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To cite this article: Christian S. Czymara & Leo Bauer (2025) Discursive Shifts in the German Right-Wing Newspaper *Junge Freiheit* 1997–2019: A Computational Approach, *German Politics*, 34:1, 128-155, DOI: [10.1080/09644008.2023.2231353](https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2023.2231353)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2023.2231353>



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# Discursive Shifts in the German Right-Wing Newspaper *Junge Freiheit* 1997–2019: A Computational Approach

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## ABSTRACT

Right-wing media are pivotal for the success of the political right. We investigate the discursive trends in roughly 57,000 articles published in Germany's biggest far-right weekly newspaper, *Junge Freiheit* (*JF*), between 1997 and 2019. During this period, *JF* expanded steadily in terms of both circulation and output. Quantitative content analyses reveal that, firstly, *JF* shows clear partisanship: although officially independent, *JF* has already covered the relatively new right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* more than all other parties combined. Secondly, *JF* tends to form its identity mostly through railing against the perceived dominance of liberalism in politics and society, although attention to these aspects has decreased in recent years. At the same time, whitewashing Germany's past has been a rather stable theme. Lastly, the *JF* clearly casts immigrants, refugees, and Muslims as a threat to Germany. However, this aspect has mainly become prominent in recent years, and the refugee inflows of 2015/16 worked as a catalyst that boosted attention on related topics. We discuss implications for scholarship on right-wing media in general, and Germany in particular.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 10 May 2022; Accepted 24 May 2023

## Introduction

Over the last 20 years, the political right has gained political and discursive power in Germany (Arzheimer 2019; Salzborn 2016) and other European democracies (Mudde 2019). In Germany, this includes the establishment and electoral success of the right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD) (Arzheimer and Berning 2019) and the formation of the PEGIDA movement. While the former became the second strongest party in local elections in Saxony in 2017, the latter organised weekly demonstrations

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against Islam, refugees and immigration, attracting up to 25,000 participants during its peak (Schwemmer 2021). Right-wing media play a crucial role in this development (Figenschou and Ihlebæk 2019; Rone 2021). The weekly newspaper *Junge Freiheit* (*JF*) is an important part of the media environment of the political right in Germany (Braun and Vogt 2007; Salzborn 2016) and has become the country's sixth-largest weekly newspaper overall (IVW 2021). In this study, we analyse the content that *JF* communicates to its audience and how the newspaper adapted its content while significantly increasing its readership. To this end, we investigate trends in *all* content published in *JF*'s printed edition between 1997 and 2019. We use algorithm-based topic modelling on a rich, web-scraped dataset consisting of roughly 57,000 unique articles. We focus on three aspects that we consider particularly relevant in the context of the far-right in Germany: (i) reporting on party politics, (ii) the references to nationalistic topics, and (iii) the perceived cultural threat posed by minorities and immigrants. We quantify how much space the *JF* devotes to each of these aspects vis-à-vis all other content and analyse the trends in these topics over time.

Results show that the right-wing discourse has shifted in recent years. While the political left served as the main enemy in the late 1990s, *JF* now focuses more on immigration and integration issues and propagates the AfD as its (unofficial) parliamentary representation. These findings are relevant to scholars of Germany's far-right and the development of European far-right politics at large. The results on the representation of German party politics and national identity in *JF* demonstrate the crucial role the AfD plays in right-wing media (and vice versa, see Bachl 2018), and the far-right's self-conception in a decidedly German context. Our results pertaining to representations of ethnic threats are relevant for a broader scholarship on European far-right politics: as Germany has been only one country among several in receiving refugees, our findings on this issue are particularly relevant for the comparative study of reactions to these developments in right-wing media across the continent.

## The Weekly Newspaper *Junge Freiheit*

We focus on the weekly newspaper *Junge Freiheit* as a representation of the so-called New Right in contemporary Germany. Salzborn (2016) characterises the New Right as pursuing the 'intellectualization of right-wing extremism' and '(right-wing) cultural hegemony' (38), and *JF* itself as 'the flagship of the New Right [and] a leading right-wing media outlet' in Germany (46). Similarly, Braun, Geisler, and Gerster (2007) describe the *JF* as 'one of the sharpest weapons in the arsenal of the New Right' (17).<sup>1</sup> Based on a comparison of several German right-wing outlets, Müller and Freudenthaler (2022) find that *JF* belongs to the group of 'core right-wing

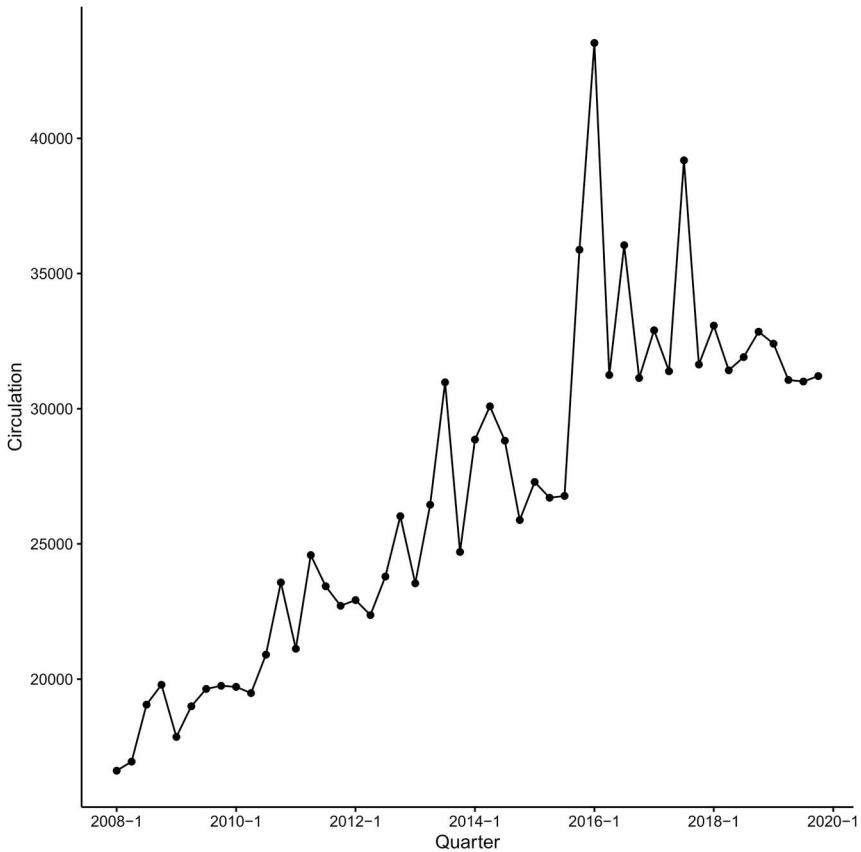
populist' outlets, which are characterised by the prominence of topics relating to right-wing ideology and populism. Similarly, Klawier, Prochazka, and Schweiger (2022) and von Nordheim, Müller, and Scheppe (2019) show that *JF* has a distinct negative style of reporting on topics such as immigration or politics as compared to mainstream outlets. Czymara (2023) shows that these topics are featured more prominently during times of high immigration or after Jihadist terror attacks. As such, the newspaper can be understood as a hyperpartisan media outlet in line with Rae (2021), serving a broad right-wing conservative clientele. Yet, *JF* has an appearance similar to conventional mainstream media outlets (Heft et al. 2020), indicating its goal is to target both far-right and more moderate conservative readers.

Current editor-in-chief Dieter Stein launched *JF* as a student newspaper in 1986, publishing it first at irregular intervals and then monthly, while expanding its readership gradually by establishing *JF* reading groups for conservative university students (Kohrs 2016). The paper always catered to a far-right, conservative, and educated readership, embracing debates and opinions that crossed from the conservative centre-right CDU party spectrum into right-wing extremist territory (Weiß 2017, 20). The paper's agnosticism towards party lines proved to be a successful strategy and was only abandoned when the AfD gained popularity. In the mid-1990s, the paper made the transition to a full-fledged weekly newspaper. As the paper increased its readership, it stood at the centre of several controversies in the early 2000s, which centred on its exclusion from book fairs and freezing of its bank accounts due to its ideological leanings. However, these events only increased its visibility (Der Tagesspiegel 2006) and furthered its self-conception as a challenger of 'liberal-mainstream' media (Braun, Geisler, and Gerster 2007, 22).

*JF* is the largest right-wing print outlet in Germany, and the fifth largest weekly newspaper in Germany overall, with a circulation of over 30,000 copies sold each quarter (IVW 2021). In contrast to most established print publications, which have witnessed a steady decline in circulation, *JF* has achieved the opposite. Figure 1 shows that the circulation of paid copies more than doubled between 2008 and 2019, rising from roughly 16,600 to over 31,000. There was a peak during the first quarter of 2016, when *JF* sold more than 43,500 copies. This roughly corresponds to the time during which the immigration of refugees to Germany and Europe was dominating public debates (Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017).

## Theory

We are interested in three domains that are particularly relevant in the context of the New Right in Germany. First, we will investigate the prominence of German parties in the reporting of the *JF* and how the *JF* reacted to the establishment of Germany's first successful right-wing party, the



**Figure 1.** Circulation of *JF* over time.

AfD. Second, Salzborn (2016) describes the *JF* as having been ‘heavily responsible for spreading *völkisch* nationalism within the public sphere’ (46), we are interested in topics relating to issues around nationalism and national identity. Third, given the increased importance of immigration and integration issues for the political right (Abou-Chadi, Cohen, and Wagner 2021), especially since the refugee inflows of 2015/16 (Gessler and Hunger 2021), we analyse topics of ethnic and cultural threat and how these changed over time.

### **Party Politics**

The centre-conservative Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) have been the haven for the majority of German conservatives and have governed post-war Germany for 53 years of its 72-year existence. Before the ascent of the AfD, parties further to the right have at best enjoyed marginal success. These fringe parties have targeted far-right or outright fascist audiences:

The National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) caters to a mostly right-wing extremist clientele, although with anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation rhetoric (Sommer 2008). The NPD has repeatedly been monitored by German intelligence agencies due to its antidemocratic ambitions and it has already faced party ban proceedings twice. This has made it off-limits for many conservatives, along with other fringe alternatives such as Die Republikaner and Deutsche Volksunion, which enjoyed marginal local electoral successes in the 1980s and 90s. An exception has been the Party for a Rule of Law Offensive, also dubbed the Schill-party after its founder Ronald Schill. However, its success was limited to a short-lived governing coalition in Hamburg in the early 2000s, after which it sank into oblivion.

In turn, the CDU and CSU have struck a balance between moderate centrism and right-wing conservatism over time, although the relationship has been contentious (Dilling 2018; Wiliarty 2018). In particular, the promise that there shall be no democratically legitimated party to the right of the CDU/CSU, once given by CSU party leader Franz-Josef Strauß, has led to tensions. This became most evident during Angela Merkel's chancellorship, when the CSU leadership openly criticised her immigration policies (Wiliarty 2018). Her decision to admit refugees in 2015 led to a split not only between the sister parties but also within the CDU itself. The relationship between CDU and CSU was further strained due to the emergence of the AfD as a competitor for right-wing voters starting in 2013. The unfolding Eurozone crisis and large influx of refugees in the following years saw right-wing CDU/CSU voters and some politicians defect to the new party, along with voters of other far-right parties. After the AfD's early successes in state elections and the 2017 federal election, parts of the CDU/CSU have at times drawn on the AfD's policy positions to bring voters back to the CDU/CSU (Hertner 2021). This reflects a wider trend in European electoral politics (Abou-Chadi 2016; Han 2015). For example, Bavarian's minister-president Markus Söder (CSU) led his party's 2018 state election campaign with a strategy of symbolically strengthening a sense of Bavarian identity by mandating the installation of Christian crosses in all Bavarian public office buildings (Schäfers 2018).

Since 2013, the AfD's rise has led to new dynamics in the conservative spectrum and the German party system as a whole. Founded as the Wahlalternative 2013 with a fiscally conservative orientation, it first entered federal politics with strong opposition to the Greek bailout during the Eurozone crisis and the German government at that time (Berbair, Lewandowsky, and Siri 2015). Dominated by right-wing conservatism, it became a haven for right-wing voters dissatisfied with what they perceived as the CDU's drift to the left (Arzheimer 2015). The initial success of the party in local and state elections in 2014 led to an unprecedented euphoria on the right in post-war Germany and a rapid increase in the party's visibility. Yet, this

also meant an influx of increasingly anti-immigrant, nativist, and racist voices into the party's ranks, increasingly catering to an audience usually affiliated with extreme-right parties (Arzheimer and Berning 2019). The ensuing power struggle between these factions inside the party is ongoing, but extreme-right voices have gained the upper hand (Art 2018). Existing research shows that populism and opposition to mainstream parties in German far-right media increased after the federal elections of 2017 (Klawier, Prochazka, and Schweiger 2022; P. Müller and Freudenthaler 2022). Moreover, exposure to far-right news outlets correlates with voting for right-wing parties (Müller and Bach 2021).

Our first research question relates to the coverage of German parties in general, and the AfD in particular. The AfD resonates with a broad segment of the far right and is the first successful right-wing party in post-war Germany. Thus, we expect that *JF* features the AfD increasingly and prominently from its inception onward while coverage of other parties declines.

### **Nationalism**

The nationalist discourse within the post-war German far right can be traced along the fault line between Neo-Fascists and various strands of right-wing conservatism, the latter of which can be subsumed under the label New Right. This cleavage can be traced back to the changing nature of right-wing conservatism in the 1980s, specifically a New Right distancing itself from a fascist Old Right (Minkenberg 1992). *JF* clearly belongs to the New Right, both in its own and scholars' view (Braun, Geisler, and Gerster 2007; Salzborn 2016), which is why the focus here is on right-wing conservative identity discourse.

The New Right, having gained discursive influence throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, largely rejects liberalism and multiculturalism as well as established political institutions (Salzborn 2016). The New Right considers the '68 generation' their main ideological enemy, because they are considered the cultural mainstream and political elite in contemporary Germany (Betz 1990). Müller (1999) notes that the critique of liberalism is so dominant that the New Right actually falls short of articulating a coherent idea of national identity itself. Yet, anti-imperialist and anti-immigration stances are key to the fragmented notions of German identity of the New Right. At the same time, the New Right often borrows terminology from the political left, which Salzborn (2016) describes as a 'a political mimicry and an attempt to advance an intellectual meta-politics aiming at a conservative cultural revolution' (40). Generally, the New Right tends to sketch national identity in a piecemeal fashion that centres on an ethnically homogeneous nation state (Schedler 2016), national pride, and the goal of unrestrained German sovereignty (Pfahl-Traugher

1998). This is often historically motivated, as the *Kaiserreich* (the German monarchy between 1871 and 1918) and its leading figures fit the self-image of the New Right as a conservative elite and intellectual avant-garde (Betz 1990). Perceived positive historical role models are thus an important part of the New Right's conception of the German identity (Pechel 2007). In contrast, the obvious and indisputable atrocities of Nazi Germany only play a minor role. Actors of the New Right have repeatedly attempted to deny the Holocaust's historical singularity or have downplayed it as just one episode in a millennium of German history (J. Müller 1999; Prowe 1997). With its elitist conservative self-image, the New Right also frequently uses conservative Nazi resistance figures, such as Wehrmacht officer von Stauffenberg, as patriotic role models (Weiß 2017). Many among the New Right make a distinction between themselves and Nazi Germany's ideology by relying on pre-Third Reich far-right philosophers in the conservative revolutionary tradition, such as Ernst Jünger and Arthur Moeller van den Bruck (Weiß 2017). Pechel (2007) argues that *JF* promotes a 'traditional historical narrative of national heroes and heroic deeds, the separation of the Nazi regime from German society as well as historical relativisation, apportionment of guilt and perpetrator-victim reversal' (113). Further, the New Right has also acquired a decidedly populist tone, centring on the governing elite's treason upon the people (Weiß 2017). This recent spin manifests itself in the AfD's far-right populist election campaigns and legislative politics.

Our second research question concerns nationalism and Germany's history. Based on existing qualitative research (Braun and Vogt 2007; Pechel 2007; Salzborn 2016), we expect discourse on nationalism and on the political left to feature prominently in *JF*, with a particular rise in coverage on national identity after the AfD's inception, while historical topics mainly focus on aspects that allow for positive identification.

### **Cultural Threat**

As a final aspect, we are interested in cultural threat. Fear of demographic replacement and threats to a country's perceived ethnic and cultural homogeneity are among the key concerns of the far right (Abou-Chadi, Cohen, and Wagner 2021; Gessler and Hunger 2021). Accordingly, the New Right in Germany is often characterised by racist sentiments and rejection of immigration (Salzborn 2016). For example, Braun, Geisler, and Gerster (2007) argue that *JF* tolerates foreigners as long as they remain foreign and abroad, but 'as part of the German society, however, the foreign appears as a constant threat' (27). Similarly, Klawier, Prochazka, and Schweiger (2022) show that *JF* primarily frames immigration as threatening by focusing on aspects such as crime.



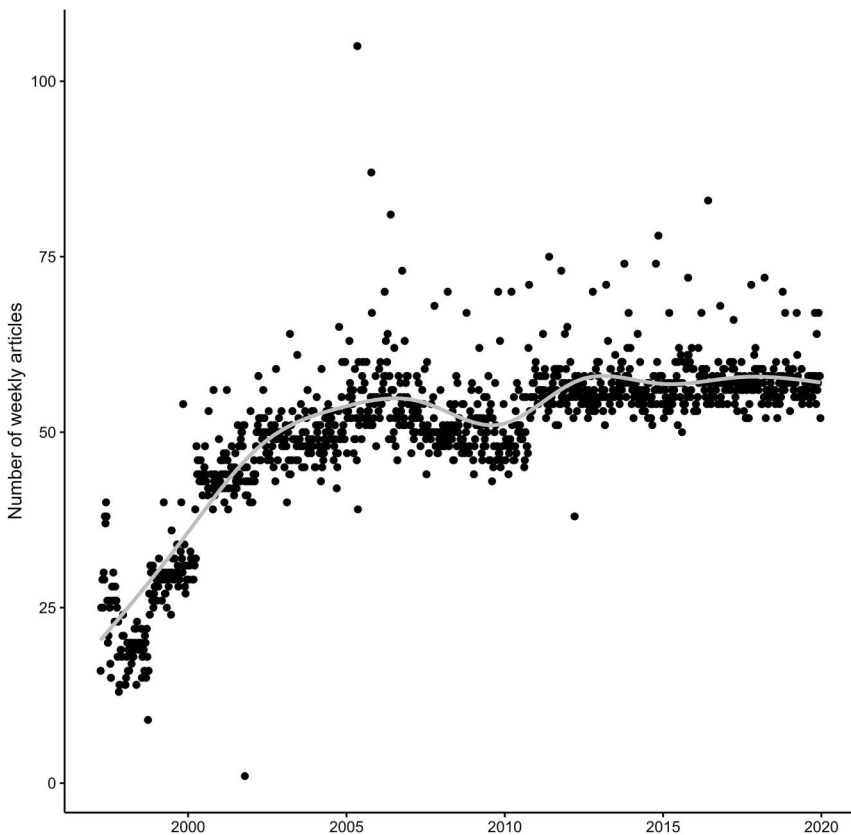
The literature often explains out-group hostility with the perception that newcomers and minority members are threatening the status quo (Blumer 1958). Such perceived threats are more likely when immigrants originate from countries that are seen as culturally distant from one's own society. Importantly, threat perceptions often do not correspond to actual conditions (Hjerm 2007), but are the result of the negative framing of immigrants and minorities by the media (Meeusen and Jacobs 2017; Meltzer et al. 2020). Studies on mainstream media indicate that potentially threat-inducing aspects such as public safety and economic consequences play an important role in news about immigration (Czymara and van Klingeren 2022; Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017; Jacobs et al. 2018; Lawlor 2015). Meeusen and Jacobs (2017) show that such reporting matters: minority groups depicted in a negative way or framed as criminal are also evaluated as least favourable by the public. Similarly, negative tone of immigration news (Schemer 2012; Schlueter and Davidov 2013) or issue salience are also associated with anti-immigration attitudes (Czymara and Dochow 2018; Van Klingeren et al. 2015) and vote intention for anti-immigration parties (Boomgaarden and Vliegthart 2007). While these considerations apply to mass media in general, New Right media are particularly likely to frame immigration and ethnic minorities as threatening (Braun, Geisler, and Gerster 2007; von Nordheim, Müller, and Scheppe 2019).

In recent years, the German right has increasingly politicised immigration (Hutter and Kriesi 2021) and arguments of the far right have diffused into the political mainstream (Abou-Chadi and Krause 2020). The climate among the far right became particularly hostile with the inflow of refugees to Europe in 2015 (Salzborn 2016; von Nordheim, Müller, and Scheppe 2019). At more than a million, the number of first-time asylum applications was five times as large in Germany as compared to other EU countries in 2015 and 2016 (Burmamann and Valeyathepillay 2017). The situation intensified after refugees were connected to the sexual assaults in Germany on New Year's Eve in 2015/16, which were vividly discussed among the far-right in Germany (Czymara and Schmidt-Catran 2017, 737 f.) and caused a spike in anti-refugee violence (Frey 2020). Moreover, statements in the media by anti-immigration politicians following Islamist terror attacks also increased the likelihood of violent attacks against refugees in Germany (Jäckle and König 2018). We thus expect that immigration-related topics were particularly prevalent during the refugee inflow in late 2015. Moreover, we expect that *JF* increasingly focused on refugees and Muslim immigrants as a threat to German society. Based on the years 2015/16, von Nordheim, Müller, and Scheppe (2019) show that *JF* tends to emphasise the distinctions between 'Muslim immigrants' and 'Christian natives', constructing 'a grand "we" that is set against Muslim aliens who pose a threat to the Christian

majority' (von Nordheim, Müller, and Scheppe 2019, 50). As a final aim, we compare trends in the amount of reporting on Christianity ('us') and Islam ('them').

## Data

*Junge Freiheit* provides articles published in its print edition since March 1997 openly on its website.<sup>2</sup> We downloaded a comprehensive data set covering 24 years, with 50 to 51 issues per year. Our aim is to show what readers of *JF* were exposed to during this period. Thus, we do not remove any content a priori except for duplicates and articles with missing date information. This allows us to examine how present a given topic is in the output of *JF* in general, and should proxy the experience of a reader during this period. Our final dataset consists of 56,726 unique documents.



**Figure 2.** Trend in published articles.

Figure 2 shows that the number of articles rose successively from the late 1990s to 2005. For the very beginning of our investigated period, this is partly due to the fact that not all articles were yet available in the archive. However, even when taking these missing articles into account, the upward trend in early years remains. From 2005 on, the number of weekly articles stabilises at about 57. As discussed above, *JF* saw substantial circulation growth during this time (cf. Figure 1).

## Method

All pre-processing and analyses were conducted in *R*.<sup>3</sup> We deleted stop words, terms occurring in more than 20 per cent or in less than one percent of all articles, and non-letter characters and stemmed terms using Benoit et al. (2018). We then employed structural topic modelling (STM) from Roberts, Stewart, and Tingley (2019) to identify the dominant topics in these articles. STM is an unsupervised machine-learning method that identifies dominant word clusters in the data without any restrictions apart from the number of topics (see below). It relies on the bag-of-words assumption that each term in a text contributes to its meaning independent of its position (Boumans and Trilling 2016). Topic here thus refers to words that typically cluster together and represent a latent theme. It is likely that most articles in *JF* consist of various topics simultaneously, for example refugees, nationalism, and the economic consequences of immigration. Topic modelling is especially suited for the analysis of such texts (Grimmer and Stewart 2013, 272). By bridging quantitative and qualitative approaches, topic models can be particularly helpful for discourse analysis (Jacobs and Tschötschel 2019).

In an iterative process, STM yields two probability distributions: first, the term probability for each topic and, second, the topic probability for each article. The first probability captures how likely a term is in a topic, theoretically ranging from zero (term certainly does not pertain to the topic) to one (term certainly pertains to the topic). The second probability includes the likelihood that a topic is part of an article based on the words used in the article. This probability also potentially ranges from zero (topic does not appear in the article at all) to one (article consists only of this topic). Each topic consists of all terms, but to varying probabilities, and each article consists of all topics, but with a varying probability. Moreover, the probabilities of all terms belonging to a topic sum up to one, as do the probabilities of all topics belonging to an article. This implies that, within an article, a higher probability of one topic means a lower probability of at least one other topic (Grimmer and Stewart 2013).

The main choice one has to make when running topic models is the number of topics the machine should identify. To make an informed,

inductive choice, we ran models with different numbers of topics, ranging from 10 to 150 (Jacobs and Tschötschel 2019). We then calculated semantic coherence and exclusivity and plotted both against each other (see Figure A1 in the appendix). Semantic coherence refers to the co-occurrence of a topic's most probable terms and 'correlates well with human judgment of topic quality' (Roberts, Stewart, and Tingley 2019, 11). As semantic coherence is generally high in case of few topics with many very common words, we examined it together with exclusivity, which captures whether a topic's most probable terms are unlikely to co-occur with those of other topics (Roberts, Stewart, and Tingley 2019, 12). Maximising semantic coherence and exclusivity simultaneously pointed toward a model with either 40 or 50 topics. While the model with 40 topics would be more parsimonious, we compared different models and chose the model with 50 topics because it allowed for the distinguishing of theoretically relevant topics (for example: Islam and immigration). We also checked models with more than 50 topics, but these did not lead to relevant new insights. Based on the final model, coherence and exclusivity are relatively high for all topics that are relevant for this study, as Figure A2 in the appendix displays (Table A1 in the appendix shows information for all topics). We allowed the topic probabilities to vary over time by including the publication date as a smooth term into the function (Roberts, Stewart, and Tingley 2019).

We assigned names for each topic based on its most probable terms and articles, i.e. articles that mostly consisted of this topic. Both authors then decided together on the meaning of the topic and chose a name that represents this meaning. As is usual with journalistic texts (Jacobi, Van Atteveldt, and Welbers 2016, 11), we find some irrelevant topics, such as book, music, and movie reviews, or re-occurring op-eds or interview series.<sup>4</sup> While discussing all topics is clearly beyond the scope of a single paper, we will focus on topics that relate to the three domains of party politics, nationalism, and cultural threat. In order to estimate their overall salience and changes therein, however, it is necessary to include all other content in our statistical models as well.

## Results

### *Overview of the Content of Junge Freiheit*

We identify four topics related to political parties, six related to nationalism, and four related to cultural threat. We will discuss these topics in depth below. The party and the nationalism topics each make up about 10 per cent of the overall content of the *JF*, the cultural threat topics together amount to five percent of all content. Somewhat surprisingly, cultural threat is thus not a highly prevalent theme averaged over the whole time

span. Figure A3 in the appendix shows the average topic probabilities for all 50 topics. Of all relevant topics of this study, the biggest ones are those relating to parties and one on Ideology (see below). In sum, the topics of this paper resemble roughly a quarter of the overall print output of the *JF*. Figure A4 in the annex shows how the topics connect to each other.

### Party Politics

The first set of topics relates to politics and includes the conservative-centrist *CDU/CSU*, the other *major parties* (Social Democrats, Greens, and Free Liberals), the right-wing *AfD*, and other minor *far-right parties* (Republicans, *NPD*, Party for a Rule of Law Offensive). Table 1 gives an overview of the relative frequencies of these topics and their most probable terms and articles.<sup>5</sup>

Strikingly, the *AfD* is already the party the *JF* writes about most, ranking as the 10th topic overall. This is particularly remarkable since the *AfD* has existed for only 6 years of the 24-year period of investigation. Accordingly, many articles of this topic deal with issues related to the establishment of the party (for example: Ahead of second party convention, *AfD* spokesman specifies party's stance on Islam, 08 Nov 2013), important changes in its leadership, or in its ideological alignment (for example: The outcome of the ongoing dispute in the Executive Board will determine what role Bernd Lucke [Note: party founder] will play in the future (28 Nov 2014) or The dispute over the future leadership structure brings the euro critics to the brink of a split immediately before the party convention in Bremen (09 Jan 2015)). With a 2.8 per cent probability, the *AfD*'s prominence does not only surpass that of the *CDU/CSU* (2.1 per cent) but even that of all other major parties *combined* (2.6 per cent).

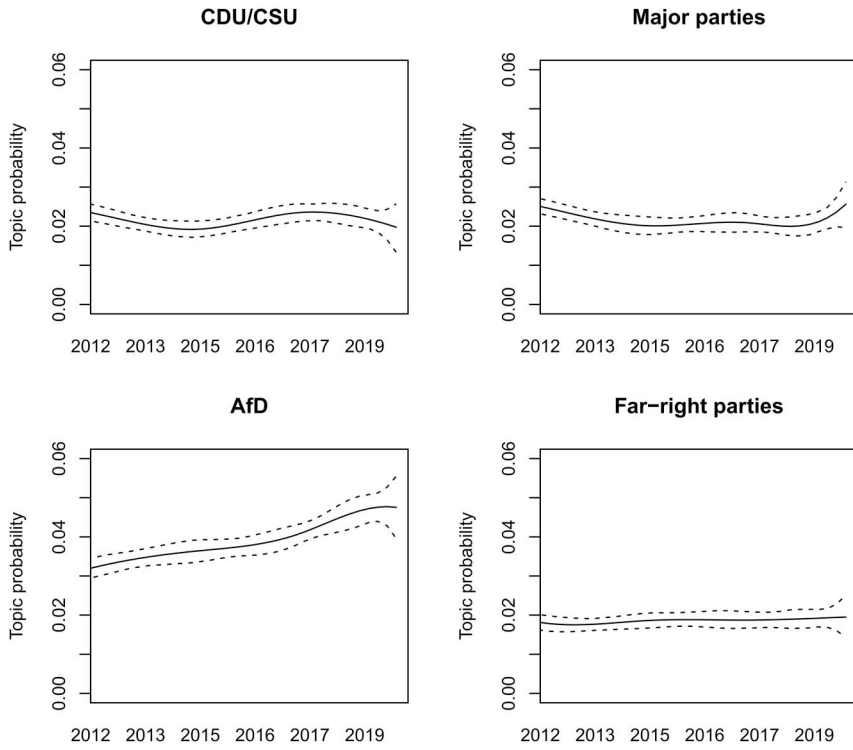
The dominance of the *AfD* is also evident in Figure 3, which plots the topic proportions of the four party topics over time. The plot starts in September 2012 when the *Wahlalternative 2013*, the predecessor of the *AfD*, was officially founded. We see a clear trend in Figure 3: ever since its establishment, the *AfD* dominates the content of *JF* and this tendency increases over time, as lower left panel of Figure 3 shows. In contrast, the prevalence of other parties is relatively stable at about 2 per cent. With more than 4 per cent, the *AfD* topic is more than twice as prominent in *JF* as any of the other political party topics from mid-2017 onwards. Thus, the average proportion of the *AfD* topic shown in Table 1 is an overly conservative estimate of the overall dominance of the party since its foundation in 2012.

Looking at the time before 2013 (Figure A5 in the appendix) shows other far-right parties were more prominently discussed in the late 1990s but their presence in the *JF* declined already in the early 2000s and has remained below 2 per cent since the establishment of the *AfD*. The *CDU* was not



**Table 1.** Political party topics.

	CDU/CSU	Major parties	AFD	Far-right parties
Probability	0.0210	0.0264	0.0283	0.0200
Rank	18/50	11/50	10/50	22/50
Terms	cdu merkel csu union kohl angela chancellor	greens spd fdp red schrüder coalition cdu	afd member delegate chair parliamentary group bundestag criticism	election hamburg saxony schill baden republikaner württemberg
Examples (publication date)	Leadership crisis: The traditional political Ash Wednesday in Passau made clear how thin the CSU's personnel cover is (15.02.08)  Horst Seehofer has dared a clear new beginning with his personnel policy and initiated a generational change in the party (07.11.08)  Defeat in the dispute over nuclear phase-out (13.01.06)	Just in time for the hot phase of the state election campaign, SPD and Greens forge an alliance against Prime Minister Jürgen Rüttgers (16.04.10)  Mining as a contentious issue (18.04.08)  Even two weeks after the state elections, it is not yet clear which coalition will govern the Rhine and Ruhr in future (21.05.10)	AFD: There is much suggesting that the directional dispute will enter its decisive phase in the coming week (15.05.15)  AFD Federal Executive Board Warns Björn Höcke: On probation (25.12.15)	Republicans: Asserted as strongest right-wing party (02.10.98)  Home state: Local elections in Baden-Württemberg (04.06.04)
			Party spokesman Bernd Lucke causes irritation with an admission ban for ex-members of the Islam-critical Die Freiheit party (11.10.13)	Rolf Schlierer: [right-wing politician] elected to Stuttgart city council (18.06.04)



**Figure 3.** Trend of political party topics.

discussed more before the AfD was founded. Throughout the whole investigated period, the CDU topic fluctuates between roughly 2 to 2.5 per cent. Other major parties were more present in the *JF* during the time of the government coalition between the Social Democrats and the Green Party 1998 to 2002 but then declined. Hence, it seems that, at least in the decade before the establishment of the AfD, the *JF* does not seem to have been aligned with any right-wing or conservative party in particular. Rather it seemed to have spoken to right-wing voters without parliamentary representation. The *JF* became unprecedentedly partisan with the establishment of the AfD and has remained like this since.

### **Nationalism**

To examine *JF*'s reporting on nationalism and national identity, we look at six topics, two ideological (*national identity* and *ideology*) and four historical (*Nazi Germany*, *German Empire*, *Nazi resistance*, and *GDR* (German Democratic Republic, former East Germany)). This relatively strong focus on the national history is noticeable for a newspaper. These topics are shown in



**Table 2.** Nationalism topics.

	National identity	Ideology	GDR (German Democratic Republic)	Nazi Germany	German Empire	Nazi resistance
Probability Rank	0.0124 38/50	0.0304 8/50	0.0167 27	0.0113 40/50	0.0167 28/50	0.0035 50/50
Terms	Volk [people] national nation identity	left conservative social democracy	gdr west sed (GDR ruling party) federal republic (West Germany)	august hitler resistance ns [abbreviation for national socialism]	friedrich king empire [Reich] wilhelm	july betrayal summer may
Examples (publication date)	netherlands culture pride Flanders' quest for independence is an example to all European peoples (24.08.12)	democrats liberal right Renaissance of the nation states (11.01.08)	east stasi reunification Gysi as keynote speaker in Leipzig: Mockery of the SED victims (05.07.19)	national socialist beck count 20 July 1944: The course and failure of Operation Valkyrie (18.07.14)	emperor prussian history The equestrian statue of Frederick the Great has returned to its original home (17.11.00)	june father finally Marianne Meyer-Krahmer, daughter of the resistance fighter Carl Goerdeler, about her father and 20 July 1944 (16.07.04)
	The right of the nation (19.06.98)	Socialism has a future (19.09.97)	Unity as an agenda (12.11.99)	Register of persons [in the conservative Nazi resistance 1944] (16.07.04)	Prussia's history (23.02.07)	Was 20 July treason? Books are still being published today that try to prove this (13.07.12)
	The new patriotism (07.01.05)	The right-left attribution is abused (04.05.12)	Carl-Wolfgang Holzappel: For Germany (13.06.03)	Focal Points and Actors of 20 July 1944 (20.07.07)	750 years ago, the last Staufier, Konradin, was executed in Naples: End of German rule in Sicily (26.10.18)	The wasted legacy (28.07.00)



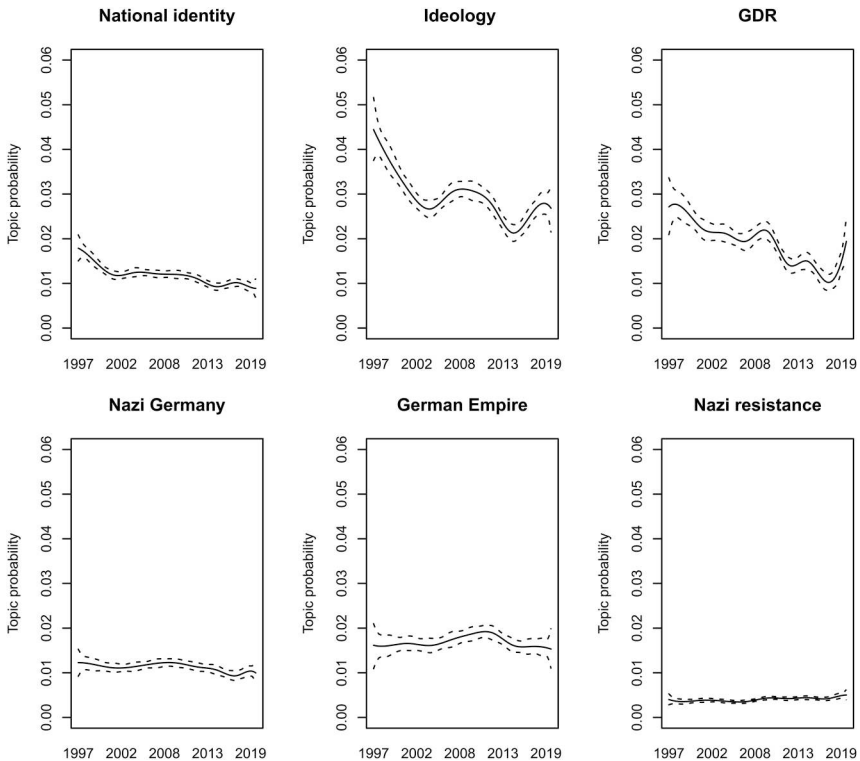
**Table 2.** *Ideology* and *national identity* deserve special attention because both could feature prominently in the New Right's self-conception. The topic *national identity* encompasses the *völkisch* nationalism that characterises *JF* (Salzborn 2016, 46), as it includes terms such as *Volk*, nation, identity, culture, and pride. It deals with Germans as one people (*Volk*), that shares a common culture and history, which also separates it from other people. Titles of articles in this topic include those such as: National Consciousness: No One Wants the European Einheitsmensch, German history as an opportunity, and In search of the Volk. Thus, the idea of a German *Volk* is often connected with nationalism and pride. However, with a probability of 1.8 per cent this topic only ranks 38th out of 50. The topic we labelled *Ideology* consists of terms such as *left*, *right*, *conservative*, or *liberal*. As these terms demonstrate, this topic includes *JF*'s understanding of conservatism, often as compared to the left. Many articles on the topic discuss the ideological underpinnings of conservatism, such as nationalism (Renaissance of the Nation States, 11 Jan 2008). Others discuss ideas and philosophies from the left, for example stating: The grandchildren of Critical Theory in the radical left have not further developed the theoretical approach of the 'Dialectic of Enlightenment' but have trivialised and flattened it (in: The misery of metaphysics, 10 May 2002). Interestingly, with a probability of 3 per cent the *ideology* topic is much more prevalent than the *national identity* topic.

Given Germany's history of National Socialism, we expected historical topics to play an important role for the nationalism of Germany's New Right (Pechel 2007). We identify two topics in our data that refer directly to the time of National Socialism (*Nazi Germany* and *Nazi resistance*), and a third that deals with the *Kaiserreich* (*German Empire*). In contrast to the democratic Weimar Republic (1919–1933), the monarchy of the *Kaiserreich* is often a positive reference for the German right. The relative frequencies of the empirical topics confirm this: while the *Nazi Germany* only appears in 1.1 per cent of all content and ranks as the 40th most probable topic overall, the *German Empire* is featured in 1.7 per cent and ranks 28th out of 50. The rather strong presence of the *German Empire* topic also implies that the positive counterexample to fascism during National-Socialism is not the German democracy of the Weimar Republic, but the monarchy of the German Empire. This mirrors the right-wing discourse in early post-war Germany, which viewed the Empire as a positive counter-example to Nazi-Germany (Evans 1987). While clearly a prominent point of view in early post-war Germany, it is somewhat surprising to see that monarchism and specifically the German empire are still discussed this frequently.

Articles on *Nazi Germany* mention the atrocities of Nazi Germany, but often rather descriptively. For example, the terms *Holocaust* or *war* do not appear frequently within this topic. Instead, several articles of this topic

focus on conservative army officers' resistance against the Hitler regime. There is even a topic that represents this issue, which we have labelled *Nazi resistance*, although this is the least-often occurring topic of our model, with an average probability of merely 0.3 per cent. Articles in the *Nazi resistance* topic deal with the failed attempt of Wehrmacht officer von Stauffenberg to assassinate Hitler in 1944. Some of the titles of articles in the *Nazi resistance* topic already indicate how this resistance is framed: Patriotic Role Models (16 July 2004), They Died for Germany (20 July 2019), For the Honour of the Nation: Stauffenberg's Example Towers above Everything Else (20 July 2007).

The GDR topic, lastly, deals with the former German Democratic Republic and issues around the Reunification of both Germanies in 1990. These articles are clearly negative toward the former East German state and Real Socialism. Some address civic resistance against the dictatorial regime, such as Standing up to the dictatorship: Coming to terms with the past: For decades, numerous organisations have been taking care of the victims of the SED regime and dealing with the history of the GDR (17 Aug 2007).



**Figure 4.** Trends of nationalism-related topics.

Figure 4 shows that the *national identity* topic appears a bit more during the beginning of our period, but then stabilises at a lower level. This is not in line with our theoretical expectation that the national identity topic gains more prominence after the rise of the AfD. The *Ideology* topic occurred more frequently during the late 1990s, but then decreased until 2004, when it rose again until 2009. Hence, right-wing debates about the political left are more frequent than discussions of national pride at all points, but also tend to rise and fall. Figure 4 also shows that the historical topics did not fluctuate much over time. At all points, *German Empire* has the highest topic probability, followed by *Nazi Germany*, followed by *Nazi resistance*. The presence of the GDR topic decreased over time, although there is reversed trend at the end of our period.

### Cultural Threat

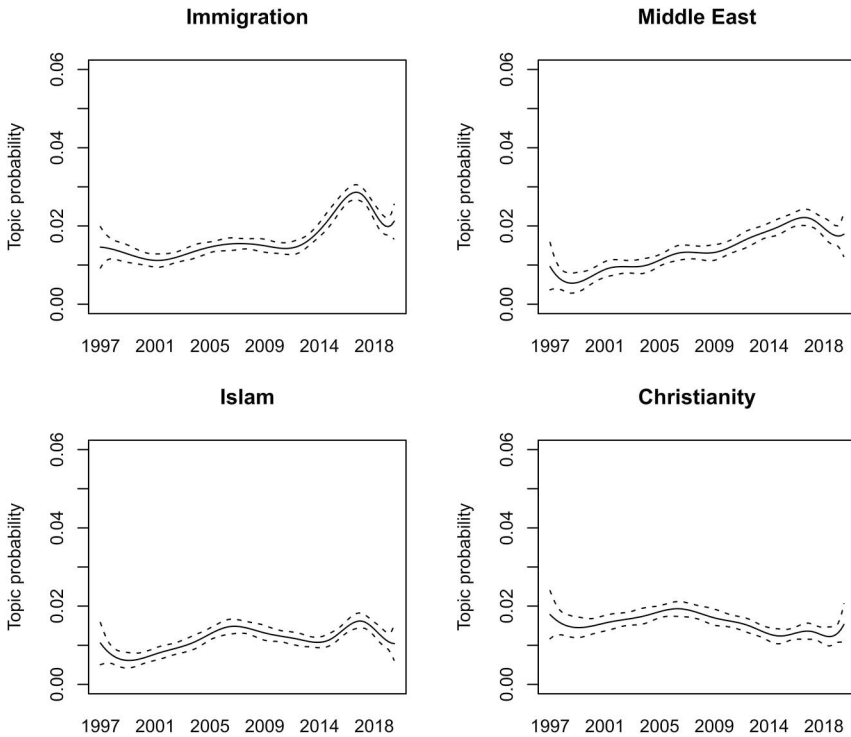
We identify three topics that are related to the concept of cultural and ethnic threat: *Immigration*, *Middle East*, and *Islam*. Table 3 gives an overview of these topics, as well as the *Christianity* topic, which we use as a reference for the *Islam* topic. As expected, immigration is primarily covered in a threatening matter, for example by describing immigrants as illegal or criminals (The new crime statistics prove it: Many criminals came to Germany with the influx of refugees, 28 Apr 2017). In addition, the *JF* mostly casts refugee applications as bogus, which is summarised by the title: Cheaters welcome (20 Aug 2019), which mocks the slogan ‘refugees welcome’.

Averaged over the whole period, these four topics were not very present in the content of *JF*, with no topic having a probability above 1.6 per cent and with all raking below 30 out of 50. However, Figure 5 reveals strong temporal variation. Before 2015, immigration played only a minor role in *JF*, making up 1 to 1.5 per cent of all content (represented by the upper left panel in Figure 5). This picture changed significantly with the sudden inflow of refugees. At its peak in early 2016, the probability of the *immigration* topic almost tripled, making it one of the most dominant topics during this time. The attention levelled off after 2016 but remained on a higher level compared to pre-2015.

As most refugees originate from Muslim-majority countries and many are Muslims themselves, *immigration* was also frequently connected with *Islam* (also see Figure A4 in the Appendix). Articles about *Islam* are typically about Islamisation, political Islam, and religious fundamentalism, for example: Misunderstood tolerance: Germany is being Islamised, but politicians ignore the problems (16 Jun 2017) or A New Reconquista under reversed signs (08 Aug 2003). Further, the *Islam* topic correlates with the *Middle East* topic, which is where many recent refugees in Europe originate from. Interestingly though, the *Islam* topic is not very present in *JF* overall

**Table 3.** Cultural threat topics.

	Immigration	Middle East	Islam	Christianity
<u>Probability</u>	0.0160	0.0112	0.0098	0.0138
<u>Rank</u>	31/50	41/50	45/50	35/50
<u>Terms</u>	foreign [country] turkish turkey refugee immigration illegal integration	iran al syria government arab president is [Islamic State]	islam muslim religion muslem culture islamist	church catholic christian pope christ evangelical faith
<u>Examples (publication date)</u>	Cheaters welcome (20.09.19)	Russian arms deliveries cause irritation (24.05.13)  Yemen: In the dispute with Saudi Arabia, the Shiite Huthis show surprising resistance (11.05.18) International struggle for power and influence (15.06.12)	The Western trivialisation of religion will not work with Islam (14.10.16)  For the masses, violence counts (05.07.19)  Rita Breuer on Christians in the Islamic World (17.07.15)	Christians around the world pay tribute to the Pope (08.04.05)  Eucharist: German bishops have turned to Rome to clarify a central question of the Catholic faith (13.04.18) Conservatives call for spiritual renewal (19.12.08)
	The new crime statistics prove it: Many criminals came to Germany with the influx of refugees (28.04.17) The Federal Government's current migration report reveals surprising results (08.02.13)			



**Figure 5.** Trends of cultural threat related topics.

and only ranks 45th of all 50 topics. This is in contrast to our expectations. As [Figure 5](#) shows, both the *Islam* (lower left panel) and the *Middle East* (upper right panel) topics follow similar trends as the *Immigration* topic. Hence, the refugee inflow also gave rise to the *Islam* and the *Middle East* topics, with both peaking in early 2016. In contrast, the *Christianity* topic, which correlates with *Islam* but not strongly with *immigration* or *Middle East* (Figure A4 in the Appendix), actually decreased from about 2007 onward (lower right line in [Figure 5](#)).

## Discussion and Conclusion

Our analysis of a rich dataset of roughly 57,000 unique articles published in the right-wing weekly newspaper *Junge Freiheit* between 1997 and 2019 allows us to map the development of right-wing discourse in Germany in the last two decades. The results show that *JF* expanded steadily over this period. While we quantify developments relative to *all* other content, we focus on three domains in particular: party politics, nationalism, and cultural threat.

Regarding our first research question, we have shown that political parties are frequently discussed. Combined, all political party topics sum up to almost 10 per cent of all content that has been published in *JF* during this period. This is perhaps similar to mainstream newspapers. However, *which* political parties are covered is very different from mainstream media. The relatively young right-wing party AfD is already being discussed more than any other party at all times. Excluding the centre-conservative CDU, which was in government during most of the investigated period, the AfD even received more attention than all other parties combined. This strongly corroborates qualitative research arguing that the *JF* ‘has effectively “offered itself as an unofficial mouthpiece of the AfD”’ (Kellershohn cited in Salzborn 2016). If the trend we observed in the data is not going to reverse in the future - and there is no reason to assume it will - the dominance of the AfD vis-à-vis all other parties is likely to amplify even further, which may affect voting (Müller and Bach 2021).

Our second research question concerned nationalism and national identity. While our model identified a *national identity* topic that one could associate with *völkisch* sentiments, it occurred surprisingly rarely in our data. Content on the left, which the New Right sees as its political and ideological enemy, occurred more frequently. Existing qualitative research points to two explanations for this finding. First, the ‘left mainstream’ is the ‘enemy number one’ of the New Right (Braun, Geisler, and Gerster 2007, 22), and thus plays an even more important role than national pride. Second, the New Right is trying to become part of the political mainstream through political mimicry and terminological appropriations from the left (Salzborn 2016, 40).

In addition, we were interested in *JF*’s references to Germany’s history. We were able to identify several distinct topics related to German history. The German Empire received somewhat more attention than either the Third Reich or the conservative resistance against Nazi Germany. In line with qualitative findings from existing research, we find that when historical topics are addressed, they serve as a way to decriminalise Germany’s history and portray Germany as a historical victim (Pechel 2007). Our results further show that the presence of historical topics is remarkably stable over time. These findings are particularly relevant for scholarship on the German far right, the relationships between its media and political parties, and its identity politics as well.

Finally, topics related to cultural threat and immigration were boosted by the refugee influx of 2015/16, with the immigration topic almost tripling in early 2016. The framing of immigration in *JF* was clearly negative (Braun, Geisler, and Gerster 2007; Czymara 2023; von Nordheim, Müller, and Scheppe 2019) and comparable to the rhetoric of far-right, anti-immigrant movements (Schwemmer 2021) and parties. Notably, the proliferating anti-immigrant violence in 2015/16 (Frey 2020; Jäckle and König 2018)

was hardly addressed by *JF*. Interestingly, *JF*'s new focus on immigrants, refugees, and Muslims was accompanied by a declining interest in Christianity. The New Right often understands itself as the defender of Europe's Christian tradition. Based on our findings, however, it appears that this is less a fight *for* Christianity than *against* Islam. This finding further corroborates the above-reached conclusion that *JF* has advanced to become something akin to the unofficial 'mouthpiece' of the AfD. This finding should also be relevant in the broader European context, particularly in a comparative sense: as Germany is hardly the only country with a sizable Muslim minority, our results lend themselves to comparison with the representation of cultural threat in other European far-right media outlets.

Prior research has argued that the New Right is mostly missing a coherent ideology (Müller 1999). Our results corroborate this: The most prevalent topic in our Nationalism category primarily deals with the political opponent: The Left (Betz 1990). Over time, this topic seems to be replaced by the emergence of the AfD and cultural-threat topics. While the AfD is as a 'positive' kind of identity, the latter can again be viewed as a 'negative' self-identification that only works in demarcation to the other. Thus, the New Right seems to a large degree be defined by what it is against. The topics we identified further point to the key role *JF* plays within the far-right media environment. It bridges the gap between the relatively marginal elitist national conservatism and the populist right. In doing so, it retains a focus on ideological debates and gives space to prominent New Right theorists, while keeping a populist appeal via headlines and topic selection. Thus, it is more of an intellectual medium than other popular far-right publications, which lack such aspirations.

Our aim was to show how right-wing media reporting in Germany has developed, based on rich data over a relatively long period. Nevertheless, our study has limitations. Perhaps most crucially, it is limited in scope in various ways. First, our models mainly present descriptive trends. While we tried to give meaning to the topics by quoting relevant articles and thus bridging qualitative and quantitative approaches, in-depth discussion of content is limited due to the large corpus we investigate. This makes it difficult, for example, to assess the amount of deintellectualisation that Salzborn (2016) ascribes to *JF* in the late 1990s. Second, it is unknown how well *JF* represents right-wing media across different political contexts. Future research may want to take a comparative perspective and analyse differences in the content of right-wing media across countries with different histories or political systems. More broadly, we hinted at the correlation of the increasing circulation numbers of *JF*, the establishment and electoral success of the AfD, and the temporal popularity of, for example, the PEGIDA movement. However, any causal attribution is shaky here. Future research might want to tackle this issue, for example, by employing a natural experiment

design. The study of Jäckle and König (2018) is a promising step in this direction.

In sum, our results show that, while apologetic content about Germany's history occurs rather stable over time (Pechel 2007), other discourses ebb and flow. The amount of attention paid to the political left, which used to be pivotal for the New Right (Braun, Geisler, and Gerster 2007; Salzborn 2016), lost relevance according to our data. At the same time, the salience of topics related to cultural threat was boosted by the refugee inflow of 2015/16. Similarly, the establishment of the AfD had an enormous impact on *JF*. Given the growing circulation of *JF*, this strategy seems to work in terms of increased outreach, and thus discursive power.

## Notes

1. All translations by the authors.
2. The data do not include readers' letters, event calendars, advertisements, or other documents that are not articles. Furthermore, note that not all articles from earlier years are available in the archive, so that we have access to the complete issues from 1999 on. However, only a few articles are missing from issues throughout 1997 and 1998 and we have no reason to assume those that are missing are systematic with respect to content. One should nevertheless keep this in mind when we discuss the beginning of our period of investigation.
3. Code is available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/V9E36>; the scraper is accessible at <https://github.com/leo-bauer/junge-freiheit-scraper>.
4. We did not delete this content because, first, our goal is to analyse shares and trends in the *overall* content published in the *Junge Freiheit* and deleting some parts a priori would disable us from doing so. Second, as topic models are mixed membership models, several of these texts are likely to not only contribute to, e.g. op-ed or review topics but also theoretically relevant topics such as *AfD* or *Islam*.
5. Note that our approach does not count the citations of party representatives but rather how much of each article focuses on a party (i.e. the probability that a party topic is included in an article).

## Acknowledgments

We presented this paper at the 7th International Conference on Computational Social Science IC2S2. We thank all discussants there as well as the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).



## SUPPLEMENTAL DATA AND RESEARCH MATERIALS

Supplemental data for this article can be accessed on the Taylor & Francis website, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2023.2231353>.

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