

Julia Bläsius, Elisabeth Bollrich, Jonathan Overmeyer

# From Cutback to Backlash

How can public services strengthen democracy?

## At a glance

*In this paper we examine the results of the study »Antidemocratic Election Successes in Unequal Germany« which looks at the relations between regional public services and increasing dissatisfaction with democracy in Germany's 400 districts. The results show that spatial disparities in local public services are reflected in the AfD's 2025 election results at district level. Indicators such as broadband coverage, child care and school education turn out to be particularly significant. Having said that, subjective evaluations of public services sometimes deviate sharply from objectively measurable indicators. Nevertheless, the results provide important insights for a socially just structural policy, in particular supported by investments in technical and social infrastructure.*

## Introduction

In the past ten years, as in many other European countries, there have been marked shifts in Germany's political party system. This may be seen, for example, in the election successes of right-wing populist or extreme right parties in regional, national and European elections. In Germany this development is discernible particularly in the rise of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland), which since its founding in 2013 has been able to establish itself as a permanent fixture in the German party system and has become increasingly radicalised.<sup>1</sup>

This paper summarises the findings of the study »Antidemocratic Election Successes in Unequal Germany«, which investigates the extent to which there is a concrete connection between regional election results and differences in public services.<sup>2</sup> Sweeping judgements are often made with regard to both the urban-rural divide in public services and differences between eastern and western Germany in terms of electoral behaviour. The object of this analysis is the re-

<sup>1</sup> In May 2025 the AfD was classified as »confirmed extreme right« by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution.

<sup>2</sup> By public services, we mean state provision of basic goods and services, such as education, health care, housing and a decent utility infrastructure, which are necessary for a dignified life, free personal development and participation. In Germany, this is based on the principle of the welfare state (as enshrined in the Basic Law, Art. 20 (1) GG) and serves to foster social cohesion.

relationship between unequal living conditions – based on indicators of public services – and the election results of populist parties, such as the AfD, at the level of Germany's 400 districts and independent towns and cities. On this basis we come up with a number of practical structural policy recommendations.

Satisfaction with the quality of health care, education and care provision, as well as mobility infrastructure is a key factor influencing trust in state actors and democracy. For example, in recent years doubts have been increasing concerning the state's ability to deliver these public services. Discussions about buses that in many places no longer run, long waits for doctors' appointments or a lack of day care places lay bare the structural deficits in provision left behind by years of austerity policy in some German regions. The special infrastructure and climate protection fund launched by the CDU/CSU and the SPD and adopted by the previous Bundestag should be understood as an answer to these shortcomings. What is at issue here, however, is the specific design of public services and their functional and regional distribution. It has to be ensured that the regional availability of public services is socially just and helps to foster equal living conditions, thereby strengthening trust in our democracy. For that reason, too, the study whose findings we summarise here, is more relevant than ever.

First of all, the regional and structural policy factors affecting support for anti-democratic parties are difficult to disentangle at regional level. This is because spatial disparities in terms of public services and economic viability overlap with other factors that spatially may be unevenly distributed, such as demographic indicators or even elements of cultural history to which we can pay only limited attention here. It is also important to point out here that the results of the multivariate regression analysis may not be interpreted as causal effects. The relationship between spatial indicators of public services and democratic participation and/or support for antidemocratic parties is complex. This means that the correlations identified here are merely starting points, and cannot fully explain election results. But such clues are particularly important in the present circumstances when it comes to political action.

## Equal living conditions and election results

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung has already published reports on Unequal Germany in 2015 (Albrecht et al. 2016), 2019 (Fink et al. 2019) and 2023 (Gohla/Hennicke 2023). These were based on cluster analyses and aimed at highlighting regional inequalities in different kinds of area. These so-called disparity reports bring to light structural challenges, but also the potential for reducing regional inequalities, especially in the context of the current economic and societal transformation. Most recently, a distinction has been drawn primarily between two clusters:

### Spatial areas characterised by socio-economic disparities

- **Dynamic urban areas with elevated risk of exclusion:** economically robust urban areas with good infrastructure and opportunities for the highly qualified, but with marked social polarisation and a housing shortage.
- **Wealthy suburban and rural areas:** high wages, low poverty and public debt, mainly in the vicinity of southern and western German economic centres.
- **Germany's solid middle:** scarcely different from the German average, partly peripheral and heterogeneous regions with comparatively stable infrastructure and social protection, limited growth potential.
- **Structurally weak areas with some positive catch-up effects:** rural areas in eastern Germany, shortage of skilled workers, low incomes, but sporadic catch-up processes, as well as low public debt and, in some instances, low old-age poverty.
- **Former industrial cities with structural challenges:** western Germany, high poverty, social problems and limited scope for municipal action, nevertheless, above average medical care and digital infrastructure.

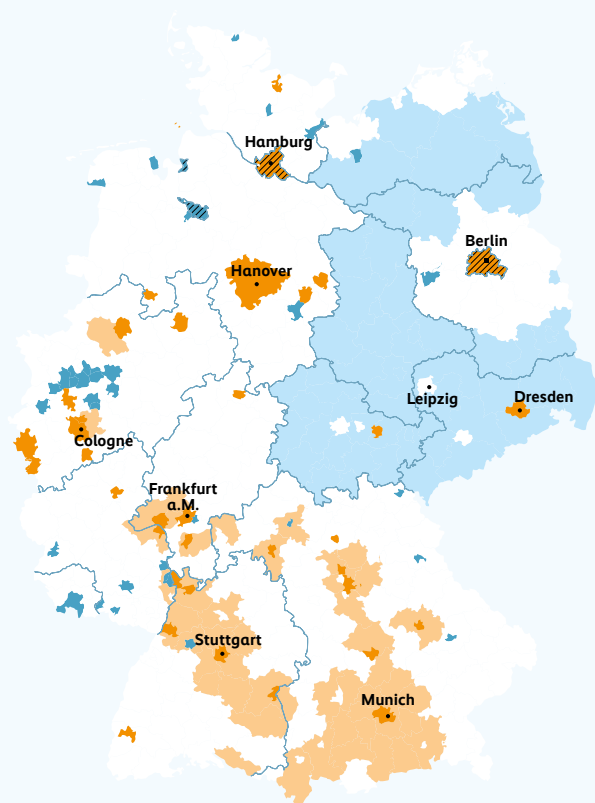
### Spatial areas characterised by regional resilience and future viability

- **Regions with some obstacles to adaptation:** average economic resilience with shortages of skilled workers, child care and municipal investment.
- **Areas with particular structural challenges:** mainly rural areas, low investment, shortage of highly qualified workers, overall a critical demographic situation despite good child care – a major effort will be needed to cope with the challenges of transformation.
- **Resilient rural areas:** somewhere in the middle with regard to innovation and above average with regard to economic diversity, stable demographically, very attractive to skilled workers and high municipal investment despite comparatively below average infrastructure. Well prepared for transformation overall.
- **Spatial innovation poles:** large cities and metropolitan areas with a surfeit of knowledge-based jobs and good infrastructure, as well as rural areas with strong renewable energy. The high concentration of particular kinds of jobs, however, could hinder transformation.

In connection with Germany's 2025 federal elections the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung commissioned the Institute for Regional and Urban Development Research (ILS) to carry out a new analysis of social-spatial inequalities based on a

Disparities map 2023

Fig. 1



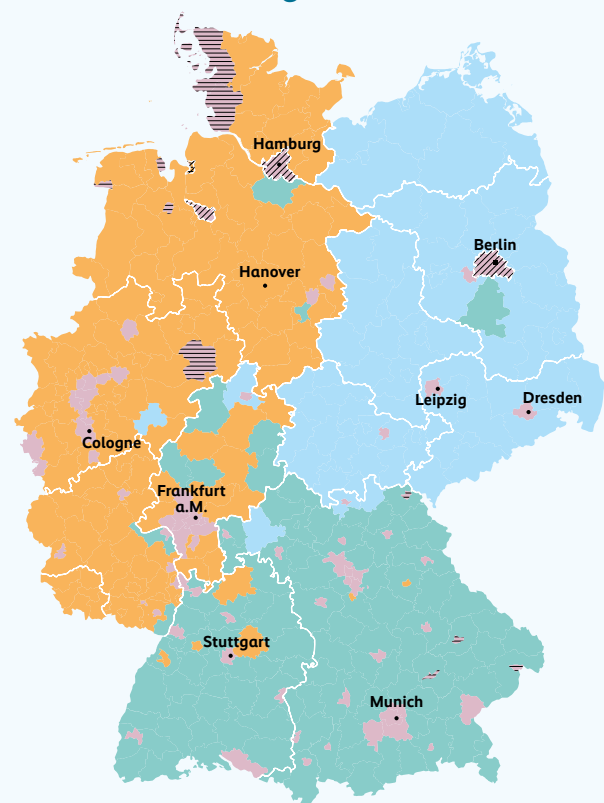
#### Cluster types

- Dynamic urban areas with elevated risk of exclusion
- Wealthy suburban and rural areas
- Germany's solid middle
- Structurally weak areas with some positive catching-up effects
- Former industrial cities with structural challenges
- City-states Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen (no data on local finances)

Source: Authors' presentation; data: Regional statistics, Bertelsmann Stiftung; Wegweiser Kommune, Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs, and Spatial Development, Thünen Landatlas, Federal Employment Agency statistics, Federal Network Agency's Gigabit Land Registry, GeoBasis-DE/BKG 2021.

Disparities map of resilience and sustainability 2023

Fig. 2



#### Cluster types

- Regions with some obstacles to adaptation
- Resilient rural areas
- Areas with particular structural challenges
- Spatial innovation poles
- Administrative districts with special status with regard to renewable energies
- City-states Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen (no data on local finances)

Source: Authors' presentation; data: Regional statistics, Federal Employment Agency statistics, Infas 360 GmbH, German Patent and Trademark Office, EON Energy Atlas, Bertelsmann Stiftung; Wegweiser Kommune (Municipality Guide), Federal Network Agency's Gigabit Land Registry, GeoBasis-DE/BKG 2021.

cluster analysis of previous disparity reports. This study also takes up the debate on AfD election results in »structurally weak« regions, in which people feel »neglected« (Fröhlich et al. 2022). For the first time the AfD were the strongest party in all five eastern German Länder and even made gains in western German Länder at the 2025 Bundestag elections. Once again, explanations are being sought for the rise of the AfD.

The set of indicators for the regression analysis underlying this report takes its bearings from the previous investigations of spatial inequality in Germany, the so-called disparity reports (Unequal Germany 2015, 2019 and 2023). Because

objective indicators capture only one dimension the results of the German government's Equality Report 2024 (GWB 2024), which looked primarily into subjective perceptions of certain regional factors, were incorporated in the analysis.

The analysis shows that spatial disparities with regard to living conditions are clearly reflected in the AfD's election results. Support for the far right and differences in voter turnout, however, can be explained only to a certain extent in terms of certain aspects of public services. In combination with subjective evaluations of the regional situation, however, helpful approaches do suggest themselves, which are summarised in what follows.

	VOTE SHARE AfD	DEVELOPMENT OF AfD VOTE SHARE	VOTER TURNOUT	DEVELOPMENT OF VOTER TURNOUT
Dynamic urban areas with elevated risk of exclusion	13.19 %	+4.51 %-P	82.11 %	+5.15 %-P
Affluent (surrounding) areas	17.94 %	+7.29 %-P	85.62 %	+4.53 %-P
Germany's solid middle	20.72 %	+8.30 %-P	83.15 %	+6.22 %-P
Structurally weak areas, but with some positive catch-up effects	40.53 %	+7.27 %-P	79.42 %	+6.71 %-P
Old industrial cities facing structural challenges	19.27 %	+6.60 %-P	78.35 %	+6.82 %-P

Source: Authors' presentation.

### A comparison of eastern and western Germany brings to light a variety of explanations, but shrinking regions exhibit a number of similarities:

- Taking Germany as a whole we can say that a higher proportion of older people and a lower share of women go hand in hand with a higher AfD vote. These effects are less a reflection of the voting behaviour of older people or men than of the negative demographic dynamics of shrinking regions, as well as the accompanying poor state of the economy. In Germany as a whole the AfD benefits especially in regions facing particular structural challenges.
- The geographical dummy variable »eastern Germany« remains, however, the strongest predictor of AfD electoral success. The party registers its highest vote shares and gains in structurally weak rural regions in the east, especially in the spatial cluster »structurally weak areas with some positive catch-up effects« (see disparity reports). These areas are, despite any economic catch-up successes in recent years, characterised by a marked urban/rural divide, economic structural change, demographic decline and migration, especially of young people, as well as a high subjective dissatisfaction with regional development and public services. Although population decline has largely been halted in these areas and wage development and broadband coverage have picked up, above all young and well educated skilled workers, company start-ups and patents are still lagging behind.
- In western German Länder the AfD prospers in particular in less dynamic old industrial areas, such as in the cities

of the Ruhrgebiet and its environs. For example, the AfD has been able to mobilise strong support in places such as Kaiserslautern or Gelsenkirchen, in which socio-economic pressures, a lack of economic prospects, unemployment and ongoing or already completed structural upheavals coincide. They have also been able to capitalise on a rising voter turnout, which previously had been quite low. Having said that, there has also been a rise in the AfD vote in economically stable regions, for example, in the affluent surrounding areas and the solid middle of southern Germany. The AfD has made significant gains here despite average public services and a lack of structural weaknesses. The reasons for this could include fears of »deindustrialisation« and uncertainty in relation to the green and digital transformations. The traditionally strong industry in the southwest would be hit particularly hard by this and, with its traditionally more conservative electorate, could be more susceptible to AfD narratives.

### Social infrastructure and digitalisation are aspects of public services that serve to underpin democracy:

- The AfD tends to make fewer gains in regions with a higher educational level.<sup>3</sup> Although there is no significant correlation with the indicator school leavers without qualifications this could be because precisely in urban areas the school dropout rate is very high, which rubs counter to spatial explanatory patterns (especially urban/rural).
- Our analysis shows that, besides education, other aspects of social infrastructure exhibit significant correlations with AfD electoral results. This applies above all

<sup>3</sup> Only school leavers with higher qualifications were used as an indicator here. For a more detailed analysis, it would also be necessary to look at how many people have intermediate school leaving certificates and vocational training, provided that sufficient data is available.

	VOTE SHARE AFD	DEVELOPMENT OF AFD VOTE SHARE	VOTER TURNOUT	DEVELOPMENT OF VOTER TURNOUT
Regions with partial barriers to adaptation	18.67 %	+7.96 %-P	82.80 %	+6.59 %-P
Resilient rural areas	21.15 %	+8.30 %-P	84.35 %	+5.22 %-P
Areas facing particular structural challenges	37.20 %	+7.63 %-P	80.10 %	+6.51 %-P
Spatial innovation poles	14.53 %	+5.05 %-P	81.88 %	+5.17 %-P

Source: Authors' presentation.

to child care coverage, which has a significant negative correlation with AfD election results both for Germany as a whole and for western Germany. In eastern Germany, however, in which historically child care coverage has been higher, there is no significant negative effect. The finding that wherever more child care places tend to be available the AfD polls lower remains very robust, however.

- The importance of social infrastructure is further illustrated by comparison with subjective levels of satisfaction from the 2024 Equality Report (Gleichwertigkeitsbericht). Higher satisfaction, particularly with vibrant town centres and associated local amenities, goes hand in hand with lower AfD electoral success, especially in eastern Germany.
- There is also a significant negative correlation between broadband coverage and the AfD vote. The AfD tends to fare worse in regions with more developed digital infrastructure. This applies in particular to western Germany. But although this effect is not confirmed for eastern Germany, we can assume that the indicator is overshadowed by other indicators that better describe the urban/rural divide.

## Subjective evaluations reinforce objective disparities, especially in the east:

- Perceived disadvantage and a lower subjective evaluation of health care and mobility provision are very important for overall satisfaction with public services. In particular in eastern Germany satisfaction with elements of public services appears to exert a stronger influence on overall satisfaction. In western German regions, by contrast, assessment of the economic situation in one's

own region, also in direct comparison with other regions, has a stronger effect on overall satisfaction.

- In eastern Germany, subjective evaluations of public services and the economic situation in the regions exhibit a closer correlation in almost all respects with AfD election results than in western German Länder. For western Germany, by contrast, we see closer correlations in relation to selected individual indicators in the regression model than in eastern Germany.
- Individual economic situations have less impact on voting decisions than evaluations of the general economic situation and the future in one's own region. This correlation is more manifest in eastern Germany.

## Practical recommendations: what follows from the results

High AfD vote shares and gains are evident most of all in eastern Germany, rural areas and structurally weak districts. There is a clear correlation in this respect in both eastern and western Germany between the state of public services and AfD electoral success. In places in which social infrastructure, quality of education and broadband coverage are better, AfD results tend to be lower, while election turnout is higher.

A clear added value of this study is the link between objective indicators of democracy-relevant public services and subjective evaluations from the Equality Report. That is because clear correlations emerge on the subjective level in particular in relation to health care and mobility: satisfaction with public transport, health care provision and vibrant town centres seems to have a closer correlation with voting behaviour than purely statistical data on services.



- 1. Raise the profile of regional inequalities and tackle them head on:** dissatisfaction with the general economic situation must be addressed in areas facing particular structural challenges. The AfD strategy is to try to capitalise on such worries. In eastern Germany action is urgently necessary with regard to the rural/urban divide. Here in particular it is evident that at the relational level unequal living conditions are a decisive factor in dissatisfaction and lack of trust. Subjectively perceived inequalities must be at the forefront of the political debate and action must be taken, for example, by expanding the joint task of »improving regional economic structures« and boosting investment, directed not only at economic potential, but also at the needs of local people. The Federal Government's Equality Report provides guidance on prioritisation in this area and should be heeded.
- 2. Joint investment rather than carrying out repairs:** if existing inequalities and the related societal dissatisfaction are to be reduced we need to do more than tackle the investment backlog caused by austerity policy and really expand public infrastructure and public services. The special Infrastructure fund provides an opportunity to break down material and administrative barriers, especially for Länder and municipalities. However, the subjective evaluations featured in this study highlight the fact that isolated successes often go unnoticed. What would be decisive is thus a consistent and forward-looking investment policy that doesn't just repair the damage, but invests, according to need, in future-oriented structures. Furthermore, it must be supported by a people-oriented communication and participation strategy. If citizens become actively involved in the prioritisation and implementation of investments at local level then local needs will be met more satisfactorily, self-efficacy can be realised and a positive vision of the future can be developed. In this way state action can restore long-term trust and strengthen democratic stability.
- 3. Restore municipal capacities:** to this end, thorough reform of municipal funding is urgently needed (Raffer/Scheller 2025). On the expenditure side this concerns reductions in social spending and resolving the issue of old debts. On the revenue side support programmes must be more closely coordinated and set on a longer term basis. In particular for structurally weak regions in eastern Germany, which tend to suffer less from old debts than municipalities in, for example, the Ruhrgebiet, nevertheless, a robust balance needs to be struck between revenues and expenditures so that they can invest in their region's future viability. Key to this are investments in (political) education/training infrastructure and reliable child care, broadband coverage and local public transport. Also important are the creation and cultivation of vibrant town centres, local integration projects, and (multicultural) dialogue and encounter formats, especially where immigration from abroad is high.
- 4. Confidence in the future through innovation and decent jobs:** at the same time, it's important to acknowledge that positive economic catch-up effects do not necessarily mean that a region will find itself on a stable future-proof path. If, on one hand, a region makes economic progress but falls short in key respects (for example, with regard to skilled workers or innovation capabilities), which are crucial for meeting the coming challenges, then that will also have an effect on local people's confidence in the future. The AfD may take advantage of this situation, especially in the eastern German urban/rural divide. Concerns about the future, in particular in relation to crises and upheavals, must be taken seriously. They often arise from negative experiences of transformation. While it's true that we have identified a correlation between AfD election results and the state of individual public services, that is not the only reason they need to be tackled urgently. Over the long term, it is crucial to open up new economic and social prospects that go beyond public services alone. Examples include promoting start-ups and attracting new companies, along with the creation of decent jobs and competitive wages. Disbursement of state subsidies can be made conditional on this.

## Bibliography

**Albrech, Joachim; Fink, Philipp; Tiemann, Heinrich (2016):**

Ungleiches Deutschland: Sozioökonomischer Disparitätenbericht 2015 [Unequal Germany: Socioeconomic Disparities Report 2015], Gute Gesellschaft – Soziale Demokratie # 2017plus. Bonn, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung; available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/wiso/12390.pdf> (last accessed on 3.7.2025).

**Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft und Klimaschutz (BMWK)**

**(2024):** Gleichwertigkeitsbericht 2024: Für starke und lebenswerte Regionen in Deutschland [Equality Report 2024: for robust and liveable regions in Germany]; available at: <https://www.bundeswirtschaftsministerium.de/Redaktion/DE/Publikationen/Wirtschaft/gleichwertigkeits-bericht-der-bundesregierung-2024.pdf?blob=publicationFile&v=84> (last accessed on 3.6.2025).

**Fink, Philipp; Hennicke, Martin; Tiemann, Heinrich (2019):**

Ungleiches Deutschland: Sozioökonomischer Disparitätenbericht 2019: Für ein besseres Morgen [Unequal Germany: Socioeconomic Disparities Report 2019: for a better tomorrow]. Bonn, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung; available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/fes/15400-20190528.pdf> (last accessed on 3.7.2025).

**Fröhlich, Paulina; Mannewitz, Tom; Ranft, Florian (2022):**

Die Übergangenen: strukturschwach und erfahrungsstark: Zur Bedeutung regionaler Perspektiven für die Große Transformation [Disregarded: structurally weak but rich in experience: the significance of regional perspectives for the Great Transformation]. Bonn; available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/a-p-b/18522.pdf> (last accessed on 3.7.2025). English translation available at: <https://www.fes.de/en/study-disregarded>

**Heider, Bastian; Scholz, Benjamin; Siedentop, Stefan; Radzyk,**

**Jacqueline; Rönsch, Jutta; Weck, Sabine (2023):** Ungleiches Deutschland: Sozioökonomische Disparitäten 2023 – wissenschaftlicher Hintergrundbericht [Unequal Germany: Socioeconomic Disparities Report 2023 – background report], FES diskurs. Bonn, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung; available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/a-p-b/20535.pdf> (last accessed on 3.7.2025).

**Heider, Bastian; Novack, Tessio; Scheunert, Pauline; Scholz,**

**Benjamin (2025):** Antidemokratische Wahlerfolge im ungleichen Deutschland: Demokratiestützende Aspekte der Daseinsvorsorge [Anti-democratic election successes in unequal Germany: aspects of public services that promote democracy], FES Analyse. Bonn, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung; available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/a-p-b/22242.pdf> (last accessed on 18.7.2025)

**Raffer, Christian; Scheller, Henrik (forthcoming 2025):**

Kommunale Grundfinanzierung, FES Analyse. Bonn, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

## About the authors

**Julia Bläsius** most recently headed the Political Consulting Department at the FES. Prior to that, she was head of the FES offices in the South Caucasus and in Ukraine.

**Elisabeth Bollrich** has been head of the FES office in Senegal since June 2025. Before that she was desk officer for foundation-wide projects in the Analysis and Planning Department.

**Jonathan Overmeyer** is desk officer for economic policy in the FES's Political Consulting Department. Previously he was desk officer in the Democracy, Society and Innovation Department.

## Imprint

### Publisher

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.  
Godesberger Allee 149  
53175 Bonn  
[info@fes.de](mailto:info@fes.de)

### Publishing department

Division for Analysis, Planning and Consulting  
[www.fes.de/apb](http://www.fes.de/apb)

### Contact

Vera Gohla  
[vera.gohla@fes.de](mailto:vera.gohla@fes.de)

### Image credits

Page 1, top: Bergsee, blau

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V. (FES). Commercial use of FES publications in any media is not allowed without written permission from the FES. FES publications may not be used for election campaign purposes.

July 2025

© Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.

For further publications from the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung click here:

➤ [www.fes.de/publikationen](http://www.fes.de/publikationen)

