Germany's far-right party lost seats in last week's election. Here's why

The major headlines coming out of Germany's recent federal election were about the Social Democrats' win and the stunning defeat of the Christian Democrats after Angela Merkel's 16-year leadership run.

But there's another major story. Many feared that Germany might shift to the right, following countries like Austria or Switzerland, where xenophobic parties have long been powerful. Instead, Germany's far-right, anti-immigrant Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) lost 11 seats, receiving about 10 percent of the vote.

Why did the AfD lose votes in this election? In an age where right-wing populists appeal to many voters, the German election results suggest that centrist parties are finding ways to contain the far right.

Why the AfD lost ground

In 2017, following highly politicized refugee inflows entering Europe and Germany, the AfD won 12.6 percent of the vote and 94 seats in the Bundestag, Germany's federal parliament. For the first time since World War II, a far-right party had made it into the Bundestag.

The anti-Muslim AfD scored big in Germany's 2017 election. What does this mean for German Muslims?

Numerous polls since then showed the AfD gaining supporters, even outperforming the Social Democrats at times. But by early 2021, AfD support had ebbed, in part because of moves by Germany's centrist parties. Instead of engaging in debates about immigration, centrist candidates tried to strike a moderate or even welcoming tone on immigration. And rather than make immigration a central theme in the election, they focused on other issues that German voters care about, including economic security and climate change.

When centrist parties face far-right challengers, research suggests that they have three strategic options: They can move to the right and co-opt far-right

positions; they can stand their ground and denounce the far right's positions; or they can shift the agenda and downplay issues on which the far right thrives — typically issues such as immigration, multiculturalism or crime.

In recent years, German parties have tried out all of these approaches — and, for the most part, they've found that co-optation doesn't work. For example, Markus Söder, head of the Christian Social Union and Bavarian prime minister, learned this lesson the hard way when his party experienced historic losses in the 2018 Bavarian elections. To recapture AfD voters, Söder had styled himself as an immigration hard-liner. After this strategy backfired, he embraced more moderate positions, acknowledging that the co-optation strategy led to a "political near-death experience."

Angela Merkel's bloc lost ground in Sunday's election. So who won?

Co-opting far-right themes may cost votes

Academic research confirms Söder's assessment. In our recent paper, Winston Chou, Naoki Egami, Amaney Jamal and I studied whether and how mainstream parties could win back AfD voters. We interviewed German voters for 15 months in 2016-2017 in four nationally representative surveys of about 3,000 respondents each.

We found that voters who supported the AfD were much less likely than other voters to switch to competing parties. But using an experimental approach, we also found that this loyalty could be broken. When we presented AfD voters with hypothetical centrist party candidates that favored severe immigration restrictions, up to half of the AfD's electorate could be persuaded to vote for such candidates.

But our experimental evidence also revealed that adopting xenophobic slogans would probably lead to centrist parties losing far more of their own supporters than gaining far-right supporters. Centrist voters are turned off by candidates who impose immigration bans and espouse anti-immigrant rhetoric. And in systems where voters can choose among multiple viable parties, they are likely to abandon those that flirt with the far right.

It appears that most German politicians had come to a similar conclusion this year. To be sure, there was also plenty of immigration-specific rhetoric, including

comments by the CDU's unsuccessful chancellor candidate, Armin Laschet, that "2015 can't happen again" — a reference to the million or so refugees entering Germany that year. But analysts also pointed out that candidates often remained vague about references to 2015.

Centrist party candidates who did run on far-right slogans this year tended to flounder. One prominent example is the CDU's Hans-Georg Maaßen. A former head of Germany's intelligence agency, Maaßen campaigned on a nationalist, anti-immigrant message in the eastern state of Thuringia. He came in a distant third in a race the SPD candidate won (the AfD came in second). Laschet never openly distanced himself from Maaßen, which could have cost the CDU some votes.

The center zeroed in on economic issues

The election results also showed that talking about issues voters care deeply about — but on which the far right is weak — probably contributed to the strong showing of centrist parties. In our 2016-2017 survey, a sizable share of voters said that issues such as economic inequality and pensions decided their vote. We also found that many of these voters, including AfD supporters, rated the AfD's competence on these issues poorly. And when we presented voters with hypothetical candidates who varied in their competence and positions on economic issues, we found that candidates that highlighted pensions or increased taxes were quite popular.

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These survey findings help explain the Social Democrats' victory. In exit polls, voters ranked these issues as most important: Economic and social security (the top issue for 28 percent of voters), the economy/employment (22 percent) and the environment/climate change (22 percent). The SPD campaign's focus on economic issues — and combination of a centrist chancellor candidate and a left-of-center economic platform — apparently paid off. Voters who switched to the SPD — many of them former CDU voters — cited economic and social security as their most important issue.

At the same time, the SPD avoided the trap set by the AfD — it did not buy into the idea that embracing ethnic diversity is a vote loser. Instead the SPD ran a record number of candidates with immigrant backgrounds, positioning itself as

an open and cosmopolitan party that can competently address issues.

Put simply, our research and the 2021 German election results suggest that centrism pays off. Despite AfD rhetoric and media coverage to the contrary, most voters in Germany — and perhaps elsewhere — don't find harsh anti-immigrant positions appealing. Instead, a centrist stance on immigration combined with center-left economics turned out to be a winning strategy.

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