

Activating the Right People: Internet Usage, Nativism, and the AfD

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The consumption of political information on the web is regularly blamed to play a major role in the surge of populist radical right parties such as the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). While previous research interpreted the online political information mainly as a tool to persuade voters from the political centre, I argue that the internet plays a substantive role in activating voters with a nativist political predisposition. Using data from the German Longitudinal Election Study in 2016/17, I find that using the internet for political information is associated with a substantively higher probability to vote for the AfD only when individuals have a nativist political predisposition. The results highlight the important role of the proliferation of far-right worldviews in the electorate for the success of the AfD. The internet only helped the party to efficiently activate their potential voters.

Keywords: populist radical right party; internet; political predisposition; nativism; Alternative für Deutschland

1. Introduction

The popularity of the populist radical right *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany; AfD) at the ballot box in recent German elections has drawn considerable attention by both political actors and the scientific community (see e.g., Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Goerres, Spies, and Kumlin 2018; Hansen and Olsen 2019; Schaub and Morisi 2019; Schmitt-Beck 2017; Schumann et al. 2019). While many scholars highlight the previously untapped demand for a successful far-right party in Germany (Arzheimer 2015; Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Berbuir, Lewandowsky, and Siri 2015; Schmitt-Beck 2017), others emphasize structural determinants, such as the news and media environment (see e.g., Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Schaub and Morisi 2019; Schumann et al. 2019). Importantly, scholars repeatedly hypothesised

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the internet to play a major role in the rise of the AfD (see e.g., Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Ernst et al. 2019; Mounk 2018; Schaub and Morisi 2019; Schumann et al. 2019; Stier et al. 2017; Zimmermann and Kohring 2020). *How* the internet benefits their popularity is still an open question, though.

Previous research has already shown that, firstly, the internet offers small, populist, and radical parties benefits to distribute their messages (Gibson and McAllister 2015; Krämer 2017; Moffitt 2016; Potter and Dunaway 2016). Secondly, populist radical right parties use this opportunity extensively (Stier et al. 2017). And thirdly that in contrast to voters that stick to analogue media, frequent internet and social media users are more likely to vote for the AfD (Schaub and Morisi 2019; Schumann et al. 2019). Based on exploratory findings, Schaub and Morisi (2019) cautiously conclude that the internet helped the AfD to persuade voters from the political centre but little is known about the mechanism of the effect. In this paper, I challenge the view that the internet works as a medium to persuade voters to support for the AfD. Instead, I argue that most importantly, consumption of political information online can activate voters that hold views in line with the party to begin with

I argue that as Germany’s most successful populist radical right party to date, the AfD was the only party that vehemently campaigned with anti-immigration messages in 2017. These messages appeal primarily to people with a political predisposition that is best described as nativism (Arzheimer and Berning 2019). These sentiments appeal to voters’ group-oriented attitudes that are exceptionally stable (Converse 1964; Mader and Schoen 2019). This means they are unlikely to change in light of a political campaign (Zaller 2012). Moreover, internet users’ choices are highly informed by their political predispositions, meaning, that they show a severe selection bias in favour of content that aligns with their political views (see e.g., Garrett 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick and Kleinman 2012; Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, and Polavin 2017; Stroud 2008, and others). This means that voters who are more in line with the party’s nativism are predestined to be reached by the information that is distributed by or generally in favour of the party. This confrontation with partisan news activates previously uncommitted or unmotivated partisans (Dilliplane 2014; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948) but does so with an issue that is ill-suited to persuade voters (Zaller 2012). If this line of reasoning holds, we should observe that internet consumption of individuals leads *only* to a higher probability to vote for populist radical right parties if their political predispositions are already in line with the parties’ political agenda.

Using individual-level data from the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) Cam-

paigen Panel (Roßteutscher et al. 2019), I test whether consuming political information from the internet in combination with a political predisposition that is in line with the AfD’s political agenda is associated with individuals’ likelihood to vote for the AfD. The results show that regularly informing oneself about politics on the internet prior to a federal election is associated with a higher probability to vote for the AfD, but only for people with a strong nativist political predisposition.

This study strengthens the point that the internet benefits populist radical right parties (see e.g., Krämer 2017; Moffitt 2016; Schaub and Morisi 2019; Schumann et al. 2019), but more so it shifts the focus on individual’s political predispositions as the determining factor whether internet usage has a beneficial effect for the populist radical right parties or not. Therefore, the challenge for liberal democracies lies not so much in the patterns of individuals’ browsing behaviour but the distribution of nativist worldviews in the electorate.

2. Activation, populist radical right parties, and the internet

With the work of Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948), the question of media content’s effect on the electorate is as old as the field of political sociology itself. Most notably, the authors found that partisan news has little persuading effect on non-partisans. Rather, voters self-select into partisan news outlets, based on their political predisposition. The partisan information merely activates those that one expects to vote for the respective party anyway. In contrast to the confrontation with opinion-changing content, voters’ self-selection only activates them by bringing to the forefront why they may want to vote for the candidate that is in line with their predisposition (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948).

While in 1948, research focused on the habitual consumption of partisan-leaning newspapers or radio programs, today’s discussions revolve around filter bubbles in online search engines, the personalized curation of news, echo chambers, and social media (see e.g., Dylko 2016; Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, and Polavin 2017; Pariser 2012; Stier et al. 2020; Sunstein 2001; Thorson and Wells 2016). Because of this new media environment, researchers are again faced with the puzzle of self-selection into partisan news and its effects. The internet is a pull-medium par excellence: instead of presenting pre-selected content to a passive audience, online, it is necessary to actively navigate through links on websites to access whatever information one seeks (Chaffee and Metzger 2001). More than ever, encountering information relies heavily on constant decisions of the consumers (Dylko 2016). Since these decisions are informed by people’s preferences, browsing the World Wide Web is hardly the same for any two individuals.

Extensive research has demonstrated that people show a substantive selection bias toward information that is consistent with their attitudes (see e.g., Festinger 1957; Garrett 2009; Iyengar et al. 2008; Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, and Polavin 2017; Stroud 2008; Taber and Lodge 2006).

This selective attention is particularly enabled by a high-choice environment: people spend more time with news articles that are in line with their political views than those that oppose them (Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic 2015; Garrett 2009; Knobloch-Westerwick, Mothes, and Polavin 2017; Stroud et al. 2019). Importantly, Taber and Lodge (2006) point out that the selection bias is the strongest for people with the strongest prior beliefs. Stier et al. (2020) show that with increasing populist attitudes, internet users increasingly avoid established news sources (Fawzi 2019). Additionally, Hameleers, Bos, and de Vreese (2018) show that populist messages are more effective in leveraging the potential selection bias of individuals that hold populist attitudes that are based on the assumed relative deprivation of their in-group than of those that do not. In line with the findings of Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948), Dilliplane (2014) shows that this selective exposure to partisan news still has mainly an activating effect by mobilizing partisan but not-yet committed voters to cast their ballot in favour of an ideological-congruent party. The result is the selective exposure of individuals to partisan media and messages that most likely leads to the activation of voters. This is especially the case for those with extreme political views or populist attitudes

In recent years, those voters had the option to vote for a populist radical right party on almost every ballot in European democracies. These parties, however, are not a new phenomenon and have already been the subject of ample research (see e.g., Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2017). Next to their anti-elite stance in favour of the idealized "pure" people that defines their *populism*, nativism also lies at the core of their political agenda (Mudde 2007; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018). The concept of nativism refers to the favouritism of an imagined homogeneous national population in contrast to members of non-native elements that are identified by various traits, most prominently ethnicity or religion (Golder 2016; Mudde 2007). In Europe, this nativism manifests mainly in anti-immigration and anti-Muslim sentiment (see Golder 2016).

In recent years, the AfD progressed towards being Germany's only ever successful populist radical right party (Arzheimer 2015; Schmitt-Beck 2017; Arzheimer and Berning 2019). In 2015 and just before the so-called refugee crisis in Europe, the AfD had ousted their more economy-focused leadership and followed through with a much stronger emphasis on issues of immigration

and asylum seekers (Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Schmitt-Beck 2017). The strategy paid off and in 2017, the AfD gained 12.6% of the votes, tripling its vote shares in comparison to the last federal election four years earlier.

Populist parties, however, do not rely so much on formal institutional representation than on representation in popular media channels to reach potential voters (Krämer 2017; Mazzoleni 2014). While extensive studies already focused on the effect of the salience of immigration issues in newspapers and TV broadcasts on the popularity of populist radical right parties (Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2007; Burscher, van Spanje, and de Vreese 2015; Czymara and Dochow 2018), few studies addressed information that is consumed on the internet. Using the internet to inform oneself about politics, however, is widely spread among citizens. Just before the German federal election in Germany, about 37% of the voters read about the election in an online newspaper (Staudt and Schmitt-Beck 2019).

As many scholars argue, this pattern of political information access might come especially handy for populist radical right parties since the internet offers them a "relative advantage over other parties" (Schaub and Morisi 2019, p.4) to distribute their content and reach out to the electorate (see also Groshek and Koc-Michalska 2017; Hamелеers, Bos, and de Vreese 2018; Krämer 2017; Schumann et al. 2019). Firstly, the internet offers ways to promote content inexpensively (Gibson and McAllister 2015; Schumann et al. 2019). In contrast to parties' representation in traditional media and campaigning, their online presence is less dependent on their resources and size (Gerbaudo 2018; Gibson and McAllister 2015). Secondly, populist parties can directly communicate to their potential electorate in contrast to traditionally mediated channels such as news or even TV interviews. This yields additional authenticity by circumventing traditional news outlets that are often understood to be part of the elites they are criticising (Moffitt 2016; Stier et al. 2020). Thirdly, the lack of gatekeepers between the party and the electorate allows spreading emotionalized, misleading, or false statements that may be filtered out by journalists (Gerbaudo 2018; Moffitt 2016; Zhuravskaya, Petrova, and Enikolopov 2020). The AfD seems to be aware of these advantages as the party intensively uses online communication channels, especially social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter (Ernst et al. 2017). With over 14 Million Likes for the AfD's official party sites in 2016, it had accumulated more Facebook-Likes than the three governing parties taken together (Stier et al. 2017).

Although few studies have examined the effect of internet usage on actual voting (for exceptions see e.g., Falck, Gold, and Heblich 2014), the fit between populist radical right communication and the opportunities on the World Wide Web has led to several studies investigating

whether more frequent internet usage leads to higher levels of populist right-wing voting (see Schaub and Morisi 2019; Schumann et al. 2019; Potter and Dunaway 2016). Focusing on the aggregate level, Potter and Dunaway (2016) find that in multi-party systems such as Germany’s, these parties’ vote shares benefit from increased internet proliferation in the electorate. Focusing on the individual-level, Schaub and Morisi (2019) find that both higher (self-reported) internet usage of individuals and the distribution of broadband internet in a voter district is positively correlated with voting for populist parties. Also using individual-level data, Schumann et al. (2019) focus on the relationship between social media usage and the vote intention for the AfD in 2015 and 2016. They find that reported social media use is positively associated with the probability to report a vote intention for the AfD. In the light of this literature, it might be easy to blame the internet for the rise of populist radical right parties or frame it as one of the prominent threats to liberal democracies altogether (Mounk 2018). These kinds of arguments are misleading or oversimplify what is going on by implicitly or explicitly assuming that the internet has a uniform effect on the whole electorate. The exact mechanism of the effect, however, is unknown.

3. Persuasion or activation?

Given the selection bias of internet users based on their political views, it is unlikely that everybody engages with the same intensity with content from populist radical right parties. Therefore, it is unlikely that internet usage for political information has the same effect on everybody. Schaub and Morisi (2019) accounted for heterogeneity of the effect internet consumption might have on voters with an exploratory analysis. Based on a positive interaction of internet consumption and voters’ self-placement on an ideological left-right scale, the authors conclude that the internet helped the AfD to persuade voters from the political centre. This, however, relies on a rather rough measure of political predisposition (Bauer et al. 2017). This is especially important, given that consuming political information online is unlikely given the group-oriented issue of anti-immigration (Zaller 2012) and the effects we expect from partisan news exposure (Dilliplane 2014; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948). It is more conclusive to test whether the internet helped the AfD to activate or persuade voters based on the specific political issue the party occupies, namely anti-immigration.

This manifests itself in the AfD’s group-based worldview that pits an imaginative native population against outgroups, such as asylum seekers and Muslims. Since such group-based political worldviews are exceptionally stable (Converse 1964; Mader and Schoen 2019), this

issue is an unlikely basis for conversion in the sense that the party changed voters' minds. My argument is that although many of the AfD voters in 2017 voted for different parties in previous elections (Hansen and Olsen 2019; Mader and Schoen 2019), they were not persuaded by the AfD's political positions, but already held a political predisposition in the form of a nativist worldview that partisan news and the party's campaign activated. Since online content in favour of the AfD's political agenda is predestined to be encountered by people that also share their political views, the internet was merely an efficient tool for activation. Therefore, I test whether the internet helped in persuading or activating their electorate based on their degree of nativism as a meaningful political predisposition for populist radical right voting.

These considerations yield two hypotheses. If the consumption of online political information helped the AfD to persuade voters from the centre (see Schaub and Morisi 2019), we should observe that increasing levels of consuming political information online led to an increased probability to vote for the AfD, even if a voter only holds moderate positions considering nativism (*H1*). In contrast, if the internet plays a role in activating a potential electorate, we should observe that increasing levels of consuming online political information should lead to an increased probability to vote for the AfD only when the voter did show a considerable nativist political predisposition (*H2*).

4. Data and Operationalisation

This study focuses on testing the relationship between political predispositions, internet usage for political information, and populist radical right voting. I test the two hypotheses concerning the conditional relationship of the internet use and individuals' political predisposition on the support for the AfD with data from the GLES Short-time Campaign Panel for the 2017 German federal election (Roßteutscher et al. 2019). The panel was conducted online and consists of eligible German voters that were sampled from the pool of two commercial survey providers.¹ It provides a time component that allows using measurements of political predispositions a year before the federal election took place. Due to the exceptional stability of attitudes toward outgroups (Converse 1964; Mader and Schoen 2019), it is fair to assume that the predisposition was not substantively influenced by any events happening between the end of 2016 and the election in September 2017. Additionally, the measure of internet consumption could be computed with a set of responses that were recorded during multiple waves of the panel.

¹Respondi AG and GapFish GmbH

Taking panel attrition, list-wise deletion of incomplete cases, and quality control questions² into account, there are 6,351 observations available for the main analysis.

The dependent variable is a dummy variable, indicating the reported vote choice for the AfD in the German federal election in 2017. This variable considers all respondents that gave valid answers, including non-voters. In comparison with the election results, a slightly larger proportion of the sample reported that they voted for the AfD (14%).

The degree of internet use to inform oneself about politics is measured by the average number of days somebody used the internet for this purpose in the last week. This question was asked in seven panel waves. To compute the average, I use all valid answers respondents gave to the respective question.³ Using the internet as a source for political information is a quite stable habit. The average standard deviation between each answer of the individual respondents is only 1.3 days per week. The distribution of the average answers is depicted in histogram A in Figure 1. Considerable variance is visible: respondents informed themselves about politics on the internet, on average, about three days a week. Only around a quarter of them used it on more than five days.

In Europe, typical nativism defines the native ingroup mostly in contrast to immigrants, refugees, and Muslims (Golder 2016; Rydgren 2008). To create an index of individuals' degree of nativism, I use positions toward the restriction of asylum seekers and Muslims in Germany. For the index, I combine four items concerning the questions whether refugees that come for economic reasons should be deported, whether Islamic communities should be surveilled, whether Islamic practices should be restricted, and whether Islam is compatible with the German society⁴ Exploratory factor analysis confirms the consistency of the items since they all load on the same factor with loadings > 0.5 .⁵ A Cronbach's α test further supports the fit with an $\alpha = 0.83$. The index is created with weighted sum scores (see DiStefano, Zhu, and Míndrilă 2009) since the instruments used to cover different political issues with different scopes. Therefore, I weighted the items with their factor loadings and standardised the scale from 0 to 1. Higher values depict more restrictive political predispositions. The distribution is skewed in the direction of nativist predispositions with a notable spike on the far-right end of the spectrum (see Figure 1). The

²The participants were asked multiple times to select a certain answer category in item batteries. Two of these questions were inserted in the first wave and two in the eighth. I keep all cases that have passed more than half of the quality control question.

³Most respondents answered all questions in all survey waves. Only around 5.6% of them answered less than five out of all seven questions.

⁴Individuals' answers were recorded on a five-point scale from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly agree".

⁵Factor analysis with twelve recorded ego-positions of the first two panel waves and seven factors. The four items are loading on the first factor with sufficient size and explained variance: economic refugee (*loading* = 0.514; *uniqueness* = 0.425), surveillance of Islamic community (*loading* = 0.733; *uniqueness* = 0.383), restriction of Islamic practices (*loading* = 0.855; *uniqueness* = 0.216), and fit of Islam and German society (*loading* = 0.778; *uniqueness* = 0.353).

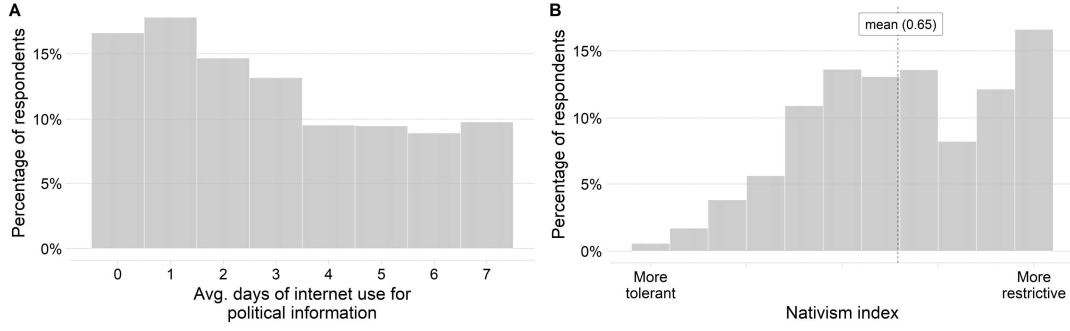


Figure 1. Histograms of the independent variables. Histograms show the distribution of the average internet use (A; binwidth = 1) and nativism index as an indicator for the political predisposition (B, bin width = 0.05).

mean index value is 0.64.

I control, firstly, for other media consumption effects by including a measure that captures whether the respondent did watch any news broadcasts on TV or has read about politics in any newspaper in the last seven days. Secondly, I control for political interest⁶ since it may influence both internet use for political information and voting behavior. Lastly, I control for socio-economic influences with individuals' average subjective satisfaction with their economic situation,⁷ for age, gender (see Bobba et al. 2018), education⁸, and whether the respondent lives in Eastern Germany (see Arzheimer and Berning 2019; Schmitt-Beck 2017).

To model the relationship, I use a logistic regression, including an interaction between the internet use and the political predisposition. To evaluate the direction, substance, and significance of the interaction. I rely on predicted probabilities, based on estimates drawn from a simulated sampling distribution and observed values (Berry, DeMeritt, and Esarey 2010; Hanmer and Ozan Kalkan 2013; King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000). I compute second differences, displaying the difference between the predicted probabilities for the range of different values for the political predisposition index when the values for internet consumption are held stable at their lowest (no internet use for political information) and highest (at least any other day) values.

$$\Delta\Delta = [\Pr(\text{AfD}|\text{PolPred.} = x_{hi}, \text{Int.} = z_{hi}) - \Pr(\text{AfD}|\text{PolPred} = x_{lo}, \text{Int.} = z_{hi})] \\ - [\Pr(\text{AfD}|\text{PolPred.} = x_{hi}, \text{Int.} = z_{lo}) - \Pr(\text{AfD}|\text{PolPred} = x_{lo}, \text{Int.} = z_{lo})]$$

⁶In general, how strong are you interested in politics? 1 = very strong, 2 = strong, 3 = medium, 4 = less strongly, 5 = not at all. The variable was re-coded that higher values indicate stronger interest.

⁷How do you assess *your own* economical situation? 1 = very good, 2 = good, 3 = partly good, partly bad, 4 = bad, 5 = very bad. The variable was recoded that higher values indicate more satisfaction.

⁸Education was measured as the highest school-leaving qualification: 0 = No and lowest formal secondary school certificate, 1 = Intermediary secondary school qualification, 2 = Secondary school certificate fulfilling entrance requirements to study at polytechnical colleges or universities.

This second difference will be 0 when the effect of a change in the political predisposition on the probability to vote for the AfD is as strong for people who do not use the internet for political information as it is for those that use it frequently.⁹

5. Results

Table 1 displays the estimates from the logit model. Three effects are of particular interest: the effect of the nativism index, of internet consumption, and their interaction. The analysis clearly shows that the effect of using the internet for political information on the likelihood to vote for the AfD is substantively stronger for people with a strong nativist political predisposition while it almost has no impact on those that occupy a very tolerant or central position on the nativism index.

Figure 2 clearly depicts that the positive effect of political information consumption on the internet is conditional on an extreme political predisposition of the voter. The plot presents predicted probabilities for different average days of internet usage for political information while holding the political predisposition stable at different scenarios. Most importantly, the predictions show that internet usage only increases the probability to vote for the AfD substantively for people that score high on the nativism index while it does not affect voters who occupy central positions. For people who hold extreme nativist views that use the internet for political information on a daily basis, the predicted probability to vote for the AfD reaches on average 62%, while on average it only amounts to 23% for people with the same views who never use the internet this way. The first difference between these two probabilities is quite substantive and amounts to 39 percentage points ($CI_{2.5\%} = 30.8\%$; $CI_{97.5\%} = 48.2\%$). The plot makes clear that this difference is almost entirely due to a difference in internet usage. The second difference between the lowest and highest score on the nativism index and zero or seven days of internet usage amounts to 40% ($CI_{2.5\%} = 30.8\%$; $CI_{97.5\%} = 48.3\%$). The high similarity between the first difference for a high score on the nativism index and the second difference is because the probability to vote for the AfD with a very low nativism index is near zero, regardless of one's internet usage (see the solid line). People who are very tolerant towards outgroups did not vote for the AfD regardless of their news consumption.

Importantly, the probability to turnout for the AfD for a voter in the centre does not change substantively whether she consumes political information on a daily basis or not at all.

⁹The data analyses were all conducted in the statistical programming language R (R Core Team 2020) and respective software packages (see Bache and Wickham 2014; Grolemund and Wickham 2011; Hlavac 2018; Venables and Ripley 2002; Wickham 2018; Wickham et al. 2019; Wickham and Miller 2019; Wilke 2019).

Table 1. Logistic regression model, estimating the probability to vote for the AfD in the 2017 German federal election.

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Vote for the AfD in '17 β	SD
Political predisposition:		
Nativism index	5.067***	(0.442)
Internet usage:		
Political information from the internet	−0.078	(0.096)
Interaction effect:		
Outgroup index X Pol. info. from the internet	0.340**	(0.109)
Control variables:		
Watched TV news	−0.733***	(0.160)
Read newspaper articles about politics	−0.272*	(0.126)
Political interest	0.202**	(0.066)
Income satisfaction	−0.303***	(0.051)
Age	−0.010**	(0.003)
Gender	−0.387***	(0.087)
Education	−0.173**	(0.060)
East Germany	0.338***	(0.092)
Constant	−4.584***	(0.442)
Observations	6,316	
Log-Likelihood	−1,881.294	
Akaike Inf. Crit.	3,786.6	

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001

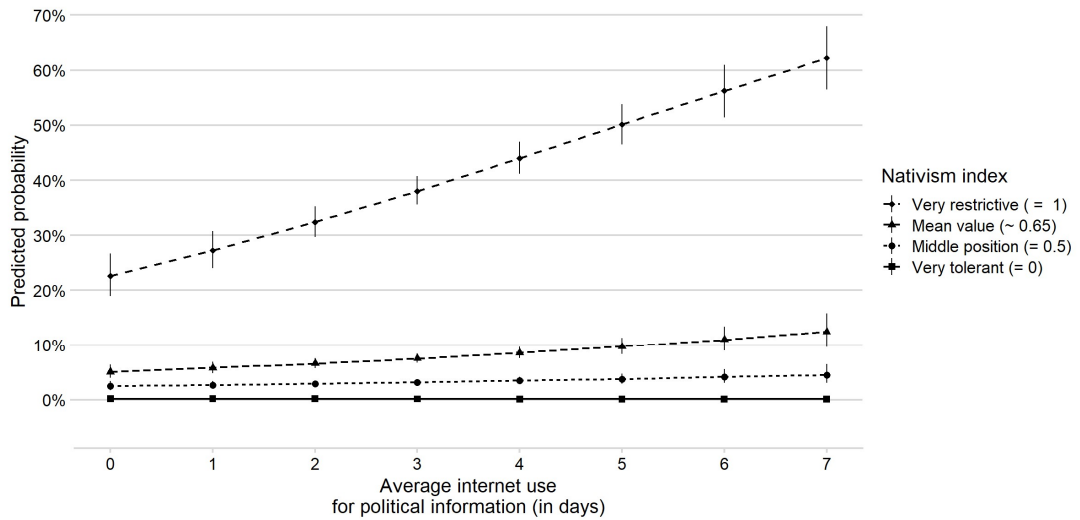


Figure 2. Predictions of probability to vote for the AfD in 2017. The predictions are based on observed values and the estimates from a model with an interaction term between the nativism index and internet usage. The lines and respective 95% confidence intervals show the predicted probabilities for average internet usage for political information (in days) and scores on the nativism index, ranging from very tolerant ($z_i = 0$), the centre ($z_i = 0.5$) and average score ($z_i = 0.64$), to the most restrictive end of the index ($z_i = 1$).

Holding the predisposition of respondents constant at its central position ($= 0.5$) yields, on average, only a difference of 2 percentage points in the predicted probability when one varies the internet use from zero to seven days ($CI_{2.5\%} = 0.0\%$; $CI_{97.5\%} = 4.3\%$). For voters with an average political predisposition, which already represents a considerably restrictive view (0.65), a change in the frequency of consuming political information on the internet from zero days to seven leads to a change in the predicted probability to vote for the AfD of 7 percentage points ($CI_{2.5\%} = 3.4\%$; $CI_{97.5\%} = 10.7\%$).

In conclusion, when voters with a nativist political predisposition increasingly used the internet to inform themselves about politics, their probability to vote for the AfD increased substantively. In contrast, when voters are very tolerant or place themselves on a central position on the nativism index, an increased use of the World Wide Web for political information does not lead to a substantive change in the probability to vote for the AfD at all. The AfD's benefit through the proliferation of habitual online political information consumption only affected voters that had a strong nativist political predisposition, while it did not affect those voters that have more moderate political views. This shows that the internet is not so much the populist radical right's tool to persuade voters ($H1$) but to activate an electorate that is already in line with their political agenda ($H2$).

6. Discussion

In this paper, I tested whether the effect of internet consumption on the likelihood to vote for a populist radical right party is conditional on the political predisposition of the voter. In contrast to previous findings, I argue that the internet does not help in *persuading* voters with more moderate political worldviews, but is mainly a tool for populist radical right parties to *activate* an electorate that already is in line with their nativist political agenda. My analysis shows that the use of the internet for political information only leads to a higher probability to vote for the populist radical right AfD when the voter has a rather extreme nativist political predisposition. In contrast, I do not observe that internet consumption has a boosting effect on the probability to vote for the AfD when one has a moderate political predisposition. The increasing proliferation of online news consumption and its potential for partisan news exposure might be a new phenomenon but the results show that its effect is not (see Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948).

This research, therefore, improves our understanding of the relationship between internet proliferation and the popularity of populist radical right parties (see Schaub and Morisi 2019;

Schumann et al. 2019; Potter and Dunaway 2016). Most importantly, it highlights that the internet played a role in the rise of the AfD but is not to blame for its success, *per se*. Rather, the party's success is anchored in a sizeable electorate with nativist political predispositions. Achieving change in the distribution of radical right political predispositions, therefore, poses an important but particularly difficult challenge for liberal democracies (Cavaille and Marshall 2019; Hainmueller and Hopkins 2014).

We should be aware that with the constant salience of immigration issues in a globalized world, a stable distribution of radical right political predispositions, and the increasing use of political news online among citizens, there is no reason to expect the success of populist radical right parties to simply fade away. It may be easy to condemn the selection bias enabling functions of the web, invite CEOs of social media firms to be questioned by lawmakers, or attach fact-checks to online political statements, but all criticism should not distract from the point that populist radical right parties' success is deeply rooted in a substantive and stable political demand.

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