

The long-term impact of the location of concentration camps on radical right voting in Germany

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Abstract

Of all atrocities committed by state actors in 20th century Europe, the systematic killings by Nazi Germany were arguably the most severe and best-documented. While several studies have investigated the impact of the presence of concentration camps on surrounding communities in Germany and the occupied territories in terms of redistribution of wealth and property, the local-level impact on voting behaviour has not yet been explored. We investigate the impact of spatial proximity to a concentration camp between 1933 and 1945 on the likelihood of voting for such a party in the 2013 and 2017 Federal Elections. We find that proximity to a former concentration camp is associated with a higher voter share of far-right parties. A potential explanation for this finding could be a 'memory satiation effect', according to which voters who live in close proximity to former camps and are more frequently confronted with the past are more receptive for revisionist historical accounts questioning the centrality of the Holocaust in German culture of remembrance.

1 Introduction

Of the salient political conflicts which reshape political competition at the beginning of the 21st century, many are rooted in historical events which lie decades and sometimes centuries in the past. In many cases, these conflicts pit the right to remember past wrongs of territorial or ethnic communities which have been historically marginalized, discriminated and prosecuted against the desire of members of the majority to maintain a particular narrative of a country's history. However, often these conflicts about how to remember the past also divide society along partisan lines. A substantial body of literature demonstrates that historical events and institutions tend to cast a shadow long after they ceased to exist, in particular if they involved conflict and violence (Acemoglu, Hassan and Robinson, 2011; Charnysh and Finkel, 2017).

In this context, we investigate the long-term political impact of the most extreme case of state mass violence—the Holocaust. While any intellectual engagement with the Holocaust should have the victims at its centre, it is pertinent to analyse its impact on political outcomes in the country responsible for the crimes as well. We analyse the impact of one of the most visible and prominent symbols of the crimes conducted under the National Socialist dictatorship in Germany: former concentration camps. In particular, we are interested in the impact of living in spatial proximity to such a former camp on voting for a far-right party (FRP). Our reasons for choosing this empirical design are twofold: First, physical monuments can be considered a particularly prominent and contentious object of memory, as their presence is visible to everyone in the area and permanent in time (Wüstenberg, 2017). Second, we believe that the impact of the Holocaust on electoral behaviour in Germany deserves particular attention. While there has long been a consensus on German responsibility and the centrality of the Holocaust for German history, this view is now challenged. We thus believe that the German case can tell us a lot about the dynamics of the long term impact of mass violence and its interaction with political competition in shaping collective memory.

We find that, perhaps surprisingly, the vote share of far-right parties increases as we move closer to a concentration camp. Our intuition is that being repeatedly reminded of an in-group transgression leads some voters to be receptive to a revisionist historical narrative which negates the centrality of German guilt. We thus find (indirect) evidence for a 'political satiation' effect in which repeated exposure to cues of in-group responsibility leads to higher receptiveness for a revisionist narrative rather than a 'resilience effect' in which being reminded of past crimes decreases the likelihood of voting for the far-right.

2 How memory persists: Resilience or Satiation?

Until now, the largest and most systematic act of state induced mass violence, the Holocaust, has received rather limited attention by political scientist in terms of its long term effect on political attitudes and behaviour. One of the few scholarly works focusing specifically on the long-term impact of mass killings in the context of the Holocaust is a recent article by Charnysh and Finkel (2017). The authors analysed the impact on the surrounding communities of the Nazi death camp Treblinka in Poland, where Germans murdered nearly a million Jews. They show that communities located closer to the camp experienced a real estate boom but do not exhibit higher levels of economic and social development. These communities also showed higher support for an anti-Semitic party, the League of Polish Families. We complement their paper by asking a related question, namely how the crimes of the Nazi dictatorship impact voting behaviour in Germany, the country of the perpetrators.

In so doing, we also hope to contribute to the general literature on far-right voting. This now extensive literature has identified factors such as political opportunity structures (e.g. Arzheimer and Carter, 2006), economic grievances such as unemployment (e.g. Golder, 2003) and anti-immigrant sentiments (e.g. Van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie, 2005) as determinants of the electoral success of FRPs, even though the interaction between these

different factors is complex and multidimensional (e.g. Golder, 2016). While there are some studies which focus on the historical antecedents of the success of FRPs as mentioned above, we aim to provide an original contribution to the literature on far-right voting by focusing on the role of the spatial location of sites of mass violence and the politicization of a country's culture of memory.

Remembering the Holocaust, the systematic killing of more than 6 million Jewish people and other minorities, has long been considered a defining feature of the *raison d'état* of the Federal Republic of Germany. The process of remembrance went through several phases. While the initial post-war period was characterized by denial and unwillingness to give a voice to the victims, the student led-revolts of the late 1960s and centre-left governments of the 1970s brought about the preconditions for an active questioning of the past and critical engagement with German guilt (Wüstenberg, 2017, 33). As Art claims, this contestation has given rise to two 'frames' of German history: a 'contrition frame', focusing on the victims and the responsibility resulting from German guilt, and a 'normalization frame', promoted by the right, arguing that discussions of German guilt had to end to allow the country to develop a 'normal' national identity (Art, 2005, 10).

Facilities previously serving as concentration camps can be considered one of the most prominent and powerful places of memory relating to the Holocaust. Memorials, places of remembrances or *lieux de memoire* are arguably distinct from other forms of memory such as public debates or events in that they are permanent fixtures with which every resident or visitor of the area is confronted (Wüstenberg, 2017, 11). This high visibility makes memorials particularly prone to be subjects of societal mobilization and contestation (ibid.). We thus hypothesize that spatial proximity to such a *lieu de memoire* has a lasting impact on vote choice in the German context.

We have two distinct intuitions about the direction of the relationship between living in spatial proximity to a former concentration camp and voting for a FRP. Our first intuition is that voters living in close proximity to a former concentration camp are less likely to vote for such a party. We refer to this as the 'resilience hypothesis'. In terms of a contemporaneous effect, being constantly reminded of the consequences and extent of German crimes might make voters resilient against any attempts of minimization of German crimes or a 'normalization

frame'. We also believe that there is an additional and related historical mechanism driving such an effect. After the liberation of concentration camps in 1945, the allied powers to varying degrees engaged in denazification measures, mostly carried out at the local level. This experience could become a shared memory passed on through generations, leading to an aversion of far-right politics and any attempts to qualify or minimize the crimes.

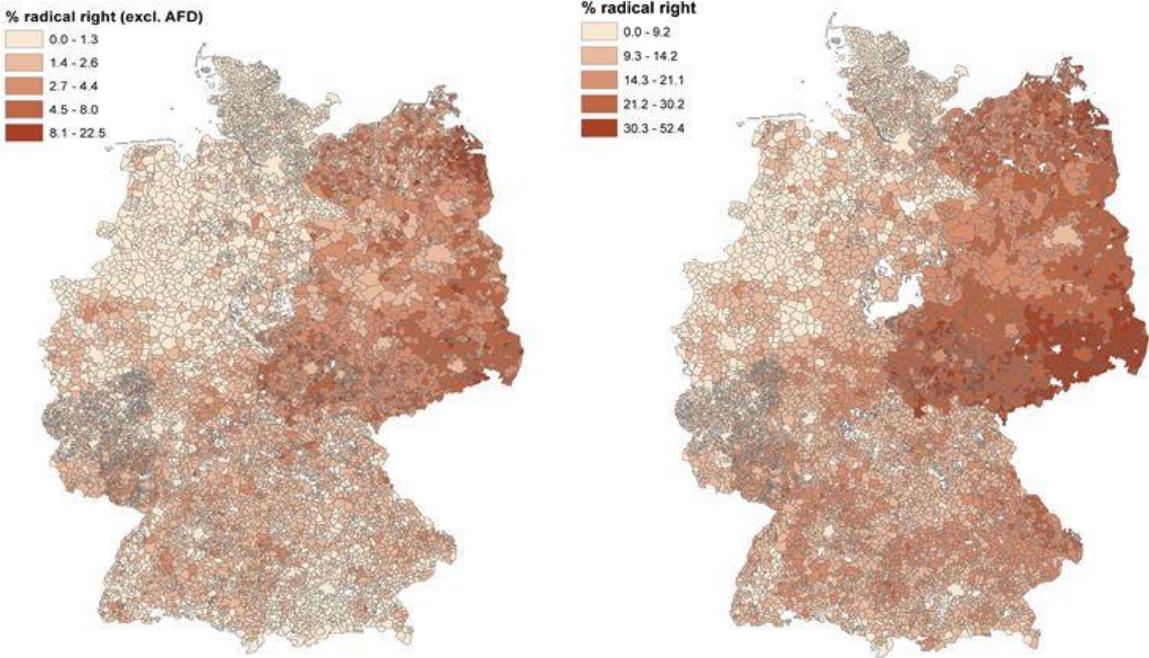
However, revelations about in-group transgressions might also prompt defensive responses and minimization of in-group complicity (e.g. Branscombe, Schmitt and Schiffhauer, 2007). We term this the 'satiation hypothesis.' Satiation as a psychological concept refers to the phenomenon that repeated exposure to a semantic stimulus—in this context embodied by former camps as places of memory—weakens the reaction and receptiveness of a subject to such assertions. Could reactions of defensiveness and minimization of in-group complicity be especially pronounced for those who have received a particularly strong 'treatment' of remembrance culture by living close to a former camp? In any case, we would expect both mechanisms to be especially pronounced in - or indeed even limited to - Western Germany, as long-ranging debates on how the Holocaust should be remembered were restricted to the Federal Republic of Germany. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) considered itself anti-fascist and thus by definition not responsible for crimes of the National Socialist dictatorship (Art, 2005, 43). In the next section, we describe our research design to test the 'resilience' and 'satiation' hypotheses empirically.

3 Data and Research Design

Our outcome of interest is the percentage of votes obtained by RRPs in the 2013 and 2017 German federal elections. We considered as far right-wing parties the following political formations: NPD, Die Rechte, Die Republikaner and Pro Deutschland. All of these parties have a clear far-right profile or even ties to Neo-Nazi groups. The status of the Alternative fuer Deutschland (AfD) is less clear. Initially founded as a liberal-conservative party in 2013 in opposition to Eurozone bailouts, the party has moved continuously to the right and is now considered as a FRP by many observers (Arzheimer and Berning, 2019; Schmitt-Beck, 2017). More recently, members of the more radical wing of the party have openly challenged Germany's culture of memory. In consecutive regional elections, the presence of the AfD had a strong mobilizing effect on former non-voters who consider themselves right-wing (Hobolt and Hoerner, 2019). Furthermore, research has shown that there is a correlation between NSDAP vote share and votes for the AfD in 2017, but not in 2013 (Cantoni, Hagemeister and Westcott, 2019) and that the AfD tends to do well in districts in which FRPs were successful in the past (Schwander and Manow, 2017). We thus run two models, one without and one with the AfD. Analysing both the 2013 and 2017 elections allows us to assess whether the emergence and transformation of this party at the fringe of the German party system has an impact on a potential memory station effect. Our expectation is that the new party has become increasingly attractive for voters who are critical of Germany's culture of memory in the latest election. Moreover, we focus on the two most recent elections to increase the robustness of our models. The election data are aggregated at the *Gemeinde* level, the smallest administrative division of local government having corporate status and powers of self-government in Germany.

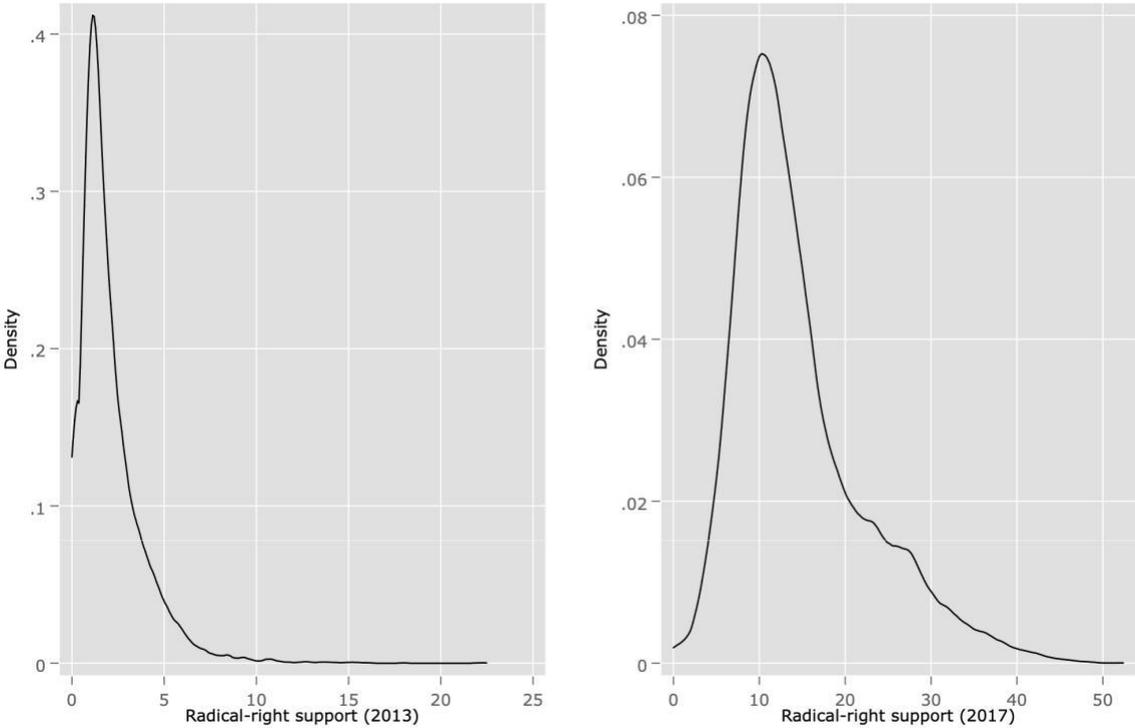
Figure 1 shows the spatial distribution of radical right support across Germany in 2013 (left panel) and 2017 federal elections (right panel) and the spatial distribution of concentration camps. The figure for the 2013 election excludes the vote share of the AfD, whereas the 2017 figure depicts the results of the election result for radical right parties including the AfD.

Figure 1: Spatial distribution of support for FRPs (*Gemeinde* level) in the 2013 (left) and 2017 federal election.



Similarly, Figure 2 shows the distribution of our outcome of interest, that is, radical-right support in 2013 and 2017 at the *Gemeinde* level. For 2017, the data include the vote share of the AfD. Both distributions are single-peaked, although 2017 density has a longer right tail, which essentially depicts the increase in support for the AfD.

Figure 2: Distribution of radical-right support (2013-2017)



As we detailed above, we exploit the fact that some geographical units are closer to concentration camps than others. For each *Gemeinde*, we calculated the distance between each polygon’s centroid and the closest concentration camp (in meters). Given that German *Gemeinde* are small geographical units (the average size is 31 square kilometers), the centroid is an accurate representation of its characteristics. Figure 3 shows the distribution of distances to the nearest camp in meters (left panel) and the log of the distance (right panel). As we expect the effect of the distance to be non-linear, we will use the latter as our main explanatory variable.

Figure 3: Distance between *Gemeinde*'s centroid and the closest concentration camp

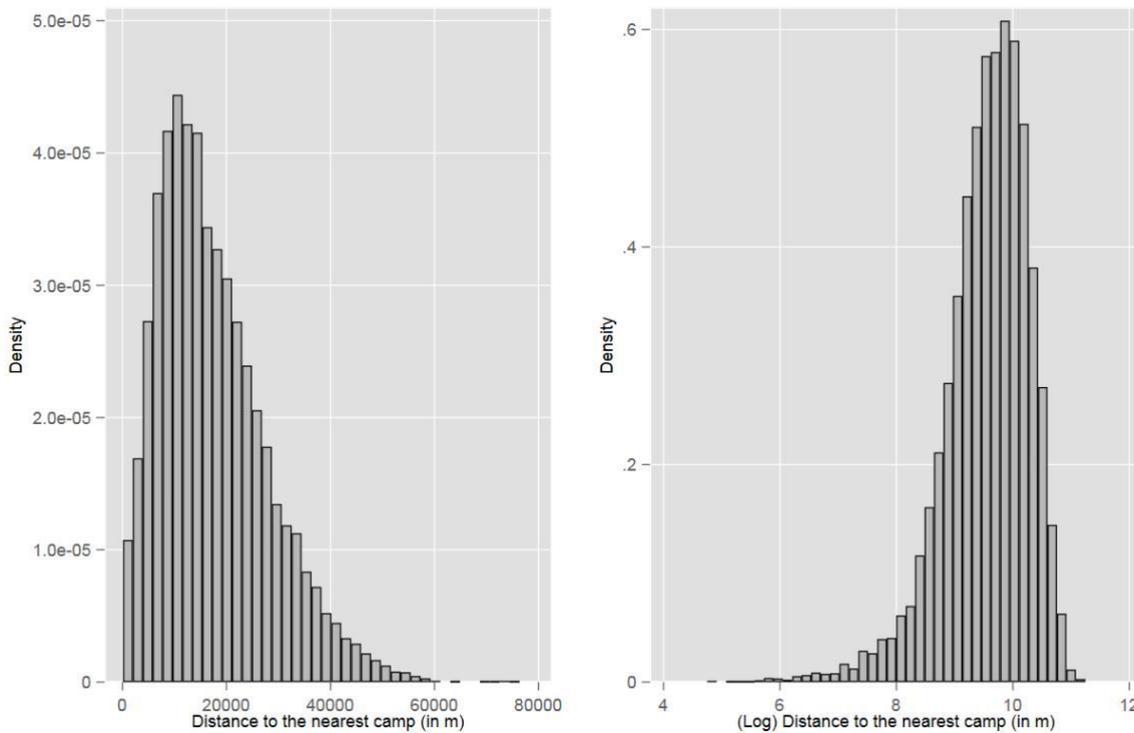
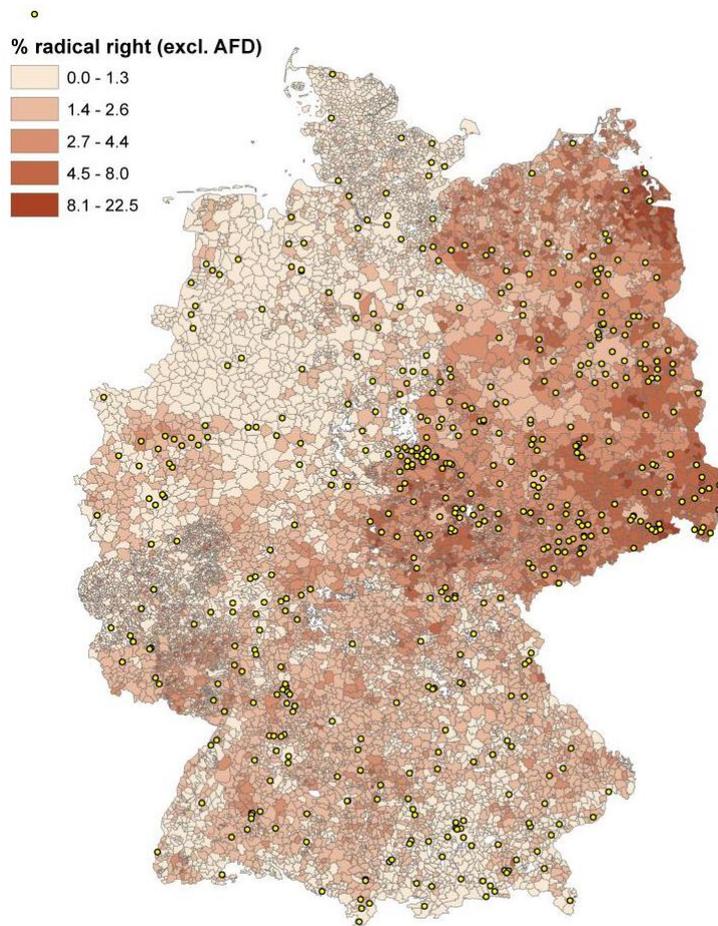


Figure 4 shows the distribution of concentration camps in Germany, as well as support for the extreme right in 2013 federal elections at the *Gemeinde* level. Data on the location of concentration camp were made available by the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C. in the context of the Geographies of the Holocaust project (Knowles, Cole and Giordano, 2014). ¹As can be seen, although camps are spatially concentrated in the East of Germany, they are fairly scattered across the territory. One major concern for our analysis is the potentially endogenous location of concentration camps across the German geography. That is, concentration camps were unlikely to be built at random. In contrast, it is likely that certain observed and unobserved characteristics drove the location of camps across space. We explore this assumption in the Appendix, in section C. The analysis does not show any systematic pattern.

¹ The authors are deeply grateful to Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington D.C for providing the data on the spatial location of Concentration Camps.

Figure 4: Extreme right-wing support in the 2013 election and the location of concentration camps



Our empirical models also control for a variety of additional indicators². The control variables are divided into two categories: variables that allow us to control for the political and socioeconomic characteristics of the *Remained* in the 1930s and variables that capture the characteristics of the same regions in Germany in 2013 and 2017. We employ areal interpolation to match the territorial units from 1930 and the contemporaneous boundaries. The *Gemeinde* data was retrieved from the federal electoral office *Bundeswahlleiter* (Bundeswahlleiter, 2017), while the shapefiles for the 1930 elections were retrieved from the Demographic Research Census Mosaic Project (Census Mosaic, 2019). In order to account for missing values in the historical data, we impute data from the five nearest polygons using spatially weighted averages at the level of modern municipalities.

² As recently suggested by Kelly (Kelly, 2019), studies of historical persistence suffer from spatial noise. Following the author's suggestion, we calculated the Moran statistics, which in our case reports a value of 1.8. Despite spatial noise cannot be completely rule out, our Moran statistics is below the suggestive significant cut-off of 2 and lower than previous studies dealing with the long-term effect of big events

Regarding the first set of controls, we include the percentage of votes obtained by the NSDAP (1930), the percentage of Jewish population (1925) and the percentage of factory workers (1933). As shown by previous works (e.g. Falter, 1991) voting patterns persist over time. Therefore, we are interested in examining the impact of being close to a concentration camp net of previous political alignments. Electoral results of the 1930 election are taken from the historical dataset compiled by Hänisch (1989)³.

All models include the following controls at the *Gemeinde* level: First, the percentage of men. As shown by the literature in political behaviour, men are more likely to support radical right-wing parties than women (Immerzeel, Coffé and van der Lippe, 2015). Second, the percentage of Catholics. As recently shown by L. and Philipp (2018), Catholic regions were far less likely to vote for the NSDAP than their Protestant counterparts. Third, we include the percentage of non-Germans, as anti-immigrant sentiment is identified in the literature as a potential factor benefiting FRPs (Van der Brug, Fennema and Tillie, 2005). These information are taken from the 2011 census. Finally, all models include the following additional controls: a dummy for areas in the former GDR, the (log of the) population density as well as *Laender* dummies (the states in the German federal system).

³ We chose the Reichstagswahlen of 31 July 1930 as they can be considered the last truly democratic elections which were not overshadowed by political violence and can be considered the 'breakthrough' election for the NSDAP (O'Loughlin, Flint and Shin (1995)

4 Results

Did the radical right receive more electoral support in *Gemeinden* located close to concentration camps? Table 1 shows the effect of the (log of the) distance between a municipality's centroid and the closest concentration camp across different model specifications and years (2013 and 2017). For each year, we run separate models which take the vote share of the AfD into account and omit it respectively. For 2017, we expect the effect to be stronger when the AfD is included, as the party attracted a substantial amount of support among far right voters and has switched to a rhetoric which calls Germany's culture of memory explicitly into question. Table 4 presents the different models. For each specification we include the models with and without an interaction between distance to a concentration camp and the dummy for a *Gemeinde* in Eastern Germany, the former communist GDR.

Looking at 2013, we observe that distance to a concentration camp has a negative and significant effect, especially in West Germany. That is, when we move away from a concentration camp, the electoral support received by radical right parties in the Western part of the country goes down. The effect of the interaction is significant both when the dependent variable includes support for the AfD and when it does not. We find that the magnitude of the effect of being close to a camp is larger when we do not include the vote share of the AfD.

We observe similar results when we focus on the 2017 election: That is, being close to a concentration camp is associated with a stronger support for the radical right. Yet, in this case we observe an interesting difference: when the dependent variable does not include the AfD votes, the interaction ceases to be significant. This pattern could be explained by the capacity of the AfD to concentrate the majority of the support of far right voters, in particular given the shift in its rhetoric which explicitly calls Germany's culture of memory into question.

Table 1: The effect of distance to a camp on radical right-wing voting

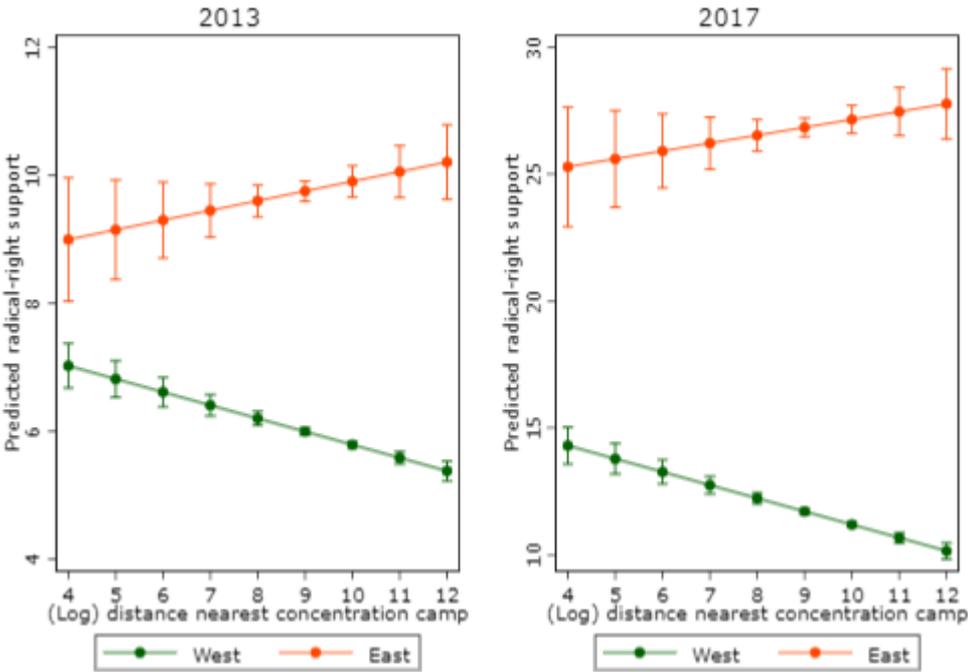
	2013				2017			
	With AfD		Without AfD		With AfD		Without AfD	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Distance concentration camp (log)	-0.078** (0.030)	-0.205** (0.047)	0.011 (0.015)	-0.012 (0.038)	0.011 (0.058)	-0.162 (0.210)	-0.011 (0.006)	-0.030 (0.017)
% votes NSDA (1930)	-0.010** (0.004)	-0.028* (0.012)	0.004* (0.002)	0.003 (0.010)	0.002 (0.007)	0.000 (0.037)	0.002* (0.001)	0.000 (0.002)
% Jewish population (1925)	0.006 (0.043)	0.480* (0.215)	0.110** (0.023)	0.113* (0.060)	-0.595** (0.084)	-0.574 (0.363)	0.035** (0.009)	0.058** (0.017)
% factory workers (1933)	0.008** (0.003)	0.044** (0.011)	0.011** (0.001)	0.011* (0.006)	-0.001 (0.005)	0.001 (0.030)	0.002** (0.001)	0.005** (0.001)
% men	0.066** (0.012)	0.061* (0.023)	0.045** (0.006)	0.044** (0.010)	0.215** (0.024)	0.212** (0.035)	0.014** (0.003)	0.014* (0.006)
% Catholics	-0.023** (0.001)	-0.014* (0.005)	-0.007** (0.001)	-0.007* (0.003)	-0.033** (0.002)	-0.033 (0.023)	-0.002** (0.000)	-0.001 (0.001)
% Foreigners	-0.047** (0.007)	-0.029 (0.023)	-0.018** (0.004)	-0.019* (0.010)	-0.126** (0.013)	-0.130** (0.041)	-0.008** (0.002)	-0.008** (0.003)
(Log) Population density	0.274** (0.027)	0.336** (0.090)	-0.073** (0.014)	-0.073* (0.038)	0.364** (0.053)	0.367 (0.229)	-0.045** (0.006)	-0.028* (0.011)
East Laender	4.945** (0.120)	0.546 (1.490)	3.111** (0.062)	2.005** (0.444)	18.154** (0.234)	9.561** (2.717)	1.151** (0.026)	0.548 (0.368)
East x Distance		0.357* (0.145)		0.119* (0.050)		0.924** (0.289)		0.038 (0.036)
Constant	1.394 (0.733)	1.477 (1.576)	-1.828** (0.381)	-1.603* (0.732)	-3.746* (1.460)	-1.991 (1.923)	-0.246 (0.164)	-0.220 (0.314)
Land FE	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
R ²	0.478	0.387	0.508	0.509	0.728	0.759	0.441	0.410

Standard errors are clustered at the Land level. * $p > 0.10$, ** $p > 0.05$, *** $p > 0.01$

Figure 5 plots the predicted support of radical right parties as a function of distance to a concentration camp in 2013 (left plot) and 2017 (right plot). The increase in AfD support can become obvious in the change in the y axis: the average support is substantially higher in 2017 than in 2013.

The left plot visually shows that *Gemeinde* located close to concentration camps in West Germany gave a larger share of the votes to radical right parties than those municipalities located far away (Figures based on Model 2 and 6). The effect is once again significant and negative in West Germany and not in the former GDR. According to our model, in the West, in places located near the camp (200 meters), the radical right received on average 7.3% of the votes. In contrast, if a *Gemeinde* is 1km away from a concentration camp, the predicted support for radical right parties decreases to 7%. The right-panel figure plots the same interaction but using data from 2017. As the figure shows, the pattern is the same.

Figure 5: The effect of being close to a concentration camp on radical-right vote



5 Concluding Remarks

This paper provides an empirical contribution on the relationship between living in spatial proximity to a former concentration camp and voting for a radical right party in Germany. Our interest in this question is motivated by a now rich literature on the long-term effects of institutions, historical events and in particular cases of mass-violence on political outcomes. The Holocaust represents a singular case of state induced mass violence given its severity and at least indirect awareness of the crimes of large parts of the German population. Debates about the place of the Holocaust in Germany's national identity and culture of memory have been an integral part of post-War (West) German politics. It thus seems reasonable to expect that a long-term effect on electoral behaviour continues to exist.

The particular focus of our empirical setup is the spatial proximity to former concentration camps as these facilities arguably represent some of the most visible and permanent fixtures of German culture of remembrance. Our results are in line with Charnysh and Finkel (2017) and suggest that the vote share of radical right parties is on average higher in municipalities in close proximity to a former camp. Our intuition is that 'memory satiation' could drive this effect, i.e. individuals repeatedly confronted with in-group transgressions become more receptive to alternative narratives in a process of cognitive dissonance. Interestingly, we only find this effect in Western Germany, where the 'contrition frame' was much more dominant in the political discourse compared to the East. Moreover, we find that as the AfD as a new party moved to the right between the 2013 and 2017 elections and increasingly uses a rhetoric explicitly targeted at dismantling the 'contrition frame', the overall effect of our dependent variable becomes stronger but is only significant when we include this new party in the analysis of the latest election. Arguably, this finding supports our argument, as it shows that the magnitude of the effect of closeness to a former camp is dependent on the strength of political entrepreneurs challenging the prevalent culture of memory. Future research could build on our findings to conduct a more fine-grained analysis, for example by incorporating additional elections, by distinguishing between different types of camps or by analysing individual-level data which could provide a handle at the psychological mechanisms behind the proposed memory satiation effect.

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