipality's attractiveness: 'The [property prices] are so going through the roof' (B4, group W–1) and the participants from W–2 face challenges finding a rental housing without personal connections. W–2 benefits from the good connections to the metropolis, tourism due to the attractive natural surroundings, and leisure opportunities, as the participants also emphasise: 'I can go up the mountain, directly, riding the bike. … I have loads of lakes around where I can spend my free time. I have a ski resort' (B2, group W–2). In W–1 and W–2, the participants are confident in the availability of jobs and therefore prospects for newcomers and locals. Thus, the participants also highlight individual prosperity: 'Because a lot of money is earned here too' (B3, group W–1) with lower living costs compared with the metropolis.

However, the local infrastructure does not always meet the – possibly due to the good financial situation high – expectations of the residents. Some participants lament the lack of specific amenities such as an organic supermarket, greater variety in gastronomy or cultural venues such as an opera: 'The [big city] residents have moved here and are culturally under-challenged' (B5, group W–2). Yet, the extent of these complaints underscores the overall prosperity of the municipalities. The participants acknowledge a wide range of stable infrastructures, such as grocery stores and medical offices, schools and train stations as well as cafés and pubs, youth clubs and a cinema. Therefore, they conclude: 'Basically, we are doing well in [W–1]. That has to be said quite honestly. So basically, everything you need to live and love is here' (B2, group W–1).

The overall content with the local living conditions could be the reason why the AfD achieves relatively low election results in these municipalities. There is no discontent to which the populist strategy of emotionalisation and taking shots at the political elite or promises of infrastructure improvements, such as that 'housing must not be a luxury' (Alternative für Deutschland Landesverband NRW, n.d.), could connect. This potential link is reinforced by the realisation that, in these cases, the population could also feel addressed by the AfD's cultural values.

This is because the districts of W–1 and W–2 have a centre-right voting tradition, as the results of the centre-right parties clearly predominate, which is also reflected in the group discussions. For example, participants from W–1 explained that Christian–Catholic traditions (such as Easter customs) are important to local people and are actively practised. Furthermore, the climate is characterised by a predominance of critical positions on migration and rejection of gendering (W–1, W–2). In W–2, the participants remember the arrival of refugees in 2015: 'So 120 asylum seekers for a village like W–2 is not exactly a small number, right. And it's not easy in terms of mentality either' (B5, group W–2), while the group of W–1 reports a special slur for newcomers of all kinds.

The AfD cannot gain ground here despite possible cultural–political overlaps, such as the rejection of gendering or the advocacy of preserving 'German' traditions and a restrictive migration policy – possibly because these cultural–political positions can also be found in conservative democratic parties whose local infrastructure policy residents can be satisfied with.

### 4.2. From (partial) discontent with perceived space …

A strongly negative perception of space dominates the groups in other municipalities (L+1, L+2, L–4, partly L–

3). Due to the structural weakness, 'no large companies settle here, bring no jobs, bring no purchasing power' (B2, group L–3) and young people are moving away (L+1, L+2, partly L–4) 'because there are no prospects here' (B6, group L+1). Thus, everyday life is characterised by long distance commutes. As participants shop in the city on the way home, the already low local demand due to outflux is becoming a threat to businesses. Correspondingly, the impression of a cascade of losses predominates (L+1, L+2, L–3, L–4), for example, the local district of L–4 once had 'a butcher, a baker, three grocery shops, a general store, where you could buy gifts and so on. Today there's nothing left' (B7, group L–4). The lack of medical offices and the lack of public places to meet up with others are a highly relevant concern for the participants, too. Overall, the participants find that locally 'our daily needs are simply not covered' (B5, group L+2). However, the participants find that they can access essential infrastructures for now – individually by car, on which a great dependence is reported, as public transport is poorly developed (L+1, L+2, L–3, L–4). Participants are therefore particularly concerned about the supply in old age: 'But if I as a pensioner am not able to walk or to drive myself, then it's really difficult' (B1, group L+2). Overall, the resulting discontent with the perceived limitation of opportunity structures culminates in the sense of personal devaluation: 'We are only second-class people in our society' (B9, L+1).

Compared with the previous cases, the participants from L+3, L–1, L–2 and W+1 present their area more ambivalently. In addition to basic opportunity structures (such as supermarkets and schools), in at least in some parts of the municipality or the surrounding area, participants report that they can compensate for deficits, such as public transportation and medical specialists. On the one hand, the participants count on civic engagement, such as a volunteer transport service, family or neighbourhood help, to ensure the provision of supplies. On the other hand, the accessibility of large cities compensates for local deficiencies: 'So if it gets really bad, you're really well supplied quickly. So, we really are in an extremely good location here' (B1, group L–2). They also find job prospects there, which, along with low property prices, mitigate a negative demographic trend. Compared with the neighbouring villages, 'we are of course still doing reasonably well here in [L+3] with the possibilities. But of course, that doesn't mean that we should be satisfied with that' (B6, L+3). This underlines that, since the partial limitations of opportunity structures can be counterbalanced, the participants are partially discontent.

Here, the AfD can potentially pick up on the (partial) discontent and use it to its advantage through its typical populist political style of emotionalisation and railing against the government. People who feel neglected by politicians as a rural population could also find promises of infrastructure improvements appealing. In their federal election programme, the AfD pledges rural areas to strengthen 'all facilities necessary for the provision of public services such as schools, medical care and broadband communication', to 'reverse the negative demographic trend' and to support medium-sized companies in general (Alternative für Deutschland, 2016, p. 93). In these cases, it depends on the local political climate whether the AfD succeeds in winning votes:

### 4.3. … to low AfD support

Those groups that live in municipalities with low AfD support despite negative perceptions of space exhibit a centre-left local political climate (L–1, L–2, L–3, L–4). This is evident in the centre-left voting tradition, as centre-left parties often outperform centre-right parties by 10–30 percentage points, as well as in the group discussions themselves. These cases express not only feminist demands for gender equality and green-alternative positions, but also criticism of right-wing (extremist) attitudes and actors. This is reflected in the clear distinction made in the problematisation of the AfD and its voters (L–1, L–2, L–4): 'Those who vote AfD know what they are voting for. He knows that he is right-wing extremist, that he … votes for a party that has views that you cannot represent' (B6, group L–4). The participants are well informed about the AfD election results and other local right-wing actors, indicating a pronounced awareness of right-wing (extremist) activities, which are resolutely opposed (L–1, L–3, L–4): '[there] was a large crowd of people, right here on the station forecourt, shouting down the AfD. They hardly stand a chance here' (B4, group L–2).

These cases also show a great deal of solidarity with refugees, as in L–4, B2 describes the community as 'very open-hearted', as practicing a 'welcoming culture' towards the refugees. Moreover, there are stories about volunteer work for refugees, such as hosting Syrians and Ukrainians and 'seeking accommodation for them' (B2, group L–2). This indicates a local political climate where people feel responsible for protecting and caring for refugees. In L–1, L–2, and L–3, refugees are not seen as competitors for governmental benefits, but as affected by weakness of public services, too.

B6: If you want to go to the immigration office because you have taken in a lot of refugees, as is the case now in [part of L–1], you have to go to [new head of district after district reform] for every official medical excuse, for every report, for every issue. And that's no longer possible.
B9: That's a day's journey … .
B6: Yes. And then you get told: Why don't you put your guests on public transport?
B4: They'll never get there … .
B6: Don't speak the language.
B5: Don't know how to write.
B6: I myself would fail if I had to go to [new head of district after district reform] by public transport.
(group L–1)

However, isolated critical statements about migration can be found in L–1 and L–2, such as concerns about

inadequate integration creating fear in cities. Nevertheless, such statements are rare and cautiously expressed suggesting xenophobic opinions are unwelcome. This distancing is evident, for example, in L–3: 'Of course there are also racists and xenophobes here … . But they keep their mouths shut because they know that they won't win a prize with it' (B3, group L–3), underlining the overall centre-left local political climate.

These observations suggest that a centre-left local political climate acts as a bulwark against the AfD's efforts to win votes, thereby limiting the party's ability to exploit discontent with limited opportunities.

### 4.4. … to high AfD support

In contrast, groups with a negative perception of space in municipalities with high AfD support exhibit a centre-right local political climate (L+1, L+2, L+3, W+1). Here, centre-right parties clearly outweigh the centre-left, sometimes receiving more than double the votes. This is reflected in the group discussions, as in L+3, the participants explain that Christian–Catholic traditions (such as Easter customs) are important to local people and actively practiced. They put great stock in the value of preservation and traditions: '[p]eople are rather conservative here' (B5, group W+1).

A centre-right local political climate is particularly evident in positions on refugees. Some participants believe that the rural population is being treated unfairly by the state because it is supporting refugees financially while neglecting infrastructure in rural areas, as in W+1, on B4's statement, a supply 'like in the big city or like in a larger city, that won't happen', B2 comments: 'That's the discrepancy. There's no money for it. They say: 'Okay, it's not profitable', but floods of asylum seekers, that is profitable' (group W+1). Participants in L+1 and L+2 report similar sentiments in their regions:

> We had an incredible number of school closures. There were no teachers and nothing. And then all of a sudden foreign children come and there's money. There are extra teachers. They are looked after. Money's not an issue. We were told for years: 'You have to save, save, save. You're getting older and older. You have no prospects anyway.' And all of a sudden that's possible.
>
> (B1, group L+2)

Immigrants are also seen as a source of danger. In L+1, participants report fear of a local immigrant family, while in group W+1 the participants see the city as a space of fear due to immigrants: 'There are just some city neighbourhoods where no German dares to go' (B3, group W+1).

In addition to views on immigrants, attitudes towards right-wing actors such as the AfD also characterise the local political climate. In L+1 and L+2 tolerance and understanding for those with right-wing (extremist) views in the village predominate. Regarding a person with right-wing (extremist) views who plans to reopen the local pub, B4 argues against a general unease that he has perceived in the community: 'We have to seize such an opportunity, regardless of whether someone thinks right, left or anything else' (group L+1), without objection by the group. Similarly, several groups (L+1, L+2, L+3) mainly justify or downplay voting for the AfD: 'the big problem is not necessarily the party and the time. So, there are always a few protest voters' (B2, group L+2). At the same time, dissociations such as the criticism that 'the AfD has no answers at all … [and only] offers supposedly simple solutions or simple slogans' (B5, group W+1), are present, but are rather moderate in those cases.

Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that the AfD may meet with approval here not only due to discontent with the limitations of opportunity structures, but also because of its cultural–political positions, such as its proclamation of a 'German Leitkultur' (dominant culture) and a restrictive migration policy (Alternative für Deutschland, 2016). At the same time, democratic resistance is comparatively weak.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The article takes up the argument from the 'geography of discontent' debate that discontent with regional stagnation or decline and the limitations of opportunity structures in 'left-behind places' are the root of the rise of right-wing populism in rural areas. Based on the qualitative analysis of group discussions in rural areas of Germany, we address the question of why the AfD gains support in some structurally weak respectively strong rural areas but not others. We show what characterises rural areas with a high AfD election result from the perspective of the population, while structurally similar areas with low AfD results are used as contrasting cases.

As a first step, our study shows that the perceptions of opportunity structures and their discontents are nuanced. In particular, compensation through the accessibility of prosperous regions in the surrounding area or through self-organised associations reduces discontent. The quantitative classification of the study regions generally aligns with participants' perceptions of space. However, the group discussions reveal small-scale differences lost in quantitative aggregation at the district level. For instance, the district of W+1 is quantitatively rated as socio-economically well-off, yet participants identify structural deficits, which they are able to compensate for in part due to the accessibility of a metropolis outside their district. This demonstrates the relevance of a qualitative perspective for the 'geography of discontent' debate, as it contributed to a more differentiated view of discontent in 'left-behind' rural areas.

Adding the analysis of the local political climate, the results suggest that areas with a high AfD result are characterised by discontent with opportunity structures and a centre-right local political climate. The contrasting cases show that a centre-left local political climate or a high level of content with opportunity structures serve as bulwarks against right-wing populist vote catching. This supports the 'geography of discontent' hypothesis

regarding the political effects of long-term stagnation or decline, but also points beyond it. The fact that the local political climate plays a decisive role underlines the relevance of cultural–political influences, as argued by the cultural backlash thesis (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In the perception of some residents that the state puts the rural population at a disadvantage compared with foreigners, an interweaving of the approaches becomes clear.

However, our results are limited in generalisability. While due to the contrasting strategy, we can surmise that these qualitative relationships are also found in structurally similar spaces, it would be promising to operationalise and test the derived theory quantitatively, considering the accessibility of infrastructures on the context and political attitudes on the individual level. The identified infrastructures most relevant to the residents, in particular public transport, medicine, supermarkets and social spaces, give orientation for operationalisation in the German context. Furthermore, the study was conducted at a single point in time, while spatial conditions and voting patterns may change over time. A qualitative longitudinal follow-up would therefore be valuable for capturing such dynamics.

Nevertheless, with a differentiated view of rural spaces, capturing participants' perceptions of space, including an openness to one's own settings of relevance, as well as examining the local political climate through group discussions, we have made a contribution to research on right-wing populism in the context of the debate on the 'geography of discontent', emphasising the relevance of the interaction of economic and cultural explanatory approaches.

In order to reduce the rise of right-wing populism in rural areas, policymakers should, in addition to structural support for rural areas to improve life satisfaction, fund liberal democratic political education more strongly. While democratic education projects in Germany can also be funded by the federal states, it is primarily the municipalities that are responsible for building and maintaining infrastructure. The Expert Council for Rural Development (2025) recommends increasing municipal capacity to act by raising continuous income rather than project funding, for example, by increasing the municipal share of sales tax from 2% to 6%.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Owing to the pseudonymisation of participants for reasons of research ethics, the data are not made accessible.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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## ETHICS STATEMENT

For research ethics reasons, the names of participants, municipalities and districts have been pseudonymised, and any personal data that could reveal participants' identities have been omitted. Furthermore, all participants were informed of their rights, and their consent to data-processing was obtained in writing. The agreement covered the fact that consent was voluntary and revocable, and that the conversation would be recorded using an audio recorder, stored and transcribed. The agreement also covered the fact that the material would only be used for scientific purposes, that only excerpts, and never the entire group discussion, would be published, and that personal data would be pseudonymised for publication.

## NOTES

1. This section and Appendix A in the supplemental data online are partly based on Deppisch (2021, 2022).
2. The categorisation into social classes was based on the weighted net equivalent household income (Federal Statistical Office, 2024) of the participants. The result was set in relation to the median of the population and categorised according to the social class definition of the German Economic Institute (Niehues, 2017).
3. In the German language, there can be gender-specific forms for nouns. For example, the masculine form of educator is 'ein Erzieher' and the feminine form is 'eine Erzieherin'. Furthermore, a group of educators where there is only one man among women is nevertheless referred to as 'die Erzieher' – the generic masculine of the plural. At this point, gendering calls for the introduction of a new linguistic form 'die Erzieher*innen', which takes into account the female subjects with the 'innen' and persons who do not (fully) identify with the male or female gender with the asterisk.
4. The following parties were considered as centre-left: *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD), *Bündnis 90/Die Grünen* and *Die Linke*. The following parties were considered as centre-right: *Freie Demokratische Partei* (FDP), *Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands* (CDU) and *Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern* (CSU). For analytical simplicity, the vote shares of the parties *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and Heimat, formerly known as the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*

(NPD), were added to those of the centre-right parties in the calculation of the voting traditions. However, we want to emphasise that unlike the other parties, which are part of the democratic spectrum, the AfD is right-wing populist with extremist tendencies, and the Heimat is right-wing extremist with references to National Socialist ideology (Pfahl-Traughber, 2019).

## ORCID

*Larissa Deppisch* http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6088-6761
*Andreas Klärner* http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0314-1215

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