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Why do immigrants support an anti-immigrant party? Russian-Germans and the Alternative for Germany

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ABSTRACT

By reaching a vote share of 12.6 percent in the 2017 federal election, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) ended Germany's rare status as a Western European polity lacking a significant Populist Radical Right Party (PRRP). Some of this support comes from a group not usually expected to vote for PRRPs: immigrant-origin voters. Recent survey data shows high levels of support for the AfD especially within the group of Russian-Germans – immigrants from the former Soviet Union and its successor states. What motivates these immigrant-origin voters to support an anti-immigrant party? This article argues that support for the AfD – besides immigration-related preferences – can be best explained by their levels of assimilation or incorporation for different domains regarding the mainstream German society. Especially low levels of economic and social integration, and in particular a strong ethnic identity, relate positively to favouring the German radical right.

KEYWORDS Germany; immigrants; Right Populist Party; integration; election

Founded in early 2013, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) recently ended the country's rare status as a Western European polity lacking a significant Populist Radical Right Party (PRRP). After successfully competing in two European Parliament elections and gaining seats in all 16 subnational *Länder* parliaments, the AfD attracted 12.6 percent of all votes in the 2017 federal election: the best result of any party newly entering the *Bundestag* since 1949. As a consequence, the AfD's rise generated

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*Shortly before finishing this article's final draft, its first author Prof Dennis C Spies passed away totally unexpected aged 40 (1981–2021). We are missing a dear and loyal friend and the best collaborator one might hope for. We will always remember him.

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considerable interest from social scientists. While a first wave of research contributions focussed on the party's ideology (Arzheimer 2015; Franzmann 2016; Lewandowsky *et al.* 2016), a second wave analysed the AfD's voters and sympathisers (Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Berbuir *et al.* 2015; Goerres *et al.* 2018; Pesthy *et al.* 2021; Schmitt-Beck 2014, 2017). In a nutshell, these studies showed that individual support for the AfD can be explained by established models drawn from the comparative literature on PRRP voters in Western Europe (see for a recent overview Arzheimer 2018) most prominently by anti-immigrant sentiments and a disenchantment with politics. Overall, the electoral make-up of the AfD resembles the template of a PRRP.

However, one factor behind the AfD's electoral success story seems unique: the party receives considerable support from so-called 'Russian-Germans': Germany's biggest group of immigrant-origin voters. Russian-Germans – ethnic Germans who have immigrated from the Soviet Union and her successor states – made up 2.4 out of 6.3 million immigrant-origin voters in Germany in 2017 (DESTATIS 2017). Dating their ethnic origins back to their forebearers, who emigrated from 18th century German lands to the then tsarist Russia, most Russian-Germans immigrated to the newly unified Germany during the 1990s as so-called 'resettlers'¹ (*Aussiedler*). Due to their unique immigration history, most Russian-Germans were granted German citizenship status – including the right to vote – immediately upon their arrival, and soon developed a strong attachment towards the Christian Democrats (Wüst 2004). However, the general picture put forward by recent political analysts is that of a pronounced re-orientation of Russian-Germans towards the AfD (Hansen and Olsen, 2020) which itself makes noticeable efforts to attract this group (Goerres *et al.* 2020). In the federal election of 2017, survey data indicates that at least 15 percent² of Russian-Germans cast their vote for the AfD – a significantly higher level of support than could be expected from the party's official election result.

The idea of immigrants supporting a party known for its pronounced anti-immigrant agenda appears counterintuitive at first. However, their specific migration history which leads to their self-conception as ethnic Germans, means that neither does this group perceive themselves as immigrants (Hess 2016; Kiel 2009) nor that the anti-immigrant party in this case perceives this group as immigrants (see Goerres *et al.* 2020). This leads to the question of how this group's party preferences for the AfD can be explained. Theoretically, there are two possibilities that might be applicable. First, support for the AfD among Russian-Germans might be explained by the same factors already identified among non-immigrant, native voters. Anti-immigrant sentiments, disenchantment with politics,

and other established drivers of PRRP support, might also motivate Russian-Germans. Following this first perspective, a recent study by Hansen and Olsen (2020) identified hostility towards (mainly Muslim) refugees as the main predictor for Russian-German AfD support – a pattern resembling the findings for native AfD voters (Goerres *et al.* 2018). Second, AfD support among Russian-Germans might be motivated for reasons specific to this group; reasons that are not relevant or even applicable to native AfD supporters. Specifically, and the main argument we wish to make in this article which has not been studied before, Russian-Germans' experiences and status as a particular group of immigrant-origin voters might be decisive in this regard. Our empirical analysis thus focuses explicitly on Russian-German voters to see whether the first or the second possible explanation can explain AfD support in this group while using findings from previous studies on native voters to put part of our results in perspective. We base our research on the assumptions that Russian-Germans are immigrants that are trying to find their place in German society and use different domains of integration as a general framework for analyses. We argue that Russian-Germans' placement on a continuum in different domains such as the economic or societal subsystem matters for the party preferences towards the AfD, not in relation to native or other immigrant-origin voters, but with regard to other Russian-German voters. Borrowing from the literature on inter-minority attitude formation, realistic group conflict, and social identity theory, and reviewing the few researched cases of PRRP support among immigrant-origin voters in other countries, we argue that the level of Russian-German economic, social, and cultural integration into German mainstream society affect whether they support the AfD or not.

Dimensions of integration and support for the specific parties among immigrant-origin voters

In contrast to the formal and informal forms of political participation among immigrant-origin voters, the number of studies addressing their party preferences is still rather limited. In general, immigrant-origin voters often show a higher likelihood to support left-wing parties in their host societies (Bird *et al.* 2011). However, there are some well-known exceptions to this rule. Prominent examples include the strong support for the US Republicans by Cuban-origin voters (see Bishin and Klofstad 2012), or the support for the Swiss Conservatives by Eastern-European-origin voters (see Strijbis 2014). Also, Russian-Germans have never been known for their support of left-wing parties; they have historically voted for the German Christian Democrats

(Wüst 2002, 2004). While we acknowledge these as examples of immigrant-origin voters supporting parties of the mainstream right, immigrant-origin voters supporting PRRPs is an even more unusual pattern, and to the best of our knowledge, there are few examples that deal explicitly with voter behaviour. These examples are restricted to France, where the support of the so-called *Pieds-Noirs* for the National Front (now: National Rally) has attracted some scholarly attention (e.g. Savarese 2016; Veugelers *et al.* 2015), and to the Netherlands, where anti-Muslim sentiment, besides economic concerns, was found to be a driver of PVV vote choice among Hindustani migrants (Roopram and van Steenbergen 2014). Studies on concepts related to vote choice have been carried out in Israel (Islamophobia among Soviet-origin immigrants, Itzkovitch-Malka and Konstantinov 2017); Switzerland (second-generation immigrants supporting immigration quotas, Strijbis and Polaviejab 2018); the Netherlands (ethnic hierarchies among immigrant groups, Hindriks *et al.* 2014); Great Britain (Islamophobia drives nationalist attitudes among migrants from India, Leidig 2019), and the US (resource conflicts between Latinos and African-Americans, Carter and King-Meadows 2019). However, none of these studies deals explicitly with voting behaviour, but rather with the politically relevant attitudes or policy preferences of immigrant-origin voters or ethnic minorities.

For possible explanations why immigrants would support an anti-immigrant party, we are thus faced with a fragmented state of the art – both in terms of theoretical approaches and dependent variables – in combination with a diverse set of immigrant-origin voters who live in different host societies. It is not an easy task to derive from this a framework which applies to the question why some immigrant-origin voters might be supportive of PRRPs. In order to structure our theoretical arguments, we will thus start with a commonality of all immigrants; as (relatively) new arrivals, they have to find their place in their country of destination. As immigrant integration research states, this often stressful and conflictual process contains several ‘dimensions’ (Harder *et al.* 2018) or ‘spheres’ (Entzinger and Biezeveld 2003), including economic, social, and cultural integration. Following authors such as Esser (2001) and Heckmann (2015), we define immigrant integration as both an ongoing process and an actual (and measurable) status with regard to the immigrants’ conditions of participation in the social systems of their host society.³

In the following sections, we will use three dimensions of immigrant integration – economic, social and cultural – as a conceptual map in order to summarise the different theoretical arguments on immigrant-origin voters’ political support for PRRPs.

The economic integration of immigrant-origin voters and PRRP support

Economic integration refers to the positioning of immigrants and their descendants in central areas of the host societies' socioeconomic systems, most prominently the labour market and the educational systems. Directly related resources such as income, job status, and formal education take centre stage in debates on immigrant integration, and there is no doubt that immigrant-origin groups differ in these resources, both when compared with the native population as well as within the group of immigrant-origin voters themselves. At the same time, scholars favouring different theoretical and normative positions towards the integration of immigrants – most prominently assimilation or multi-culturalism (see reviews in Algan *et al.* 2012) – agree that successful integration cannot be reached when immigrants find themselves persistently in precarious socioeconomic conditions.

Previous studies have related economic integration mainly to the political participation of immigrant-origin voters' (see Spies *et al.* 2020 for a recent review), but we also see arguments for relating it to their PRRP support.⁴ The reason for this is that immigrant-origin voters might compete with more recent immigrants over scarce public resources. This competition might become more intense the less successfully that immigrant-origin voters are integrated into host societies' labour markets. This line of reasoning is supported by evidence about racial and ethnic minority groups in the US where resource competition is perceived as a central force in Black–Latino relations: African-Americans express more ethnically prejudicial attitudes towards Latinos, the more they think that the latter wield more economic resources relative to their own group (Gay 2006). This is a pattern seemingly intensified by low class status and a correspondingly tighter competition in the job market (Nteta 2013). Also, Black Americans who report higher levels of economic anxiety have been found to be more open to anti-immigration rhetoric, and to be more supportive of the corresponding policy reforms initiated by Donald Trump (Carter and King-Meadows 2019). This US experience highlights the intersectional nature of ethnic or racial minority status and perceived competition.

Evidence for conflictual inter-group minority relations related to levels of economic integration also stems from the European context. Analysing support for the 2014 Swiss referendum against mass immigration, Strijbis and Polavieja (2018) identified labour-market competition as a central explanatory factor for the surprisingly high support for this initiative among immigrants already established in Switzerland. The authors conclude that especially those immigrant residents who were employed in

occupations that specifically required less human capital, and who lived in areas exposed to higher levels of cross-border commuters, showed a strong tendency to restrict further immigration to Switzerland. In Israel, Canetti-Nisim *et al.* (2009) identify the loss of economic and psychological resources as one of the main drivers of xenophobia among immigrants from the former Soviet Union. This xenophobia is especially directed towards Palestinian citizens. The low levels of Russian-origin immigrants' economic integration – as manifested in low levels of both income and formal education – has also been identified as a predictor of their vote choice for conservative as well as radical settler parties⁵ (Itzkovitch-Malka and Konstantinov 2017). In summary, we can hypothesise that less economically integrated immigrant-origin voters might be more attracted by the pronounced anti-immigration policy approach of PRRPs.

The social integration of immigrant-origin voters and PRRP support

Social integration refers to the participation of immigrants in the social and civic networks of their host societies. Parallel to the significance of economic resources, social resources such as family and friend networks, as well as participation in different civil organisations, such as sport clubs, religious organisations, or street communities, are seen as crucial for the political behaviour of immigrants and natives alike (see Putnam 2000). Social networks provide their members with important information resources, allowing them to gather, process, and discuss the policies and politics of their host society's political system. Also, social networks provide social capital, which again has been found to affect both immigrants' formal and informal political participation (Fennema and Tillie 1999; Jacobs and Tillie 2004) as well as vote choices (Bergh and Bjørklund 2011; Heath *et al.* 2013; Sanders *et al.* 2014).

However, and in contrast to economic integration, authors favouring different approaches to the integration of immigrants disagree on the concept of 'successful' social integration. On the one hand, multiculturalists might see immigrants as well integrated when they are part of dense but ethnically defined networks, for example, Russian-Germans who only have Russian-German friends and colleagues, and who play soccer in an exclusively Russian-German team. Authors favouring an assimilationist approach might surely regard such immigrants as poorly integrated, as long as they are lacking any connections to the networks of mainstream society. Thus, social integration can go hand in hand with bonding or bridging social capital: the former connecting immigrants to their co-ethnics, the latter providing links to autochthonous networks (Jacobs and Tillie 2004). The question of vote choice, then, is whether members of ethnically defined networks are more or less likely to vote

for certain political parties, and specifically for PRRPs. This vote choice might be influenced, for example, because these networks provide information about which parties to vote for, or they provide general resources to navigate the political space that enables members to make political decisions according to their preferences.

Empirical evidence indicates that membership in ethnic networks can be a strong predictor of vote choice. Prominent examples include the long history of support of African-Americans for the US Democrats and the no-less decisive support of Cuban-origin voters for the Republicans. Analytically, it is often hard to determine whether group members vote for a certain party because of individual calculations or because they see the party as representing their group interests, thereby engaging in a form of ethnic bloc (Bergh and Bjørklund 2011; Vermeulen *et al.* 2020; Webster and Webster 1986) or ethnic candidate voting (Barreto 2007). However, there is evidence that network effects do play a prominent role for individual vote choice by signalling to their members which political alternatives can be regarded as compatible with the interests of the ethnically defined group. The role of African-American churches (Calhoun-Brown 2001) and the role of Spanish-speaking media and radio stations in Florida (Girard and Grenier 2008; Girard *et al.* 2012) are well researched in this regard.

As far as the role of ethnic networks for PRRP support among immigrant-origin voters is concerned, the best-researched example is the support of the so-called *Pieds-Noirs* for the French National Front. *Pieds-Noirs* ('Black Feet') is a common label for the ethnic French, or European-origin, residents of Algeria during the period of French colonial rule. As a consequence of the lost colonial war (1954 to 1962), and subsequent Algerian independence, the vast majority of them left Algeria for mainland France, many of them settling in France's southern departments. These regions soon became known as strongholds of the National Front (Savarese 2016: 180). Analysing the voting patterns of *Pieds-Noirs* in several French national elections, Veugelers (2005) and Veugelers *et al.* (2015) estimate their support levels for the French radical right to be around 40 to 50 percent, and they explicitly point to the role of network effects for this level of support: Members of *Pieds-Noirs*' veteran organisations – veterans of the Algerian war – show a two to four times higher likelihood to support the National Front, especially as its then leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, was himself a veteran of the colonial war. In contrast, membership of other organisations that provided bridging capital to non-*Pieds-Noirs*, significantly reduced support for the National Front (Veugelers *et al.* 2015).

Membership of, or personal relations with, veterans' organisations can surely be regarded as a special indicator of immigrants' social integration, although recent evidence from Germany also stresses the potential role

of more modern social networks. Analysing the posts of Russian-speaking internet users on several online platforms, Sablina (2019) finds strong evidence for discriminatory and Islamophobic statements expressed by users on explicitly Russian-German forums. These forums, with titles such as ‘Germany in Russia’ or ‘Destroyed Europe: Refugees in Europe’, have several hundreds of thousands of registered users and seem to serve as a marketplace for radical and extreme right-wing discourses, often accompanied by favourable statements towards the AfD (ibid.). While posts to online platforms can hardly be considered as being representative of all Russian-Germans, Sablina identifies these social networks as a possible explanation for the rapid political mobilisation of Russian-Germans in recent years. In addition, newly founded networks for Russian-Germans within the AfD, which also has a large presence on social media platforms, contribute to the mobilisation of this group as well (see Goerres *et al.* 2020). Whatever the effect of such online forums or networks on the political preferences of Russian-Germans, they can surely be considered as providing much more bonding capital than bridging capital to their predominantly Russian-speaking members.

To summarise: there are many prominent examples of immigrant-origin voters being connected to certain political parties via their social networks. However, the previous examples include mainstream as well as radical parties, so we shy away from formulating a targeted hypothesis for all immigrant-origin voters and their potential support for PRRPs. As a working hypothesis, we propose that socially less-integrated Russian-Germans – i.e. those who are either socially marginalised or who rely exclusively on co-ethnic networks – might feel more attached to the AfD.

The cultural integration of immigrant-origin voters and PRRP support

Finally, cultural integration might capture different facets: on the one hand, and in a narrower sense, it might refer to immigrants’ cognitive skills, while on the other hand, and in a broader sense, it might refer to their knowledge of, and emotional attachment to, their host society. We say ‘might refer’, because the conceptualisation and measurement of cultural integration is a matter of some controversy in integration research. On the one side, some authors favour a more limited concept, highlighting only the relevance of cognitive skills, most importantly proficiency in the host society’s major language (see e.g. ‘linguistic integration’ in Harder *et al.* 2018). Following our definition of integration as the participation opportunities of immigrants in the social systems of their host societies, language acquisition surely is

the most basic requirement for this, and can be regarded as a precondition for economic and social integration. On the other side, the concept of cultural integration might include many other variables such as value orientations, delinquency (for both, see Entzinger and Biezeveld 2003), social networks (which we discuss as a separate dimension), and finally, patterns of identification (see Berry 1997; Esser 2001; Heckmann 2015).

Theoretically, the role of identification in immigrants' integration is related to the social identity approach (Tajfel and Turner 1979) in which social categorisations such as ethnicity are cognitive instruments that are used to systematically order the social environment into 'in-groups' and 'out-groups'. Empirically, such group attachments are often measured by using answers to questions about self-identification, for instance, 'feeling German', 'feeling Russian-German' or 'feeling Russian' in our case. Identification surely is the most debated sub-dimension of integration for normative reasons, as one may ask why immigrants should identify with their host society's majority population or social system in order to be regarded as being integrated. Also, the relationship between identification and other variables of cultural integration is ambiguous: some authors see identification as a sub-form of cultural integration (Entzinger and Biezeveld 2003), while others regard it as a separate dimension (Esser 2001; Heckmann 2015).

Irrespective of such theoretical discrepancies, several studies have stressed the importance of immigrants' ethnic identity for their vote choice (Baysu and Swyngedouw 2020; e.g. Bergh and Bjørklund 2011; Dancygier and Saunders 2006; Dawson 1994; Teney *et al.* 2010). Immigrants who identify closely with their ethnically or racially defined in-group tend to see their own well-being as closely related to it. This idea of a 'linked fate' (Dawson 1994) might then exert its influence through ethnic-group voting: the vote for a party that is perceived to represent the interests of the in-group best. This link between identity and politics follows five distinct steps, starting from the definition of identity and ending with agreement on collective choice (Lee 2008). Examples of ethnic-group voting are manifold. For immigrant-origin voters, the strong support of Cuban-origin voters for the US Republicans (Bishin and Klofstad 2012), the support of Commonwealth-origin voters for the British Labour Party (Heath *et al.* 2013), and the support of Turkish-origin voters for the German Social Democrats (Wüst 2004) are only three examples. While detailed empirical analysis of the patterns behind these strong affiliations are rare (but see Bergh and Bjørklund 2011), from the perspective of ethnic-group voting, as a consequence immigrants vote for the party perceived to represent their in-group's interest in the best way.

To the best of our knowledge, there are no research contributions that relate immigrant-origin voters' cultural integration or identification directly to their support for a PRRP. However, we identify at least two arguments here. In the first argument, there is good reason to believe that the more acculturated immigrant-origin voters are being attracted to the PRRPs. The evidence for this stems from Switzerland, where Strijbis and Polavieja (2018) not only identified labour-market competition but also ethnic in-group status as explaining the high support of immigrant-origin voters for the recent initiative against further immigration. More precisely, strong support for the referendum against mass immigration came from the so-called *Secondos* – Swiss residents, mainly originating from Italy and Southern Europe, with a second-generation immigration background – who had attained a high group status within the Swiss system of ethnic hierarchies (Wimmer 2004). Testing for self-identification as a *Secondo*, and controlling for several other explanations, Strijbis and Polavieja (2018) found that *Secondos* voted against further immigration as an act of symbolic boundary-making against more recent arrivals from Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. Also, Verkuyten *et al.* (1996) stress the role of immigrants' ethnic self-identification in their attitude towards other ethnically defined groups in the Netherlands. They report that immigrants have their own ethnic hierarchies in which they see their own ethnic group first, the ethnic majority second, and all other immigrant groups third, depending on the economic and cultural distance to their own in-group (see similarly for Germany, Hamidou-Schmidt and Mayer 2021). As Hindriks *et al.* (2014: 68) insist, 'larger differences between groups stand in the way of positive group relations' – a pattern also seen as one of the main reasons for the absence of 'rainbow coalitions' between Blacks and Latinos in the US (Carter and King-Meadows 2019). Translating this to the German case, we might thus conclude that immigrants who exhibit strong 'German' or 'Russian-German' identification show more support for the AfD, because they are attracted to the party's pronounced anti-immigration, and especially anti-refugee, policy approach. For Russian-Germans, securing and reassuring their status within the German system of ethnic hierarchies – where they take the position of 'justified' immigrants due to their unique immigration history – might be of special importance to them, as their ethnic 'Germanness' is important to them, although this has been repeatedly called into question by the majority society and by mainstream parties since their arrival in the 1990s (see Goerres *et al.* 2020). Early on, this sentiment of being justified has been positively affirmed by right-wing parties such as the NPD in the 1990s (Golova 2006). In the second argument, and as already indicated by Sablina (2019), Russian-Germans might regard the AfD as the party that

represents their group interests best, and thereby they engage in a form of ethnic bloc voting. We might thus conclude that immigrants who identify strongly as ‘Russian-German’ are more likely to support the AfD.

As a competing notion, the AfD does not address only Russian-Germans directly in electoral campaigns. It is clearly the most nationalistic party in the German system (thereby also being potentially attractive to strong ‘German’ identifiers), and it is also the party advocating one of the most ‘Putin-friendly’ approaches to Germany’s foreign relations with Russia (thereby potentially attracting strong ‘Russian’ identifiers). Taken together, these several mechanisms explain the role of Russian-German ethnic identity – whether ‘German’, ‘Russian-German’ or ‘Russian’ – that might lead to the same outcome: support for the AfD.

Data and methods

In order to test our arguments on the relationship between the level of Russian-German integration and their support for the AfD, we will use data from the Immigrant German Election Study (IMGES; Goerres *et al.* 2020), a post-election survey fielded after the German federal election of 2017. IMGES targets the two biggest groups of immigrant-origin voters in Germany: German citizens from the former Soviet Union and her successor states, as well as those originating from Turkey. We restricted the sample to respondents from the former Soviet Union aged 18 and older, resulting in a total sample of 360 Russian-Germans after excluding those with missing values on the dependent variable ($n=100$) and those with missing values on the independent variables ($n=28$).⁶

For the dependent variable, we used propensity to vote (PTV), asking: ‘How likely is it that you will ever vote for the Alternative for Germany?’. Responses ranged from 0 ‘not at all likely’ to 10 ‘very likely’. We estimated OLS regressions with robust standard errors and a post-stratification weight that took into account differences in selection probability due to sample design and non-response (see the methods report in Goerres *et al.* 2020). Note that our dependent variable represents the likelihood of voting for the AfD, i.e. whether the AfD is part of the consideration set for vote choice (see Oscarsson and Rosema 2019), and not the reported vote choice for this party. The main reason for this is that more than 30 percent of Russian-Germans indicated that they had not voted in the 2017 federal election. Focussing on self-reported vote choice would thus severely limit our sample size. In addition, self-reported vote choice suffers from social desirability, especially for extreme parties, and PTVs are considered a feasible and less-problematic alternative for capturing voting intentions for the right (Johann *et al.* 2016). However, as part of the robustness test, we will offer both logistic regressions on AfD vote

choice as well as multinomial models on the AfD's and mainstream parties' vote choice and turnout.

Our core argument states that Russian-German economic, social, and cultural integration is related to the likelihood of Russian-Germans voting for the AfD, so we constructed indices for each of the three integration dimensions. The exact coding of integration-related variables mirrors the researchers' conceptual idea of integration, including its normative underpinnings. Recall that we defined immigrant integration as both an ongoing process and an actual status regarding the immigrants' levels of participation in the social systems of their host society. The opportunity to participate is thus central to our concept and to the corresponding measurements of integration. We argue that, *ceteris paribus*, the more participation opportunities that Russian-Germans have, the better their economic resources, the more social contact they have with native Germans, and the better they are able to speak German. As a consequence, our conceptualisation and resulting measurements of integration are motivated by assimilation (Esser 2001; Heckmann 2015) and by the incorporation theories of integration (Alba 2005; Alba and Nee, 1997). Finally, we will also test for patterns of ethnic identities.

For the exact coding of independent variables, we followed the approach suggested by Harder *et al.* (2018), and in the [Online Appendix, Table A1](#), we report all underlying items, their initial and transformed scales, and the corresponding integration dimension. Descriptive values for the independent and the dependent variables can be found in [Online Appendix, Table A2](#). All independent variables have been rescaled to the range of 0 to 1. To give an example, we used household income, employment status, the evaluation of the respondents' current economic situation and their formal education to construct levels of *economic integration*. We first recoded the variables' initial scales to a scale between 0 and 1 and then calculated a mean index. Thus, the resulting index of economic integration ranges between 0 and 1 and takes up higher values for more economically integrated Russian-Germans. We followed the same approach for *social integration*, using information on the respondents' relationship status, whether their partner originated from Germany or abroad, information on the ethnic composition of friends and work-related social networks, as well as membership of organisations. We also produced estimates for the linguistic aspect of *cultural integration* in the same sense, using information on self-reported language proficiency and language use.

As discussed in the theory section on cultural integration, *ethnic identity* is a frequently discussed explanatory variable for immigrants' political preferences, but its relationship to the overarching concept of cultural integration is disputed. In addition, and in contrast to the effects

of the other dimensions of integration, the effects of Russian-German's ethnic identity on AfD support are theoretically ambiguous. Thus, we will maintain a broad understanding of cultural integration and will analyse language skills and identity patterns separately, using information on how much respondents feel 'German', 'Russian-German' or 'Russian' (see [Online Appendix, Table A1](#)).

Recall that there is an alternative to our arguments about the potential effects of integration on Russian-German support for the AfD. Their support might just be explained by the same drivers that we know to be in place for native supporters of the AfD (Berbair *et al.* 2015; Goerres *et al.* 2018; Schmitt-Beck 2014, 2017): the explanatory variables stemming from the wider literature on PRRP support in Western Europe. To be able to see whether standard variable or integration-related variables relate to AfD support, we include both perspectives in our analyses. As many review articles have summarised (see e.g. Kitschelt 2007; Mudde 2013; Muis and Immerzeel 2017), the number of potential alternative explanatory variables for PRRP support is impressive. While this speaks for a vibrant literature, it also faces us with the problem of identifying a list of control variables that is comprehensive enough for our models not to suffer from omitted variable bias, but also parsimonious enough to be applicable to our rather small sample. Weighing these requirements against each other, our list of control variables includes *age* (in years), *gender* (0=female, 1=male), *immigration-related*⁷ as well as *socioeconomic policy preferences*,⁸ and *dissatisfaction with democracy* (ranging from 1=very satisfied to 4=not satisfied at all). While the role of standard drivers of AfD support among Russian-German voters has recently been analysed by Hansen and Olsen (2020), we do not have a genuine interest in them, but we rather see them as the yardstick for our analyses on the impact of integration variables.

Results

We begin our analysis with the distribution for the dependent variable (Figure 1). We look at those that choose one of the extreme poles, the category that they would never or always vote for the AfD. Here, almost 45 percent of Russian-German respondents indicate that they would never vote for the AfD whereas about 4 percent would always vote for the AfD. To put this numbers into perspective, whereas 45 percent never-voters is a high number, it is still considerably lower than the proportion of the native population which showed about 75 percent as never voting for the AfD.

We report the results from four OLS regression models in Table 1. In M0, we only test the relationship between standard variables for AfD

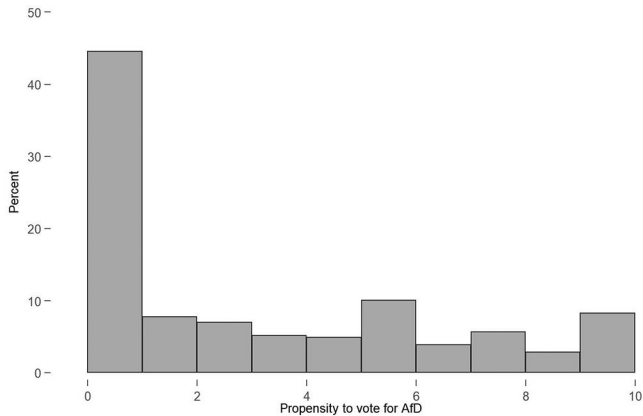


Figure 1. Distribution for propensity to vote among Russian-Germans.

support with the propensity to vote for the AfD which replicates in part the analyses by Hansen and Olsen (2020) for the Russian-German population. In M1, we include the economic, social and language aspects of cultural integration. In M2, we include three measures of ethnic identity, and in M3, we combine all factors. We summarise our findings in three main conclusions.

The first conclusion is that Russian-German support for the AfD can be partly explained by some well-known drivers that were found to relate to AfD support among natives in other analyses (M0). In our models, immigration-related policy preferences stand out as significant predictors, with immigration-critical respondents being more inclined to support the AfD: a sizeable maximum effect of .3 scale points. In contrast, neither age, socio-economic preferences, nor dissatisfaction with democracy are significantly related to AfD support among Russian-Germans, while socio-economic preferences especially have been identified as playing a role for more market-liberal native supporters (see Goerres *et al.* 2018). Also, the lack of a significant gender effect for Russian-German sympathisers is striking, as there is ample evidence for stronger support from males in the native electorate (Berbuir *et al.* 2015; Goerres *et al.* 2018; Schmitt-Beck 2017).

The second conclusion is that, in addition to the traditional drivers of AfD support, the level of Russian-German integration plays a substantial role in their support for the AfD (M1). The more that Russian-Germans are integrated economically, socially and culturally (language-wise) into German mainstream society, the less likely they are to consider voting for the AfD. All three effects are statistically significant and empirically relevant, matching (economic and social integration) or even outperforming (cultural integration) the impact of immigration-related

Table 1. OLS regressions on Russian-Germans' probability to vote for the AfD.

	Bivariate regression estimates	M0	M1	M2	M3
Economic integration	0.06 (0.07)		-0.19* (0.09)		-0.19* (0.09)
Social integration	0.12 (0.13)		-0.21** (0.07)		-0.16* (0.08)
Cultural integration: language	0.02 (0.05)		-0.45** (0.14)		-0.54*** (0.15)
Identity: German	0.16 (0.11)			-0.02 (0.09)	0.15 (0.09)
Identity: Russian-German	0.34*** (0.09)			0.23*** (0.06)	0.12* (0.06)
Identity: Russian	0.29** (0.10)			-0.03 (0.07)	-0.08 (0.06)
Age	-0.47*** (0.09)	0.00 (0.12)	-0.22* (0.11)	0.03 (0.12)	-0.24* (0.11)
Gender: male	-0.38*** (0.07)	0.03 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.04)	0.00 (0.04)	-0.03 (0.04)
Socioeconomic preferences	-0.57*** (0.10)	0.10 (0.11)	0.09 (0.09)	0.11 (0.09)	0.12 (0.08)
Immigration-related preferences	-0.03 (0.10)	0.29** (0.10)	0.28** (0.09)	0.30** (0.10)	0.27** (0.09)
Democratic dissatisfaction	0.19*** (0.06)	0.19 (0.11)	0.11 (0.09)	0.20 (0.10)	0.13 (0.09)
Constant		-0.08 (0.09)	0.59*** (0.16)	-0.16 (0.10)	0.48** (0.15)
N	360	360	360	360	360
R ² adjusted		0.11	0.24	0.16	0.27

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$, Weighted data.

All independent variables recoded to 0 to 1 range.

policy preferences: arguably the most established single predictor of PRRP support in Western Europe. Keeping in mind that socioeconomic status is often a poor predictor for PRRP support among native voters, and especially among native AfD voters (see Goerres *et al.* 2018), the role of economic integration in Russian-German support for the AfD is noteworthy, with a predicted effect size of -0.18 . While it is not possible here for us to test in greater detail the arguments for the competition for resources between Russian-Germans and other immigrant groups – especially refugees – we can conclude that economically less-integrated Russian-Germans are more supportive of the AfD, even when we control for a host of other factors. Studying these relationships in more detail for the single integration dimensions (see [Online Appendix, Table A3](#)), we see that especially education (for the economic integration dimensions), bridging capital with German organisations and having a German partner (for the social integration dimensions), and German language skills (for the language aspect of cultural integration) drive these effects.

The relationships between the propensity to vote for the AfD and the three dimensions of integration also hold true when we control additionally for identity patterns in M3.

The third conclusion is that the two facets of cultural integration, language skills and identity patterns, play a relevant but ambiguous role in Russian-German support for the AfD, and their effect depends crucially on the actual definition of this disputed concept. Analysing only a part of cultural integration by relying solely on its cognitive elements (M1), we find that Russian-Germans being fluent in German, and predominantly also using German in their everyday life, reduces their support for the AfD by more than a half. The fact that this effect is the strongest in all models, together with the reasonable argument that German language proficiency surely increases opportunities for participation in the economic and social spheres, emphasises the relevance of this finding. Russian-Germans with good opportunities for participation in German society see little reason to support the radical right AfD. These results also hold true, albeit at a slightly lower level, when we rely on interviewer-reported German language skills instead of self-reported German language skills.

However, this is not the entire pattern regarding cultural integration, as can be seen in M3. In this model, we added patterns of ethnic identity to our three integration indices, thus applying an additional facet of cultural integration. As M3 shows, the cognitive elements of cultural integration are still strongly and negatively related to Russian-German support for the AfD, but Russian-German identity significantly increases support for the party by .12 scale points. A similar, but not significant, relationship can be observed for German ethnic identity which is close to conventional levels of statistical significance ($p = .095$). In contrast, respondents identifying strongly as Russian feel less inclined to vote for the AfD, but again, this relationship does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

This leaves us with the unique pattern that strong Russian-German identifiers not only show more support for a party that strongly advocates the role of Germanness, but at the same time it also addresses them specifically as Russian-Germans. This party advocates a pronounced anti-immigration and highly assimilationist integration policy approach, while at the same time undertaking strong efforts to address Russian-German immigrant-origin voters, e.g. by the founding of a specific network for Russian-Germans in the AfD, making use of Russian-language party programs as well as offering policy positions that appeal to Russian-German voters (see for more details Goerres *et al.* 2020).

We are hesitant to conclude too much from our cross-sectional survey as far as social-psychological motives are concerned. However, this odd

combination seems to be in line with findings from the Netherlands (Verkuyten *et al.* 1996), Switzerland (Strijbis and Polaviejab 2018) and the US (Carter and King-Meadows 2019), suggesting that ethnic minorities often express anti-immigration and anti-minority attitudes in order to secure their own social status in comparison with other minority groups. This pattern may be more intense for immigrants who are struggling to find their place in, and being accepted by, the majority population. What makes the case of Russian-Germans unique however, is the specific targeting by the AfD as a justified group of ‘returners’, setting them apart from other immigrant-origin voters, thus fostering a unique link between the party and this ethnic group.

For robustness checks, we replicate our analyses with vote choice for the AfD as the dependent variable, and estimated logistic and multinomial logistic regressions (see [Online Appendix](#)). While these analyses show that our final results depend on the specification of the dependent variable and the corresponding number of cases, they also confirm that some patterns of integration, especially social integration and ethnic identity as a Russian-German, are relevant in any of these scenarios. We also replicated our analyses for another group of immigrant-origin voters that showed no affiliation to the AfD in the past, Germans of Turkish descent. Here we see that the propensity to vote for the AfD is much lower and that explaining the support of those few that did not indicate they would never vote for the AfD solely relies on immigrant-related preferences. This adds evidence to our claim that this phenomenon is a unique relation for immigrants with ethnic German origins.

Conclusion

When analysing the support of Russian-Germans for the AfD in 2017 – a party known for its tough stand on immigration and integration policy – we argued that levels of integration relate to AfD support among Germany’s biggest group of voters of immigrant-origin. Our results indicated that only a few of the standard explanatory variables that commonly explain AfD vote choice among native voters also work for this immigrant-origin group, and that these variables are mostly immigration-related policy preferences. However, these variables have rather limited explanatory power when additional dimensions of immigrant integration were brought into the picture. We found negative relationships for economic, social, and the linguistic facet of cultural integration, thus showing that the more that Russian-Germans integrated economically and socially into the host society, and the better their German language skills, the lower is the likelihood of them ever voting for the AfD. In addition, holding an identity as ‘Russian-German’ – a

specific ethnic identity – drives AfD support. While the study's factors for economic integration are not specific to immigrants, as e.g. job status or income also affect AfD vote choice among native voters, the other domains, especially regarding ethnic identity and language, are specific to immigrants and show the importance of immigrant-specific factors for AfD party preferences which cannot be detected in most studies as these variables are rarely included in standard surveys.

The importance of a Russian-German social identity might not be unrelated to the actions of the AfD in 2017, that specifically targeted Russian-Germans by valuing their Germanness, while also catering to their needs with Russian-language materials, fielding Russian-German-origin candidates and by founding specific networks (Goerres *et al.* 2020). Whether the AfD continues to mobilise this particular source of support, or whether this was a one-time event, remains to be seen in the next elections in 2021. In the long run, second-generation and third-generation Russian-Germans could normalise their voting behaviour, a pattern found with the French *Pieds-Noirs* (Veugelers *et al.* 2015). So far, only a few Russian-German voters are part of the second generation, thus we cannot conduct such analyses, but we can assume that with rising levels of integration, more general factors apart from migrant-specific determinants become important instead. This article adds to two different strands of the literature which have not been analysed together in the past, drivers of party preferences for the Populist Radical Right, as well as determinants of party preferences among immigrant-origin voters. Regarding the literature on voters of the PRR, our study gives evidence that these voters are a heterogeneous group which might consist of different sub-groups for which specific determinants matter (e.g. see for a study on differences between East and West Germans Betz and Habersack 2019). Similarly, our findings add to the literature on immigrant-origin voters showing also that this group of voters is highly diverse and that not all immigrant-origin voters support the left due to their lower socio-economic integration. Consequently, each group's status and position should be considered for analyses of party preferences instead of grouping those born abroad together and blurring existing differences.

Notes

1. Resettlers who entered Germany after 1993 are called 'late-resettlers' (*Spätaussiedler*). In contrast to 'resettler', which is a legal status in German law, the now more familiar 'Russian-German' is an ethnic description, not a legal term.
2. These values stem for the Immigrant German Election Study (IMGES), the dataset we also use for our analysis. More precisely, 15 percent of all Russian-German respondents to have voted for the AfD in the federal

election 2017. However, self-reported vote choice for PRRPs are known to be impacted by patterns of social desirability. In the standard German election survey, only 10.2 percent of native voters indicated a vote intention for the AfD – a value considerably lower than the party's official election result of 12.6 percent. Assuming the same underreporting for Russian-Germans, we estimate 15 to 18 percent AfD support among this group.

3. How this participation does process and how it should look like as often contested. Some researchers merely use the term integration as some sort of anchor that addresses questions regarding the relation between immigrants, their descendants and the majority society. Others, such as Berry (1997) distinguish between integration outcomes, meaning that immigrants keep the group-specific peculiarities and assimilation outcomes, where immigrants take over values and customs from the majority. We see integration that refers to the relationship of individuals and the majority society, neither distinguishing specifically between assimilation and incorporation. Regarding the process of integration, earlier works, such as Gordon (1964) proposed that integration is a linear process that ends in full assimilation with the majority society. We of course, as others, do not follow this view and agree that integration is not linear, and might often lead to segmented assimilation as it was proposed by e.g. Portes and Zhou (1993), where integration process only happen for a few domains but not all.
4. It is important to note however that factors from the realm of economic integration on immigrants, such as formal education, income or job-status, are often included in analyses of the majority's support for PRRP. We acknowledge that these variables are not immigrant-specific, so that the placement on these subfacets is also something of importance for majority voters, but we include them under the umbrella of economic integration because these are the major variables used in integration research. However, we consider that they are not immigrant-specific in the discussion.
5. Some of these parties advocate a pronounced nationalistic agenda, but we would argue that, in a narrower Western European sense, Israel is lacking a PRRP, as the issue of immigration is far less important in Israel than the much more salient topic of national security (see Hirsch-Hoefler *et al.* 2010). As far as we are aware, this leaves France – and as we argue, Germany – as the only two countries where immigrant-origin voters support PRRPs disproportionately.
6. We estimated additional Heckman selection models to see whether the patterns of 'missingness' on the dependent variable distort the estimates for our regressions reported in the main text, but we found no evidence for this.
7. For immigration-related policy preferences, we asked respondents whether they would like to see immigration to Germany made easier or harder. Answers were given on a scale ranging from 1 ('immigration should be facilitated') to 11 ('immigration should be restricted').
8. For the socioeconomic policy preferences, we stated: 'Some people want lower taxes, even if this means a reduction in the benefits offered by the state. Others want more benefits offered by the state, even if this means

an increase in taxation'. We asked respondents to indicate their own position on a scale ranging from 1 ('more benefits, even if this means higher taxation') to 11 ('lower taxes, even if this means less social benefits').

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Data availability statement

The data for this study is taken from GESIS, ZA7495 Datenfile Version 1.0.1,

<https://doi.org/10.4232/1.13544>. The replication code (Stata do-file) and the replication data set are also available https://osf.io/8px7r/?view_only=e1a2fbfb-c9fa4e54829ea16cc17c222a.

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