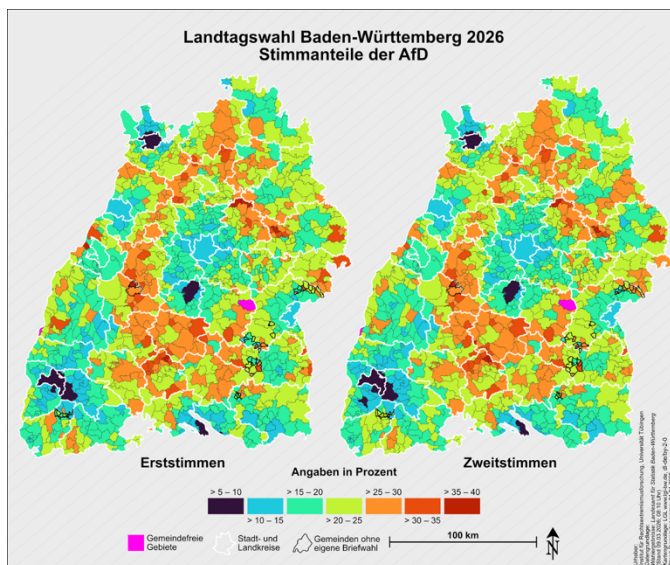


Protocol Day 1 CIVIS Open Lab

Regional Perspective (Team IREx)

- **Clustering of votes:** There is a clustering of AfD votes in Baden-Württemberg with rural communities, for example the regions of the Black Forest or the Swabian Alb, having a much larger share than cities.
- **Electorate:** The electorate of the AfD looks like the one of other big parties, with no focus on one specific social group and a decreasing gender bias.
- **Urban activities:** Far-right actors such as the AfD, “Der III. Weg”, or far-right youth organizations get increasingly active in the cities through stickers, flyers, or social media content. In Tübingen, student fraternities are very active and while they are not necessarily far right, some of them share (bridge) ideologies.
- **Increasing Antisemitism** can be observed not just within the far right but also on the left spectrum, for example in some Pro-Palestine protests, which allows the far right to proclaim itself as the protector of Jewish life.
- **Voting motives** are changing from protest votes to support based on ideology.



Strategies for dealing with the far right (Team IREx)

- There are three theoretical strategies of dealing with the far right:
 - **Adjustment:** to cooperate and include them to win back votes
 - **Confrontation:** exposing them through debate
 - **Isolation:** no cooperation or interaction
- While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, research shows that adaptation and confrontation often lead to normalisation, as these strategies tend to give far-right ideas a platform.
- Isolation (*cordon sanitaire*) is not a silver bullet but can work if parliamentary isolation is complemented by societal and media responses.

Session 1: Civil Society and the extreme right: local challenges (Team Glasgow)

Each group had to deal with one dilemma, e.g. how to respond if a colleague is openly expressing far-right ideologies, or how to react to a far-right protest in the area. The goal was to learn from each other's perspectives. Afterwards, one person from each group presented the following outcomes to the assembly:

- **Counter protest:** The type of protest matters in determining whether it is effective. Violence often draws away media attention. In Greece, violent protests between the far right and the left are much more common than in Germany. There is also a danger that counterprotests increase the attention on far-right actors, but it is a way for people to engage more pro-democratically and become more motivated, as they find themselves less isolated.
- **Workplace environment:** To avoid normalization, a certain degree of confrontation is always necessary, but responses are always subject to certain conditions: position at work; the general working culture and its political tendencies; and personal relations to the person. It is important to find allies and to be mindful of the emotional toll of confrontation. General rule of thumb: consider the existing institutional guidelines and show solidarity with victims.
- **General Overarching Points:** There is no one-size-fits-all solution, so the context matters. While silence can be legitimate for protecting yourself, do not leave harmful ideas



unaddressed. Action plans need to be considered (where to draw the line, how to proceed, and what is the overall goal). There are tensions between engagement and legitimising across all situations, as neutrality becomes a problematised concept. In a conversation, do not deny the other person's legitimacy to stay in touch and keep them engaged. General rule of thumb: the right strategy matters more than being right.

Session 2 - Keynote

- **What the AfD is:** The AfD is a populist actor of the far right that manages to appear radical (within constitutional limits) but also often acts extreme (antidemocratic).
- **Reasons for its success:**
 - Strategic organisational professionalisation
 - Normalisation of ideas despite radicalisation
 - Greater party identification than other parties
 - Satisfaction with candidates and increasing heterogeneity of topics
 - Other parties' actions and media focus on migration increases legitimacy
- **The fourth wave of populism** sees far-right parties increasingly in government
 - The limits of what is tolerated and acceptable are being moved.
- **Strategies for parties**
 - Scale from strict exclusion to coalition and from ignoring to adopting
 - So far: no cooperation on any level but the "firewall" is cracking
 - Adopting far-right positions to win back voters does not work
- **Strategies for civil society**
 - Do not cut off contact as long as possible
 - **Conventional strategies:** voting, joining parties, social movements
 - **Innovative strategies:** new formats of participation e.g. citizen councils
 - **Social participation matters**
 - Places to learn about democracy and self-efficacy
 - Community-based perspectives can strengthen democracy
- **The local level**
 - Stronger connection to the people and more cooperation with far-right actors
 - Mayors play a central role in how far-right actors are dealt with.
 - The AfD takes advantage of debate formats going beyond the scope of the debate to emphasize their own issues.
- **Civil Society**
 - Political education needs to be emphasized, focusing on peer-learning strategies to increase self-efficacy.
 - More spaces for dialogue should be created to depolarise the debate and increase trust between citizens and politics.

Q&A following the keynote

- **Strengthening civil society** in rural areas by expanding places for engagement for people who would like to be engaged, also increasing the dialogue between people who do not think alike.
- **Changing opinions is possible**, as the far right is showing, democratic actors need to adopt strategic thinking about how to change opinions to be more democratic.
 - This needs more energetic engagement, more resources (e.g. through parties), and more openness to change.
- **More forums for conversation**
 - There are some successful formats where people can speak and listen.
- **Historians can help** identify local fascist history and spread the knowledge (memory culture).
- **Dilemma of partnering with Antifa** and its association with violence, as trust is an essential ingredient to engage with the broader public.



CIVIS Open Lab – Day 2

Input (Team Athens)

Local mobilisation against the far right

- Peaceful grassroots mobilisation can reduce electoral support for far-right parties.
- But timing is crucial: Counter-protests are most effective when they take place close in time and location to far-right events, particularly within the six months preceding an election.
- The German case illustrates that the effects can vary: Protests against PEGIDA sometimes increased mobilisation among PEGIDA supporters by reinforcing their collective identity and commitment.

The effects of far-right violence

Far-right violence can either decrease or increase public support for far-right parties.

- When the media clearly attributes attacks to far-right perpetrators, support for the far right tends to decline. By contrast, attacks that receive limited media attention or are ambiguously attributed may increase support for far-right actors.
- The **severity of violence** also matters: High-intensity attacks are generally associated with declining support for the far right.

Session 3: Myths about the far right (Team Salzburg)

Myth 1: “*AfD voters are only protest voters*”

- ➔ Immigration attitudes are the strongest predictor, but the AfD also mobilises non-voters. Dissatisfaction plays a role, but ideology matters.

Myth 2: “*AfD voters reject democracy*”

- ➔ AfD voters are more dissatisfied with how democracy functions, but some prefer majoritarian ideas over pluralism.

Myth 3: “*The AfD is mainly supported by the poorest*”

- ➔ Lowest-income groups are not the strongest supporters but rather status anxiety (fear of social decline) is more important.

Cooperation with the AfD?

Risks normalisation of far-right actors and shift of political debate to the right. Little evidence that cooperation weakens the AfD, no clear voter “recovery” effect for mainstream parties.

Session 4: The Far Right in the Workplace, Strategies from Trade Unions

Far-right strategies in the workplace

- **Entry into works councils**
 - Far-right actors seek influence through existing workplace institutions to gain legitimacy and access to employees.
 - Example: *Zentrum Automobil* presents itself as an "alternative trade union" and has gained representation in more than 150 works councils.
 - The organisation is connected to broader far-right networks, including links to the Identitarian Movement, AfD actors, PEGIDA, *Ein Prozent*, and *Compact*.
- **Focus on the automotive industry**
 - The sector is targeted because the transition to e-mobility creates insecurities around jobs, professional identity, and the future of industrial regions.
 - Far-right actors use these fears and status anxieties to present themselves as defenders of workers and traditional industries.
- **Rhetoric and mobilisation strategies**
 - They use anti-establishment narratives, portraying workers as victims of political elites, management, and established trade unions.
 - They often operate "**under the radar**", avoiding openly extremist positions during elections and revealing their broader agenda only after gaining influence.
 - Established unions are frequently attacked as disconnected or as "traitors" to workers.



Effective responses

- **Counter-organising and workplace engagement**
 - Strengthen democratic workplace structures before far-right actors gain influence.
 - Maintain continuous engagement with employees, not only during elections.
 - Take concerns about job security, industrial transformation, and economic uncertainty seriously.
- **Approach different groups differently**
 - Ideological supporters who should be politically isolated.
 - Frustrated employees may be reached through dialogue and engagement.
 - Pragmatic or uninformed supporters can be influenced through information and discussion.
- **Avoiding moralisation**
 - Simply labelling people as extremists can reinforce feelings of exclusion.
 - Effective responses combine political education, factual arguments, and genuine engagement.
- **Strengthening democratic workplace culture**
 - Challenge contradictions in far-right narratives and question whether they genuinely represent workers' interests.
 - Promote solidarity, participation, and spaces where employees can discuss concerns without turning to far-right explanations.

Session 5 – What works (and what doesn't)?

Building strong local structures

- Long-term, early, and sustained local organising is essential, especially in rural areas.
- Successful initiatives rely on stable networks, the willingness to learn, and cooperation between local actors who are committed to democracy.

Dialogue and engagement

- Focus on dialogue rather than moralising or lecturing.
- Listen to everyday concerns and create spaces for open discussion.
- Every meaningful conversation can be considered a success.
- Use low-threshold formats to reach politically distant or disengaged groups.

Political education and cultural approaches

- Strengthen political education, especially among young people.
- Effective formats include:
 - Workshops and discussions
 - Documentaries and public events
 - Theatre, art, and other cultural activities as accessible entry points
 - School-based and youth outreach programmes

Challenges

- Access is often shaped by local gatekeepers and existing structures.
- A key challenge is to avoid working only within familiar social networks.
- Successful strategies need to reach beyond already engaged groups and prevent the repetition of existing social divides.