

MP-IDSA *Issue Brief*

The AfD's Rise in German Politics

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Summary

The media hype surrounding the rise of the AfD, an alt-right party in Germany's post-World War II political establishment, often overlooks the institutional challenges, systemic undercurrents, and transformations in the traditional sociopolitical and economic landscapes since German reunification that have facilitated its emergence as a notable player. However, it faces some critical challenges on its path to legitimate governance.

Introduction

The rise of Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany’s eastern region of Saxony-Anhalt, particularly in the context of the upcoming September 2026 regional elections, has been seen across mainstream narratives as the twin outcomes of years of economic neglect by Berlin and an ideological reorientation of the electorate towards the alt-right. While socio-economic anxieties have historically shaped populist waves across Europe, and a gradual mainstreaming of extremist ethnonationalist worldviews has been woven into party mandates, such as those of the AfD and its supporters, media hype has often overlooked some fundamental trends.

The party has grown from a fringe actor in 2013 to a popular regional stakeholder and the second-largest party in Germany’s Bundestag, or federal parliament, by 2026. The AfD’s rise over the course of nearly a decade and a half has been consolidated on several essential pillars: filling the vacuum that was created due to institutional apathy towards Eastern Germany; the decline of traditional institutions like the Church to historic lows; festering infrastructural neglect; economic volatility, and rejection of mainstream politics.

Dismantling of Traditional Institutions and the Resultant Vacuum in Saxony-Anhalt

Churches in Saxony-Anhalt have cautioned their members against voting for the AfD in the lead-up to the September 2026 elections. Catholic priests have taken a collective stance on the incompatibility of Christian values and ethno-nationalism. This collective stance was put forward in February 2024 at a gathering of the German Catholic Bishops’ Conference, where the participants unanimously adopted a declaration titled ‘Ethnic Nationalism and Christianity are incompatible’, arguing that the ethno-nationalist worldview of the AfD embodies ‘genuine right-wing extremism’.

Warning churchgoers against voting for the ‘blue’ (the party colour of the AfD) on a whim, Bishop Gerhard Feige (Bishop of Magdeburg) more recently pointed out:

Until now, Saxony-Anhalt's motto has been 'Thinking Modern'. The AfD wants to replace it with 'Thinking German' ... The AfD's election posters speak a very clear language: 'Save your country', 'Take your country back', 'Deport from day one!' What else could that be but ethnonationalism?... (I) could never have imagined that so many people today could once again be so easily led astray,

or that arsonists, pied pipers and respectable-looking agitators could emerge, and that so many would fall for them.¹

However, the churches’ dwindling role as community anchors—with limited influence over the non-religious majority, who account for more than 85 per cent of the region’s 2.1 million citizens—has meant that religion and politics have been overwhelmingly decoupled for most locals.² Therefore, the likelihood of priests’ warnings against local AfD candidates is expected to remain minimal, restricted largely to devout practitioners even in the most optimistic scenarios.

AfD: The Party of the People?

Advocacy for community-centric issues has become one of the root causes bolstering the AfD’s regional popularity, regardless of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution’s (BfV) categorisation of the party as a right-wing extremist group, with parallels being drawn to the National Socialist (Nazi) Party. As a result, understandably, it becomes difficult for locals to hold a negative view of party members who also dominate contemporary civic space, for example, by serving on community football teams.³ At the same time, these figures champion localised micro-issues that hardly feature in federal discourse, such as the cancellation of a bus route or the closure of a village school, post office, or clinic.

Between the 1990s and 2017, numerous village schools across Eastern Germany closed permanently and were refurbished for non-educational purposes, such as old-age homes.⁴ Due to falling birth rates and migration to western Germany, the total number of pupils entering the regional school system has dropped considerably. In rural Saxony-Anhalt, a minimum of 15 to 20 students must be enrolled in any given secondary school, and at least 25 in primary schools, to keep them operational.⁵ If a school fails to meet this threshold, its funding and operations are negatively impacted.

Furthermore, declining municipal tax revenues have created another obstacle to maintaining educational infrastructure, specifically village schools.⁶ In many cases, smaller educational establishments have been merged into larger schools in central

¹ Christoph Strack, [“German Churches Warn Against AfD Ahead of State Election”](#), *DW*, 30 August 2026.

² Ibid.

³ [“Germany Launches Campaign to Keep Nazis from Infiltrating Sports Clubs”](#), *Der Spiegel*, 18 January 2011.

⁴ [“East Germany’s Population is Shrinking”](#), *The Economist*, 15 April 2017.

⁵ [“Teachers and Parents Criticize New School Law in Saxony-Anhalt”](#), *mdr AKTUELL*, 26 September 2024.

⁶ Tobias Johannes Hetrich and Thomas Brenner, [“When the Past Becomes the Future: The Challenges of Policies in ‘Left Behind’ Places in East Germany – A Case Study from the Gera Region”](#), *Regional Science Policy & Practice*, Vol. 17, No. 8, 2025, pp. 1–15.

municipalities in Saxony-Anhalt, forcing pupils in villages to travel long distances regularly. This has also deprived locals of vital community hubs, and fostered a growing sense of abandonment by mainstream politicians.

Notably, the AfD has strongly and consistently opposed any such school consolidations, albeit driven by racially motivated reasons.⁷ As a result, a distinct divide exists between local and federal perceptions about AfD. Consequently, this helps decouple the political party from extremism, at least regionally. Developments such as these also help explain why residents feel subjected to federally backed socio-infrastructural abandonment. These sentiments are likely exacerbated when members of the same parties, or those in coalition, hold political office in both Berlin and Saxony-Anhalt and are likely viewed as complicit in enforcing top-down educational and structural reforms.

Amid the wider debate over the implications of an AfD-governed state, two important dimensions risk being overlooked by observers. Anti-establishment parties like the AfD have tactically weaponised perception management and strategic storytelling. In the background, the party has leveraged its negative reputation and the extremist categorisation imposed by the BfV to craft a narrative of marginalisation and victimisation at the hands of state agencies. It would be wise to view these tactics as deliberate attempts to consolidate its support base, turning liberal democratic principles such as freedom of speech and association against mainstream parties and state institutions.

In April 2026, a major controversy was triggered in Saxony-Anhalt after several school pupils were barred from taking up work placements with the AfD’s local parliamentary group, for which around 20 individuals had reportedly applied.⁸ This decision by local schools received political backing from the state’s Minister for Education, Jan Riedel (CDU). The move provoked significant backlash within AfD circles, which condemned it as a politically motivated ban, with Ulrich Siegmund — the co-leader of the AfD parliamentary group in Saxony-Anhalt and its candidate for state premier (Ministerpräsident)— denouncing restrictions on students pursuing vocational placements with an elected legislative body—which he argued remains distinct from the political party itself.

Fragmentation, Firewall, and Rejection of Mainstream Politics

Given their acute dissatisfaction with mainstream liberal-capitalist policies, locals appear to have become disillusioned with so-called centrist, centre-left, or centre-

⁷ Freya Jones, “[AfD Pledge to Send Refugees and Disabled Children to Separate Schools](#)”, *The Telegraph*, 23 August 2026.

⁸ “[German Schools Block Students From AfD Work Placements](#)”, *The European Conservative*, 23 April 2026.

right politicians. Many of these officials are seen as displaying apathy towards regional concerns—particularly in rural areas—when it comes to policy issues such as the transition towards green energy, the equitable distribution of transition costs, and the lack of adequate economic opportunities.

These challenges have been exacerbated by the absence of mainstream political representatives capable of balancing their party’s federal agenda with the concerns of local constituents, who have felt abandoned by federal and regional authorities since reunification in the 1990s. Consequently, the lack of compelling alternatives among traditional parties has driven voters towards the AfD, often by default.

The aforementioned shift in the political landscape has been accelerated by the weakened Christian Democratic Union (CDU) under Chancellor Friedrich Merz and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). While the CDU is currently polling between 23 and 26 per cent, the SPD lags far behind at 6 to 7 per cent, with The Left polling at around 13 per cent.⁹

The AfD’s momentum is reflected in the recent polling results. In the lead-up to the September 2026 pre-election polls, the AfD is polling above 40 per cent, positioning itself to secure the largest share of the vote. This follows a strong performance in the 2025 federal election, where the AfD emerged as the largest opposition party in the Bundestag with 20.8 per cent of the national vote.¹⁰

While some argue that the AfD’s ascent reflects a resurgence of pre-World War II extremist sentiments, that claim overlooks critical dynamics. Electoral calculations and minimum vote thresholds can significantly shape post-election outcomes. The AfD could emerge in a dominant position simply by virtue of being the single largest party, even without an absolute majority. If smaller political rivals—most notably the SPD—fail to clear the prescribed 5 per cent threshold, their votes are discarded during seat allocation, consequently boosting the AfD’s parliamentary standing.

Furthermore, while the Brandmauer—the unwritten firewall barring cooperation or coalitions with the far right—remains intact at the federal level, the reality at the municipal and regional tiers is markedly different. Despite their ideological stigma, local AfD councillors and municipal representatives have steadily collaborated with counterparts across the political spectrum.

A study by the Berlin Social Science Center found that between 2019 and 2024, local government bodies in eastern Germany accommodated AfD motions in 26.9 per cent of cases, primarily in rural districts; in western Germany, the figure was 16 per cent.

⁹ Jens Thurau, [“Saxony-Anhalt Election: Why the AfD is So Strong”](#), *DW*, 29 August 2026.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Across the country, the highest levels of cross-party cooperation were recorded in Hesse, followed by Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt.¹¹

Frictions, Anxieties, and the Path Towards AfD’s Rise

Over time, the AfD has become particularly focused on campaigning against the green energy transition, presenting itself as the primary defender of the industrial base. After all, Saxony-Anhalt has gradually begun shedding its traditional industrial identity, moving away from coal mining towards clean energy sources such as wind and solar power. Compounding the anxieties faced by locals due to this rapid transition, regional unemployment in Saxony-Anhalt has remained 1.7 percentage points higher than the national average of 6.4 per cent, at 8.1 per cent.¹²

An investigative piece published by Clean Energy Wire further highlighted key trends that explain why an anti-renewables party like the AfD has gained significant ground in eastern Germany. Most respondents felt that energy transition costs were not distributed fairly and voiced concerns that this erodes social cohesion.¹³

At the same time, immigration has indisputably emerged as a profoundly polarising issue across Europe, and Germany is no exception. However, it cannot be viewed in isolation. It must be framed within the broader socio-economic anxieties of a host population concerned about wage suppression by an incoming foreign workforce willing to accept lower pay for the same work. Furthermore, the proliferation of conspiracy theories—most notably the ‘Great Replacement’, which alleges a deliberate attempt by political elites to marginalise native white Europeans into a minority via mass migration—has reframed immigration through an increasingly pejorative lens.

A core component of the AfD’s platform is the concept of ‘remigration’. While sociologically defined as the voluntary return of migrants to their country of origin, the ethnonationalist party has co-opted the term to encompass forced deportations and the stripping of residency status from individuals of non-German heritage.¹⁴ Crucially, in November 2023, Siegmund, the co-leader of the AfD parliamentary group in Saxony-Anhalt, attended a clandestine meeting alongside Austrian far-right activist Martin Sellner. Participants discussed plans for the mass deportation of asylum seekers, non-assimilated citizens and foreign residents.

¹¹ [“Firewall Under Pressure: Where It Stands and Where It Falls”](#), Press Release, Berlin Social Science Center, 20 March 2025.

¹² Björn Stritzel, [“AfD Surges as Saxony-Anhalt’s Economy Struggles”](#), *Euractiv*, 26 August 2026.

¹³ Benjamin Wehrmann, [“Climate Action Fairness a Sore Sport in German Regional Votes”](#), *Clean Energy Wire*, 1 September 2026.

¹⁴ Saman Ayesha Kidwai, [“AfD’s Remigration Agenda: Germany’s Challenge of Far-Right Extremism”](#), Commentary, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), 9 February 2024.

Against this backdrop, the AfD has capitalised on widespread anxieties surrounding the recruitment of skilled foreign labour in sectors such as automotive components, chemicals and logistics. This recruitment drive has become an economic necessity due to an ageing regional population compounded by the steady flight of younger workers to more prosperous western German states.

While the German workforce contracted by approximately 3.9 million between 2014 and 2024, foreign employment grew by around 3.4 million.¹⁵ Blue-collar German workers increasingly perceive this shift as an unviable strain on housing, schools, the fragile regional economy, and the Bürgergeld welfare system, fueling friction between long-time residents and migrant workers.

In the run-up to the election, the AfD has weaponised these grievances, painting immigrants as a financial liability and arguing that Berlin has prioritised foreign labour over ensuring job security for locals. Positioning itself as the sole champion of the working class, the party vehemently opposes relying on immigration to address factory labour shortages, campaigning instead for higher family subsidies and aggressive remigration policies to safeguard German cultural identity.

Limits and Challenges Confronting AfD

It is important to note that despite being projected to win the largest share of seats in the upcoming election, the AfD is by no means assured of governing once the votes are counted. This is largely because current rhetoric suggests that, regardless of past grassroots cooperation, traditional parties such as the CDU and SPD are expected to maintain the firewall (Brandmauer) principle when forming a state government in Saxony-Anhalt.

Despite the activist posture adopted by its local leaders, the AfD has failed to present concrete proposals that could foster sustained regional economic prosperity. Any such pursuit would be severely hampered by worsening labour shortages, exacerbated by a hostile climate that discourages the integration of foreign workers. At the same time, it is important to underscore that investment in the region relies heavily on stability, which would be undermined if regional and federal authorities are in a deadlock due to AfD’s activities, leaving local governance paralysed. A prospective AfD-led administration would almost certainly face domestic isolation from federal decision-makers, thereby dismantling the illusion that the alt-right party represents a viable alternative to traditional political forces.

¹⁵ [“Employment Growth is Driven by Foreign Workers”](#), Press Release, Federal Employment Agency Germany, 14 July 2026.

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