



# ON THE SUCCESS AND FAILURE OF THE GERMAN NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC PARTY'S "EASTWARD" STRATEGY IN THE VOIGT ERA

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## Abstract

Due to development obstacles in the western region of Germany, after taking office in 1996, Voigt adopted the "eastward" strategy, using the eastern region as a breakthrough point. The National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) rapidly expanded its membership by opening its doors to far-right organizations, attracted a large number of young activists through effective propaganda and mobilization, and enhanced the activism and organizing ability of its cadres through a series of large-scale activities. Relying on the dense grass-roots organization, the NPD has carried out meticulous community work, closely connected with voters, and successfully built up an image of being a pro-people and "normal party", which has laid a solid foundation for its success in the elections of the local councils and the state parliaments. However, by deploying a large number of its cadres and core organization in the East, where its electoral successes have almost invariably been achieved, the NPD has gradually degenerated into a "regional party" and an "eastern party".

## Keywords

The National Democratic Party of Germany, "Eastward" strategy, Voigt, Adjustment

## I. Introduction

On March 23, 1996, Udo Voigt was elected as the fifth Federal Party Chairman of the NPD, defeating Deckert by a narrow margin of 88 votes to 83 votes. The NPD at that time was facing a profound leadership crisis, with many contradictions and quarrels among the party's senior cadres, and proposals for the dissolution of the whole party had been put forward several times. In addition, since the reunification of the two German states, the number of members of the NPD had declined sharply, from 6,500 in 1990 to 3,500 in 1996. The NPD, which is at an all-time low, has also had no electoral success, with its Landtag election vote share hovering between 0.1% and 0.3% for a long time, and the highest it ever achieved was 0.7% in the 1991 Hamburg Landtag election. In 1969, the NPD had a membership of 28,000, and held seats in 7 of the 11 state parliaments of the Federal Republic of Germany. In the 1969 federal parliamentary elections, the NPD won 4.3% of the votes, and almost broke through the "five-percent hurdle" to enter the Federal Assembly (Bundestag).

Given that the development of the NPD in western Germany was difficult to make breakthroughs, after taking office, Voigt adopted the "eastward" strategy and shifted the focus of the party's work to the eastern region of Germany. In just a few years, he achieved rapid development in terms of party membership, organizational construction, and other aspects. The NPD also won the favor of the community voters through a variety of pro-people ways, and successfully shaped its own concern for regional affairs of the "normal party" image, and then achieved a series of successes in the election of the regional parliaments and the state parliaments, realizing the re-emergence of the NPD. The specific contents of the "eastward" strategy include the following points.

## II. Adjustment of organizational policies

### *1. The eastward movement of key organizational structures and leadership*

In order to implement its "eastward" strategy, the NPD moved its main leadership and offices to the east. Firstly, because of the lower real estate prices in the East, the NPD bought a farm and 50 hectares of land in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania at once. Secondly, because of the enormous potential for political development in the east, especially in small cities and rural areas. In 2002 the federal office of the NPD was relocated from Stuttgart, Baden-

Wurttemberg in the west, to Berlin. Deutsche Stimme, the NPD's party newspaper, was originally located in the small village of Sinning in the western state of Bavaria, but was later moved to Riesa in Saxony, along with the federal office of the NPD youth organization, the Young Democrats. The relocation of the core of the NPD to the East thus brought a number of advantages to its work in the eastern new Länder, especially Saxony, and laid the foundations for its resurgence.

### **2. New institutions for party education and training**

In order to improve the theoretical quality of the party's cadres and their ability to fight in everyday politics, the NPD has set up a number of "National Democratic Education Centers" in Chemnitz (Saxony), Koepenick (Berlin), and Anklam (Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania). Following the success of the Saxon parliamentary elections in 2004, the NPD placed greater emphasis on mobilization and agitation in the eastern part of the country, and established a "Home Towns and National Identity Education Office" in Saxony to strengthen political propaganda and the dissemination of ultranationalist ideology in the region. In 2007, the NPD set up an "Ethnic Training Office" for the Young Democrats in order to train young cadres for the future, as well as to further its work with university students.

### **3. Openness to other extreme right-wing organizations and significant expansion of young members**

From the mid-1970s to the early 1990s, the top echelons of the NPD were repulsed by violent organizations such as neo-Nazis and skinheads, and banned members of their own party and members of the Young Democrats from joining or cooperating with these organizations. As late as 1992, the NPD council refused to cooperate with the more influential Free German Workers' Party (FGW), the Alternative for Germany (AfD), and the Nationalist Front (FNV) in the east. After Voigt took office, the NPD began to cooperate with other far-right forces in an effort to build a "nationalist extra-courtroom opposition" in order to rapidly increase its power. With the help of neo-Nazis, the NPD organized a series of large-scale demonstrations in the eastern part of the country, the largest of which was the 2009 demonstration commemorating the 65th anniversary of the bombing of Dresden, in which 6,500 far-right-wingers took part (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2010. P. 62). On the one hand, these street actions demonstrated the organizational strength and operational capacity of the NPD, which expanded its political influence with the help of the media, and on the other hand, they also had a very good mobilizing effect on the eastern population, especially on the unemployed, workers, apprentices and other lower social strata. Mobilization was aimed first and foremost at those who were "cheated not only of their professional future but also of their national and cultural self-worth", those who "felt humiliated as second-class citizens" and those who "felt like foreigners in their own country". young people who "feel like foreigners in their own country". Even skinheads can be co-opted, as long as they are "happy to think and act as political soldiers" (NPD-Parteivorstand, 1999. P. 360).

It was on the basis of this change of strategy that the NPD attracted a large number of young activists in the east, thus rapidly expanding and rejuvenating its membership. The NPD had 4,300 members in 1997 and increased by 1,700 to 6,000 in 1998, which was the fastest increase in the number of members during Voigt's term of office, while the number of members in the east was 1,190 in 1997 and 2,200 in 1998, which was an increase of 1,010 members (Staud, 2007. P. 49), which means that the eastern part of the party contributed nearly 60%. More than 70% of the new members admitted during the Voigt period were under 30 years old, and the average age of the entire NPD membership was about 40 years old, thus making it a "young" party and completely abandoning its previous image as a "party of old men". The average age of the members of the various parties in the Bundestag is higher than this, among which the CDU is 56 years old, the CSU is 57 years old, the SPD is 58 years old, the FDP is 51 years old, the Greens are the lowest at 46 years old, and the Left Party is the highest at 62 years old (Niedermayer, 2013).

As the cooperation between the NPD and the neo-Nazis deepened, more and more leading figures of banned neo-Nazi organizations joined the NPD in order to continue their ultra-nationalist propaganda and agitation with their new legal identity. Thorsten Heise, Thomas Wulff and Ralph Tegethoff joined the NPD at the same time in 2004. Thorsten Heise was also elected to the 20-member Federal Council of the NPD, thus expanding the number of neo-Nazis inside to seven. The inclusion of neo-Nazis and skinheads strengthened the NPD and made up for the NPD's lack of manpower in the election campaign. With their assistance, the NPD put up 35,000 posters, distributed 2.5 million copies of the campaign newspaper Saxon Voice, 350,000 copies of the campaign program and 2.5 million leaflets during the 2004 Saxon parliamentary campaign (Deutsche Stimme, 2004).

### **III. Rooted in the community, trying to create a pro-people and "normal party" image**

The NPD pays special attention to the contact between the grass-roots party organizations and the local population, asking its members to start with small things, such as cleaning up the streets, clearing up garbage, taking care of the children of working couples, helping the elderly to fill in forms or go shopping, in order to win the goodwill of the local population over time. In addition to their strong political outreach, these widely distributed grassroots community organizations placed special emphasis on other non-political types of outreaches, such as campfires,

weekend camping trips, wilderness adventures, volunteer firefighting, and soccer training. These activities not only brought the NPD closer to the general public, eliminated their prejudices and won over some voters, especially young voters, but also honed the organizing skills of the grassroots cadres, which also paid off in the elections: 21% of the first-time voters and young voters in the parliamentary elections of Saxony in September 2004 voted for the NPD. The proportion also reached 17% in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2006, P. 4-5).

In addition, the NPD is particularly interested in regional affairs, such as the protection of fisheries in the coastal region of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, the mining of lignite in Lubmin, and the repair of the broken doors of youth centers. It is through these “pro-people” measures that the NPD has been able to establish itself as a responsible, “normal party” in some eastern regions. In a questionnaire survey before the 2011 parliamentary elections in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, 10% of the respondents thought that “the NPD takes a serious interest in local issues” (Infratest dimap, 2011, P. 30), while almost 90% of the voters in favor of the NPD thought the same way (Tagesschau, 2011). These local policies of the NPD have succeeded in creating a number of regular voters and have gradually built up a number of “fortress constituencies” in the east of the country, represented by the “Saxon Switzerland” in the state of Saxony. In the 2008 parliamentary elections in Reinhardtsdorf-Schöna, the NPD won 25.2% of the vote, making it the second largest party in parliament after the CDU. In the 2010 mayoral elections in Laucha, Saxony-Anhalt, the NPD candidate Lutz Bartek also achieved a high approval rating of 24%. As of 2010, the NPD holds seats in more than three-quarters of the local councils in the new Länder (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2011, P. 96). In 2009 alone, the party added more than 100 new seats, more than 80 percent of which were gained in the new Länder (Richter, 2009).

In addition to local parliaments, the NPD has also been very successful in elections to the state parliaments: in 2004, it entered the Landtag of Saxony with a high vote of 9.2%, marking the first time in 36 years that the NPD had entered a federal state level parliament and became the third largest party in the Landtag of Saxony. With the help of neo-Nazis, the NPD also broke the “five-percent hurdle” in the 2006 parliamentary elections in the state of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, entering the Landtag with 7.3% of the vote, and the NPD entered the Saxon Landtag with 5.6% of the vote in 2009, the first consecutive time in its history that the party has entered the same state. In 2009 the NPD entered the parliament of Saxony with a vote share of 5.6%, marking the first time in its history that it had entered the same state parliament consecutively. In the same period, the NPD also achieved better results in other eastern states than in the west, such as 4.3% in the Thuringian parliamentary elections in 2009 and 4.6% in the Saxony-Anhalt parliamentary elections in 2011, which also almost exceeded the “five-percent hurdle” for entry into the Landtag.

In addition to focusing on the overall image of the party, the NPD also pays great attention to the personal image of its members. Party spokespersons at all levels of party organization are often well-educated party members with no criminal record. The NPD has also prepared a booklet containing answers to various questions in order to enable these spokespersons to give consistent answers. The leaders of the NPD at all levels pay great attention to their image in public, they tend to dress neatly, behave appropriately, and try their best to give people the impression that they are cultivated and disciplined.

#### **IV. Adjustments of propaganda strategies**

##### ***1. Changes in the focus and direction of propaganda and mobilization work***

During the Deckert period, the NPD consistently adhered to a policy dominated by historical revisionism in the East. Due to the long history of socialist upbringing of the people in the East, this policy was not very effective. The former chairman, Deckert, was also sentenced to two years in prison by the Karlsruhe state court in April 1995 for inciting racial hatred, a sentence he was still serving at the time of the election for the federal party chairmanship. As a result, Voigt emphasized the continuation of traditional topics such as anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism, and shifted his main efforts to social and economic topics such as anti-European Union, anti-globalization, and opposition to immigration. The strategy adopted by the NPD was to nationalize social issues, claiming that “Adolf Hitler and historical national socialism are after all in the past, only in the past, whereas alienization, the Harz IV, foreign control by the EU and globalization are the bitter present” (Deutsche Stimme, 2005). The NPD advocates the creation of “regionally specific national economies”, fundamentally opposes interdependence between nations, and sees globalization as an attack on “national assets” (NPD-Parteivorstand, 2004, P. 66), an American imperialist strategy and a conspiracy of big business to control the world with the “American way of life”, or better said, the “American way of death” (NPD-Parteivorstand, 2004, P. 19). Thus, the NPD sees the distortion of German society as a direct consequence of globalization and as part of the “Jewish World Conspiracy” (Deutsche Stimme, 1999).

In addition, the NPD, by criticizing the Government for reneging on the promises made to the East at the beginning of the reunification process, is using the dissatisfaction of the lower strata of society with the cutbacks in social welfare benefits, the difficult economic situation in the East, and the inability to adapt to globalization to portray itself as a spokesman for the interests of the people of the East, especially the “little people”. In response to

retiree poverty and xenophobia in the East, the NPD cries “money for grandmothers, not for the Roma” and “jobs, not poverty - stop cheap labor”, “German jobs go first to Germans!”. In 2009, the NPD launched a five-point plan for the repatriation of foreigners. The first point of the plan proposes the creation of a national “Job Protection Security Act”, which would give priority to German jobs. The second point of the plan proposes the immediate “exclusion from German life and pension insurance” of foreigners who live and work in Germany (NPD-Bundesverband, 2009). A 2006 questionnaire survey by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung showed that 43.8% of Germans in the East believe that “foreigners come here only to exploit our social state shamelessly” and 38.4% believe that “if jobs become insufficient, the foreigners should be sent back to their home countries” and 40.5% of Germans believe that “the large number of foreigners has over-foreignized the Federal Republic of Germany to a dangerous degree” (Decker, 2006. P. 37). From these three sets of data, it is clear that this program of the NPD caters well to the public opinion in the East.

## ***2. The strengthening of propaganda and mobilization of young people through extreme right-wing youth culture***

The NPD pays special attention to the role of music, especially rock music, in propaganda and agitation, because the impact of leaflets and slogans is limited in terms of time and influence, and a leaflet will be thrown away after reading it once, whereas music can be quickly reproduced and disseminated, and rock music, in particular, with its dynamic rhythms and incendiary content, has a much stronger attraction for young people. According to the Berlin-based Antifascist Newspaper Archive and Education Center, 147 far-right concerts were held across Germany in 2004, with Saxony topping the list with 25 (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, 2004. P. 48). In order to attract student voters, the NPD also produced and distributed at least 15 “school CDs” with far-right rock music and nationalist songs in the vicinity of schools, starting with the 2004 parliamentary elections in Saxony. As part of the campaign against immigrants, in 2009 the Young Democrats drew a cartoon entitled “Ducks against hens” (JN-Bundesverband, 2009), in which a family of ducks works hard but is exploited and oppressed by the arrival of immigrant hens. These lazy and shameless hens eventually expel the Ducks from their home. Obviously, the Ducks are referring to the Germans, and the hens to the foreigners who took advantage of the Germans’ social welfare. According to the NPD’s own statistics, 10,000 “school CDs” and 30,000 “ducks against hens” cartoons were distributed that year (NPD-Bundesverband, 2009).

In addition to organizing special concerts, the NPD has taken the approach of combining far-right concerts with other large party events such as the press festival of the Deutsche Stimme and the Thuringia festival for national youth. This increases the attractiveness of the event and prevents the concerts from being canceled by the police. The press festival of the Deutsche Stimme attracts more and more young people thanks to the regular support of famous far-right bands and rock singers from home and abroad, such as David Duke from the USA, Nick Griffin from the UK, as well as Frank Lennick and Michael Regner from the band “Landser” from Germany. In 2004, 7,000 people attended, making it one of the largest far-right gatherings in Germany. The NPD’s propaganda has been particularly effective with young men, with the NPD winning 21% of their vote in the 2004 Saxon Landtag election, second only to the CDU’s 29% (Infratest dimap, 2004. P. 49).

For the NPD and the neo-Nazis, music is not only an instrument of propaganda and agitation, but also a source of considerable financial income. The publishing house of the Deutsche Stimme, which also sends music products by mail, generates annual sales of 250,000 euros, or 15 to 25 percent of the publishing house’s total sales, according to the German Federal Constitutional Court. The State Center for Political Education in Saxony estimates that neo-Nazi music revenues in Saxony amounted to 3.5 million euros in 2011 (SPD-Bundestagsfraktion, 2013. P. 35). Part of these funds were secretly channeled to the NPD as an important source of funding. In addition to organizing concerts and selling music products, the NPD and the neo-Nazis with whom it collaborated paid particular attention to the dissemination of songs via the Internet. Two albums by the band “Landser” containing racist songs have even found their way into Apple’s German iTunes online music store. These include the racist songs “Polish Pig Tango” and “Gypsy Bugs”, which insult and degrade other ethnic groups.

## **V. Conclusion**

From the implementation of the effect, the “eastward” strategy has promoted the rapid development of the NPD in the eastern part of the country, which in turn led to the strengthening of the party as a whole. According to the statistics of the German Federal Constitutional Court in 2010, there are about 25,000 extreme right-wingers in Germany, of which the NPD has become the strongest one with an absolute advantage of 6,600 people (Bundesministerium des Innern, 2011. P. 55). The success of a series of parliamentary elections not only served as evidence of the NPD’s resurgence, but also brought it a large amount of money, radically improving its economic situation. In 2002, the NPD received €330,000 in state funding, which accounted for about 22% of its total income. By 2004, due to the success of the NPD in Thuringia, Saarland and Saxony, as well as in the European Parliament elections, state funding had already doubled to €666,040, and after the 2005 federal parliamentary elections to €1,233,779 (Redaktion Belltower. News, 2008).

From another perspective, however, the effectiveness of the “eastward” strategy has its limitations. Firstly, the number of party members in the east is too small in general, and it is mainly concentrated in Saxony, where 900 and 1,400 of the 1,190 and 2,200 members of the NPD in the five eastern new Länder in 1997 and 1998 respectively were located in Saxony (Stöss, 2007. P. 105-106). Second, because the proportion of intellectuals in the NPD membership was too low, there were not enough politically literate and action-oriented cadres, which led to too many part-time positions for its cadres at all levels, making it difficult for them to accomplish various tasks at the same time. For example, Uwe Leichsenring was a deputy to the town assembly in Saxony, a member of the county council and the Landtag, and vice-chairman of the NPD in Saxony, in addition to serving as a member of the NPD’s federal board of trustees. In the 2004 elections for the local council in Königstein, the NPD won three seats but could only nominate two parliamentary candidates. Third, while on the surface it may appear that the NPD has achieved a series of electoral successes by moving a large number of its cadres and core organizational structure to the East, the West has generally received less than 2% of the vote in all years except for the Saarland parliamentary elections in 2004, where it received a relatively high 4% in the particular context of Germany-wide opposition to the reforms of the Harz IV program. In terms of party distribution, none of the other parties have a higher proportion of members in the east than the NPD, except for the Left Party, which for historical reasons has more than half (51 %) of its members in the east. Nearly a third (31.7 %) of the NPD’s members in 2012 resided in the five eastern new Länder (excluding Berlin), while the CDU’s share was 8.9 %, the SPD’s 4.5 %, the FDP 12.6 %, and the Greens 7.1 % (Brandstetter, 2013. P. 12). As a result of this abnormal development pattern of over-reliance on the east, the NPD has degenerated into a “regional Party” and an “eastern Party”.

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