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People-Centric Discourse of German-Speaking Populist Radical Right Parties: Evidence from Computer-Assisted Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Abstract: According to existing research, populist radical right parties (PRRPs) work with a concept of "the people" that is defined ethnically. This paper aims to examine the meaning these parties attach to this concept based on a study of PRRP press releases from three German-speaking countries. Using the word embeddings method, we find that the ethnic dimension is present in its conventional (expected) form only in the discourse of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ); the Swiss People's Party (SVP) subordinates the ethnic dimension to direct democracy constitutional arrangements, and in the case of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), this dimension is absent in its conventional form altogether. We show that parties typically classified as part of the PRRP family can differ significantly in how they define "the people". We attribute this to the role of the institutional and historical context in shaping the understanding and use of "the people".

1. Introduction

The centrality of *the people* in the theory of populism can hardly be overstated. Combined with anti-elitism and general will, the notion of the people is crucial in populist communication and represents its core constitutive element (Canovan 2005). This people-centrism is the key concept and necessary condition of populism, distinguishing it from other forms of anti-establishment or protest politics (Rooduijn 2019). Populism research typically distinguishes between different dimensions of "the people". Mudde and Kaltwasser differentiate among a nativist interpretation (the people as nation), a power-related interpretation (the people as sovereign) and a socio-economic interpretation (the people as the common people) (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013). This relates to notions of *ethnos*, *demos* and *plebs* (Mény and Surel 2002).

The German language is a particularly interesting case for studying people-centrism in the populist discourse, as the direct translation of "the people" is the highly contested term *Volk*. Due to the excessive misuse of the term by the National Socialists, it has an obvious nationalist connotation in Germany (Meijers and Van Der Velden 2023, Van Leeuwen 2019). Consequently, the term "Volk" has so far been avoided in Germany—even by the populist far-right (Turan 2019)—as well as in Austria (Zehnter 2025). Our study takes this linguistic sensitivity as its point of departure. While Germany was a late bloomer in establishing a populist far-right party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) entered the German Bundestag in 2017, by which point the party had already radicalized. We therefore ask whether the term's historical weight still has an impact on the discourse of Germany's contemporary far-right actors. Furthermore, as German is also an official language in Austria and Switzerland, there is the question of how the term "Volk" is used by these countries' major populist radical-right parties: the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and the Swiss People's Party (SVP).

This article thus examines the contexts and meanings in which populist radical right parties (PRRPs) in German-speaking countries use the term "the people". Although the literature on populism recognizes the existence of different conceptions of this term (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013) PRRPs are generally

perceived as a single-party family with a dominant nativist dimension. Cas Mudde succinctly formulated this argument (Mudde 2007) and has since been systematically used (Ennser 2012, Rooduijn 2015, Zaslove 2009), suggesting little variation. Therefore, as we are looking at parties from the same party family in neighbouring countries, we employ a most similar cases design.

In this article, we analyse the press releases of three parties using word embeddings, a natural language processing (NLP) method. We show that the three parties refer to Volk in different ways, particularly in their ethnic interpretations. Therefore, although being ideologically close, word embeddings reveal different characteristics of the discursive use of Volk. We thus point to the gap between ideology and its discursive communication of these contents.

The article is organized as follows: First, we focus on the concept of “the people” in populism theory and present its various interpretations. We then present three selected PRRP cases (FPÖ, SVP, and AfD) and describe the current state of knowledge regarding how they use the concept. Next, we introduce word embeddings and the data used in the analysis. The analysis aims to reveal the typical context in which the word “people” is used by the three parties. We then supplement this analysis with qualitative examples and a robustness test.

2. People-centrism and the Notion of “the People” in the German-speaking Countries

The notion of “the people” is at the centre of virtually all relevant theories and definitions of populism (Canovan 2005, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013, Rooduijn 2019). For instance, the key tenet of the ideational approach to populism (Hawkins et al. 2018) is that the people and the elites are pitted against each other. According to this conception of populism, populist politicians do not claim to represent certain interests in society but instead seek to represent the people as a whole, who are seen as a homogeneous entity, the sole bearers of sovereignty, and are oppressed by the elites. The people further exhibit what is called the general will, which denotes a collective and shared representation of what is the common good (Mudde 2004).

In populism, the word “people” plays a key role because it is imbued with political legitimacy, serves as a source of power, and functions as a means of political articulation (Canovan 2005). According to Canovan, the centrality of “the people” stems from the fact that there is a dual interpretation of “the people” in modern democracies. The people rule through elections, but at the same time, the people stand outside the government as sovereign and a source of political power. Therefore, the people have a privileged role and dual significance in this regard. In a democracy, the government is an expression of the will of the people, but it can also be continually challenged to return power to the people (Canovan 2005: 29). In Mudde’s definition, use of the term “people” is also central because, without the discursive construction of the opposition between “the people” and “the elites”, the entire definition of populism falls apart (Mudde 2004). Perhaps the most radical position on the notion of “the people” is taken by Laclau, whose theory describes how the people emerge as a source of political unity (Laclau 2005). In

theories of populism, the people are not just one element of the definition, but the very condition of populism itself. The notion of the people is, however, not exclusive to populists, but is also used by other political, anti-establishment, non-populist and even mainstream parties (Rooduijn 2019). This is because the notion of "the people" is linked to the general understanding of democratic sovereignty and is not inherently (nor necessarily) anti-pluralistic in nature (Canovan 1999, Loughlin 2014).

The question then arises as to how "the people" is defined. Populism scholars (Mény and Surel 2002, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2013) have proposed a useful threefold distinction: demos, ethnos, and plebs. Populists often appeal to the demos conception when they claim to represent the "true" democratic will of the people against allegedly corrupt elites who have usurped power. Since demos is defined in populism in a reductive way (a homogeneous, single-willed and moral political authority), the people is in tension with democratic and pluralistic versions of democracy (Corrias 2016, Fiorespino 2025). In contrast, *ethnos* refers to the people as a cultural or ethnic community sharing a common identity, tradition and, often, ancestry. Populists frequently appeal to this understanding when they position the "real people" against both elites and "others", usually immigrants and minorities who are portrayed as threats to national identity. In this sense, the classic notion of exclusionary populism was put forward (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2013).

In German, Volk can equally be related to both demos and ethnos. In Austria, Switzerland and Germany, Volk has a legal definition, as this term is used in their national constitutions, specifically in the preambles of the three constitutions, as the sovereign that elects the representatives. However, Volk was also the central nodal point of the National-Socialist ideology. The Nazi interpretation of Volk went strongly beyond the aspect of demos, addressing aspects of internal homogenization (the state includes only people of one's "own" nation), external exclusiveness (bringing the members of the nation, i.e., Volk, "back" to the territory) and even irredentism (external exclusiveness by means of territorial expansion) (Mudde 2007: 16). Austrians and the Sudeten Germans were clearly seen as part of the Volk and were "brought home" by integrating their territories into the German Reich, either by military force or by threatening to use it. Eventually, the "need for *Lebensraum* (living space)" became the pretext for ethnic Germans in Eastern Europe to start World War II.

Lastly, plebs refers to the lower classes or other economically disadvantaged groups. This manifests as an appeal to the "ordinary", "hardworking" or "forgotten" people, who are portrayed as economically disadvantaged or marginalized by elite policies (Betz 1994). The plebeian dimension of populism typically constructs an antagonism between those who "produce" and those who "take" from society, between the deserving "makers"—workers, small business owners, taxpayers, pensioners—and the undeserving "takers", which can include both economic elites (the wealthy, big corporations, bankers) and those perceived as welfare dependents (Oesch 2008). Populism, drawing on the plebs conception, frequently emphasizes themes of fairness, economic nationalism and welfare chauvinism (Kriesi et al., 2008). It portrays common people as victims of globalization, unfair trade deals or economic policies that benefit elites at the expense of ordinary citizens. This narrative often includes criticism of

international economic arrangements, multinational corporations and financial institutions that are seen as undermining the economic interests of the national community (Bornschier 2010).

The ethnos interpretation of the people is closely connected to the far-right core ideology of nativism (Mudde 2007). When analysing the term Volk in contemporary politics, it is crucial to note that it still carries particular historical weight, distinct from the more civic understanding of the people, such as the demos dimension. Especially in Germany, Volk is still strongly connected to the ethnos interpretation and has been used throughout history to signify “ethnic Germans”, whereas *Bürger* (citizens) lacks this ethnic connotation (Meijers and Van Der Velden 2023).

The next section elaborates on how these different conceptions of the people and, especially, of Volk relate to the ideology of the PRRP family.

3. The Ideology of Populist Far-Right Parties in Austria, Germany and Switzerland

3.1 Comparing the Ideological profile of FPÖ, SVP and AfD

The Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) belong to the populist far-right party family (Rooduijn et al. 2024). All three parties regularly use populist discourse and draw on the key concepts of the far-right host ideology, namely authoritarianism and nativism (Mudde 2007). The ideological closeness of these parties is also demonstrated in Fig. 1, which shows the mean expert placements of the most recent Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) round (Rovny et al. 2025). The top plot shows the positions of all 279 parties included in CHES on the items related to the far-right core ideology, law and order, and anti-immigration. As shown, all three parties score very high, close to the maximum value of 10, on both dimensions. The centre plot shows the party dissent and salience of the immigration issue. All three parties are remarkably united on this issue, which is highly salient to them. The FPÖ actually reaches an expert mean of 10 on the salience variable. The bottom plot shows the placements on two variables related to people-centrism (the people should have the final say in politics) and the salience of anti-elite rhetoric. The AfD is located lower on the people-centrism dimension, and the SVP shows relatively lower anti-elitism score. These plots clearly underline the classification of these parties as most similar cases.

The fact that the AfD, FPÖ and SVP have the same ideological profile in this regard is not only shown by the CHES data, but this is also confirmed by analyses of party manifestos, where exclusionary and nativist populist ideology is present in the communication of these parties (Zehnter 2025).

3.2. The People in PRRP discourse in Austria, Switzerland and Germany

So far, the term Volk has been surprisingly understudied from a comparative perspective (for an exception, see Zehnter 2025), although the term is relevant for all PRRPs in German-speaking countries. One problem in populism research, especially in empirical studies, is that it focuses on a rather general classification. This includes many terms from the demos, ethnos and plebs spheres that could be used to refer to the people. Often these terms are treated as synonyms, as they are all said to indicate people-centrism (Rooduijn and Akkerman 2017, Thomeczek and Bernhard 2025). Thus, there is a lack of (empirical) studies focusing on the specific dimensions of the people, especially Volk. Given the conceptual blurring, what is to be expected of the PRRPs regarding the use of Volk in their discourse?

The Freedom Party of Austria radicalized in the 1990s under the leadership of Jörg Haider and transformed into a PRRP. According to Heinisch and Werner (2019: 484), the FPÖ uses the term Volk rather broadly, encompassing diverse social groups and claiming to speak for pensioners, families and farmers while also arguing that it represents women's and children's rights. The people is also defined as "a victim under duress and treated unfairly" (Heinisch and Werner 2019: 488). In terms of anti-immigration discourse, the FPÖ claims that the culprits behind immigration were the elites and labelled "the suffering Austrian population" as the victim (Thiele, Sauer, and Penz 2021). The party also used the notion of "little people" and describes itself as a party standing for the marginalized and vulnerable (Mittnik 2024), addressing the plebs dimension. However, Rathgeb (2020) concludes that FPÖ's pro-welfare view has been rather limited, as the party focuses on welfare policies in favour of the core workforce but otherwise supports restrictive welfare policies, including tax cuts, union disempowerment and so on (Rathgeb 2020: 653). This emphasis on welfare tends to take the form of welfare chauvinism, pointing to immigrants taking advantage of social systems as the "takers", signifying the nativist dimension of the populist discourse of this party.

The Swiss People's Party (SVP), in contrast, adopts liberal economic stances in line with its traditional ideological profile. The party portrays the European Union as a threat to Swiss political institutions such as neutrality, federalism, and (direct) democracy. Therefore, the SVP strongly emphasizes the sovereignty of the Swiss people, which is threatened by the EU (Bernhard et al., 2015). This refers to the specific mechanisms and policies for increasing, or at least defending, the people's power. The party positions itself as the defender of the people's democratic rights against external threats. To that end, Switzerland's direct democratic institutions provided the SVP with a unique opportunity to claim legitimacy for its conception of the people, which is more closely connected to the aspect of sovereignty (i.e., demos) than ethnicity (i.e., ethnos).

In Germany, until very recently, far-right parties were not successful at the national level, as they were sooner or later stigmatized by association with National Socialism. The AfD broke this pattern. Since 2015, the AfD can be regarded as a prototype of a populist far-right party (Rooduijn et al. 2024); only two years later, it entered the national parliament. From the beginning, there was a *völkisch*-national wing within the party, which grew in influence over time (Häusler 2018). Like völkisch, *Volkskörper* is a term closely associated with National Socialism—these concepts were central to the Nazi ideology. Thus,

referring to the process of “radicalization”, at its centre lies the ethnic interpretation of terms around the word stem Volk.

As the question of the AfD’s interpretation of the term Volk, especially its compatibility with the constitution, has been the subject of multiple lawsuits, the AfD has published a declaration on its website (AfD 2021). Here, the AfD emphasizes its interpretation of the German Volk, culture and identity, which it wants to protect against immigration. Immigrants are “worth less” in their ideology and should receive fewer rights. Moreover, apart from the legal status and the question of citizenship, a court ruling has highlighted that there are strong voices within the party to separate the concept of citizenship from the idea of being part of the German Volk; in other words, the party argues it takes more than just citizenship to be part of the Volk (Kaya 2024). What becomes clear is that the ethnic dimension of Volk became central to the party’s ideology and discourse. Systematic research on the party’s usage of the term remains scarce; nevertheless, Linares (2019) reports that the party is still careful when using the term. Rather, they report that the AfD uses the term interchangeably with more neutral terms, such as “citizens” or “population”.

The literature review thus suggests that despite being ideologically very close, the three parties have referred to the people and Volk in particular rather differently. The next section will lay out our analytical strategy.

4. Research Question, Data and Method

4.1 Research Question

With word embeddings, we employ an exploratory method. Therefore, we do not formulate hypotheses, as word embeddings are not a tool for hypothesis testing. Since all three parties are classic examples of populist far-right parties, it can be expected that the vicinity of the word Volk will be characterized by the presence of words related to nativism, immigration and an ethnic understanding of the people. In addition to the general emphasis on immigration and related issues, the FPÖ is argued to emphasize economic grievances and deprivation. The SVP should be characterized more by an emphasis on direct democracy and self-determination rather than just ethnic homogeneity. In the case of the AfD, existing literature suggests that the party is now primarily focused on the ethnos dimension.

4.2 Word Embeddings in Press Releases

The analysis focuses on four years of political communication by the three parties, from January 2016 to December 2019. We used the Chrome browser add-on Webscraper IO to download the press releases.[1] The four-year time frame was selected to control for multiple factors, as our goal was to identify a coherent period that would limit external impact. There are two reasons we decided to start the analysis in 2016. Firstly, the AfD has been regarded as a far-right party since 2015 (Rooduijn et al. 2023). Moreover, the so-called refugee crisis in 2015 represented a clear window of opportunity for PRRPs, which likely also affected the usage of certain words. Thus, by starting the analysis in 2016, we control

for these factors, making the cases more comparable. Secondly, we limited the analysis to the end of 2019 due to the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are some indicators that the pandemic has affected the populist discourse of populist parties (Thiele 2022, Thomeczek and Bernhard 2025). As our method is based on the assumption that the discourse is relatively comparable (see below), we excluded the COVID period from our dataset. In total, the analysis covers 8,631 texts: 4,115 press releases by the AfD, 4,186 by the FPÖ and 330 by the SVP. This imbalance was caused by the fact that the SVP party publishes press releases significantly less frequently. The sample size could have been increased by extending the time period, but that would not have changed the discrepancy compared to other parties that publish more frequently.

We analysed the parties' official presentations. This is a limitation of our research design, as we only look at their public self-presentation. However, since we are interested in a comparative perspective, this bias is the same for all parties in the analysis. The advantage of press releases, a widely analysed text type in political communication studies (Gessler and Hunger 2022, Thomeczek and Bernhard 2025), is that they are a channel comparable across all three parties.

The press releases were trained using the Word2Vec model (Pennington, Socher, and Manning 2014), with a separate model for each of the three political parties. The raw text from the press releases was lemmatized and tagged for parts of speech. Only nouns, proper nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs were used to train the model in order to reduce noise in the final visualization of the discourse. The Word2Vec model is a shallow neural network that transforms a text corpus into a vector space, which is a numerical representation of the corpus. In this vector space, each word is assigned its numerical representation—a word vector. This numerical representation of words is determined by the probability that any two words will appear in the same context. Therefore, words that appear in the same context in the corpus end up close to each other in the vector space (Mikolov et al., 2013). This numerical representation of words allows us to conduct mathematical operations on them.

Word vectors are a credible indicator of which words are used together in the original corpus. This means that synonyms will have very similar vectors and, therefore, will be close to each other in the vector space. Another property of word vector spaces is that the meaning of words can be discovered through analogy tasks. For instance, the trajectory between vectors for "king" and "man" is analogous to the trajectory between vectors for "queen" and "woman" (Devlin et al. 2019). This ability to learn the meaning of words from the corpus has been shown to carry biases present in the corpus. For example, the word "receptionist" is closer to the word "she" than "he", and the word "captain" is closer to "he" than "she". This troublesome attribute of text representation in a vector space has been described by several papers, and many researchers are trying to develop ways to remove the learned bias from the vector representation of a text (Garg et al. 2018, Gonen and Goldberg 2019). However, for this research, this attribute is precisely the thing of interest. Because vector representation of text learns the biases present in the text, it is a viable tool for researching the discursive ways words get politicized around certain topics.

Word vectors produced by Word2Vec allow for exploration of the discursive position of “the people” in the populist discourse. Using cosine distance, we found 30 words that were most likely to appear in the same context as “the people” in the original corpus.[2] We visualized these words in what we call “word maps” and a ranked list based on cosine distance. Our approach is similar to Coufal et al. (2025), who showed that discourse maps using Word2Vec is a viable tool to quantify discourse and to discover “reproductive patterns into which discourse accumulates” using this natural language processing algorithm combined with qualitative analysis.

This variability is not merely noise in the data but constitutes the empirical object of this study. To capture this variation, we use word embeddings as an exploratory tool that analyses the semantic neighbourhood of “Volk” without imposing predefined categories. The embeddings are then interpreted through qualitative analysis. This approach therefore aims not to produce a single numerical measure of people-centrism, but to reconstruct the different ways in which the ethnic dimension of “Volk” is discursively constructed across parties.

The results of the word embeddings are presented in figures—word maps based on cosine distance. Moreover, for the sake of results interpretability, we supplemented the word embedding analysis with qualitative examples from press releases. We used DeepL for the translation (with minor adaptations); the original German texts for these examples can be found in the appendix.

5. Results

Our aim is to identify the context in which the word “Volk” appears and thus uncover what meanings it is intertwined with. To contextualize the frequency of the term: the lemma “volk” was used in 161 SVP press releases, 341 AfD press releases and 306 FPÖ press releases. However, word embeddings work with all texts, not only the text that contains the word of interest. The purpose of the analysis is not to draw any conclusions about the weight of particular dimensions, since word embeddings are not based on word frequencies. They can summarize any amount of words. They neither show negative or positive connotations. Rather, word embeddings show which other words are used in a similar way and in the same context as the word being focused on, in this case “Volk”. Thus, the results show which words are semantically close, based on cosine distance, and which are semantically intertwined. Note that in our analysis, we focus on the 30 closest terms, and thus, despite their varying distance to “Volk”, all of the terms that appear in the figure are already relatively close.

5.1. FPÖ

Figure 2 shows word embeddings for the FPÖ. Close to the word “Volk” (red), we find words related to the dimension of demos, including “sovereign”, “nation-state”, “self-determination”, “Federal Constitution”, ”democratic”, “rules of the game”, “voters” and “elected”. We also see that “head of state” is semantically close to Volk. In 2017, Alexander van der Bellen, a former member of the Greens, became Austrian President after narrowly defeating FPÖ candidate Norbert Hofer. Since then, he has been a bête noire for

the FPÖ, which often accuses him of acting against the interests of the Austrian people (see example below)—a classic example of the deligitimization of the political opponent in populism's antagonism (Abts and Rummens 2007: 419).

A second cluster is related to immigration, that is, the ethnos dimension. This includes the terms "refugee issue" and "migration pact" (note that these are all one word in German; see appendix). The former German Chancellor Angela Merkel also appears at the centre of the figure. Her mention is directly related to the ethnos dimension of Volk as well, as she was fiercely criticized by far-right parties across Europe for her decision to "open borders" in 2015. Some terms are directly linked to the core of populist far-right discourse, for example, "minority", which is related to the aspect of homogeneity, nativism and Manichean thinking. "Sovereign", on the other hand, refers to the aspect of the people's power—in most cases, the FPÖ combines discourse around sovereignty with anti-EU stances. It is also notable that words belonging to the demos and ethnos dimensions are close to each other, indicating that they are semantically linked and underscoring the coherence of the patterns across the texts.

In contrast, we do not see any terms related to plebs. The following press release represents a typical example of how the FPÖ uses the term Volk:

Example 1

(FPÖ 2017)

Apparently, under Merkel's motto, "We can do it", Alexander Van der Bellen is once again extending an invitation to tens of thousands of migrants to come to Europe—and especially to Austria. That is exactly what his plea for an open Mediterranean route and for open borders amounts to. Opposing the closure of the Mediterranean route is an offer to all smugglers to continue putting tens of thousands of so-called refugees into unseaworthy boats so that they can be rescued and brought to Europe. With such statements, the head of state elected by the **people** (own emphasis) is clearly acting against the interests of his own population. Van der Bellen is a president for everyone—except the Austrians, […] the federal president is now advocating further mass immigration and thus also the import of crime and terror […] With his statements, the federal president is, in any case, undermining all efforts to curb the flow of immigration; Van der Bellen apparently wants to open all the floodgates again. What comes next? Should we fly in all economic migrants from Africa at the expense of our own citizens on Austrian Airlines?" Kickl asked.

In this text, there is a clear criticism of immigration policies, linked to both German Chancellor Merkel and Austrian President Van der Bellen, who is accused of acting against the interests of the Austrian Volk. A fairly explicit nativist dimension thus characterizes the FPÖ's communication.

In FPÖ's press releases, criticism of migration is often linked to criticism of the European Union and an emphasis on popular sovereignty and the self-determination of the Austrian Volk. In a single press release it is, for example, argued that "like Merkel, Van der Bellen belongs to **those elites** (own emphasis)

who push through their ideological positions without regard for the needs and concerns of **the people** (own emphasis)", as well as "Norbert Hofer (FPÖ) stands for trust in **the people** (own emphasis) and for an Austria that wants to preserve and protect its values and does not want to trade freedom and self-determination for EU bureaucracy and paternalism"(FPÖ 2016). The topics of migration, refugees and EU criticism are directly linked to the concept of people, self-determination and sovereignty.

5.2. SVP

The SVP shows a similar emphasis on the ethnos and demos dimension of Volk as the FPÖ, although with a stronger focus on the latter. What is striking is that the terms related to Volk are much more clustered together, which can be interpreted as a high degree of similarity among them: they are strongly interconnected into a cohesive semantic whole that is repeated in the same form across press releases.

A closer look at Fig. 3 shows that these words often revolve around the topic of sovereignty and are mostly related to the Swiss system of direct democracy ("referendum", "implementation", "non-implementation" and various explicitly mentioned initiatives). In the SVP's populist understanding of democracy, the outcome of direct democratic processes represents the unquestionable will of the people (Bernhard, 2023). Therefore, it is not surprising that in the case of SVP, the theme of sovereignty dominates—best exemplified by the term "Volkswille" (the will of the people). The SVP's discourse reveals a focused engagement with Volk as the sovereign entity within Switzerland's direct-democratic system. The party typically pits the Volk against the Federal Council ("Federal Council majority") or parliament ("parliamentary majority"), often accusing them of "breaching the constitution" by failing to respect the Volkswille and "disempowering" the Volk. In addition, numerous, rather procedural and technical terms, such as "accepted", "implementation", "non-implementation" and "constitution", appear in the centre of the Figure, indicating an almost mechanical understanding of democracy.

While the party addresses immigration policy extensively, this is framed primarily in terms of democratic sovereignty rather than ethnic or cultural preservation. The focus remains on the people's right to determine immigration policy through democratic processes rather than on protecting a particular ethnic or cultural conception of the Swiss people. This does not mean that the ethnic dimension is absent from the understanding of Volk. Instead, it is linked to the understanding of initiatives and the process of direct democracy within the Swiss constitutional framework, for example, anti-immigration initiatives.

In this context, the party's discourse is dominated by references to some specific accepted ballot measures, particularly the "mass immigration initiative" approved in 2014, the "RASA initiative" and the "deportation initiative" from 2010. In these cases, the issue was that a radical proposal would be approved in referendums, which would then come into conflict with international law, resulting in none of these initiatives being implemented in their original form (Bernhard 2023). The SVP criticized this: the elites do not respect the will of the people expressed in referendums. As in the case of the FPÖ, we also see no terms linked to the plebs dimension of Volk.

Therefore, terms such as “implementation”, “non-implementation”, “disempower” and “ignore” relate to SVP’s criticism that the will of the people is restricted by preventing the full implementation of the results of direct democracy. Thus, the SVP does not explicitly advocate a particular ethnic conception of the people, but this ethnos dimension is linked to the people in a different way: the will of the people is being constrained by the imperfect and incomplete implementation of referendum results on issues related to immigration. The following press release presents a typical case:

Example SVP (SVP 2017):

Today, exactly three years ago, the **people** (own emphasis) and the cantons approved the SVP’s Mass Immigration Initiative. In doing so, they gave the Federal Council and parliament a clear mandate: to once again independently control immigration into our country through maximum numbers and quotas. It was further decided that international treaties that contradict this principle were to be renegotiated and adapted within three years, and that, in the event of non-implementation […] [t]he SVP notes that the majority of the Federal Council and parliament are ignoring this popular decision and are thus calling into question the very foundation of our system of direct democracy... Instead, together with a parliamentary majority, it has enacted an alibi law and is now attempting, through its counterproposals to the RASA initiative, to elevate this unconstitutional law to constitutional law. The situation is therefore clear: a detached elite made up of a majority of the Federal Council and parliament, flanked by certain judges and senior civil servants, is doing everything in its power to prevent the Swiss **people** (own emphasis) from once again being able to control immigration themselves. This is a frontal attack on direct democracy and on the freedom of our country, with the aim of integrating it as far as possible into the swirling EU. As in many other European countries, the coming years will thus become years of destiny in the struggle for the self-determination of our Switzerland as a free nation… It is not the first time in our history that, in the end, the Swiss **people** (own emphasis) have had to stand up for their rights against a freedom-weary majority in their own parliament and, above all, the Federal Council.

5.3 AfD

While the SVP’s and FPÖ’s discourses around Volk were somewhat similar, we see few terms directly related to either of the demos or ethnos dimensions of the people. This is surprising. Despite that party’s attempt to “normalize” the term Volk, which we discussed above, the National Socialist history of Germany apparently still casts a shadow on the AfD’s usage of the term.

Regarding ethnos, there is the term “minority”, which, however, was not, within the press releases, used in the directly nativist anti-immigration sense—the party is, for example, discussing the situation of minorities in other countries, including the German minority, and accusing the government of “making politics for a minority”. We see a few terms in the figure that indicate a direct relationship with the demos dimension. This includes “sovereign”, “parliaments” or “will of the voters” (note that interestingly, the AfD does not speak of the Volkswille, like the SVP). The AfD is also the only one of the three parties to address the plebs dimension, although only one term (“distribution policy”) is linked to it.

Numerous terms are related to foreign politics, which is probably the most surprising finding in our analysis. These included the French, the British, the Poles and the people of Hong Kong, as well as the former Hungarian president, Victor Orbán. There are also other (further away from Volk and therefore not displayed) references to the Austrian or American people. Those terms are typically linked to the demos dimension and sometimes, simultaneously, to the ethnos dimension. Rather than speaking directly to or about the German Volk, the AfD tries to present these nations as role models. For example, in the cases of Poland (Der Spiegel, 2016) and Hungary (DW, 2025), it was about supporting the people of these countries in their resistance to the European Union, especially regarding immigration. The British people's will was praised in the context of Brexit (Guardian 2024). Emmanuel Macron's policy of national interests for the French people was celebrated too. In the case of Hong Kong, the party championed the protests of the city's people against China. The message is clear: just as these other nations, the German people should also "stand up" and follow their example. As a comparatively young party (founded in 2013, with a national populist turn in 2015), it seems the party was looking to examples from other countries to deepen its discursive depth on classic populist far-right themes.

This does not mean that the AfD does not address the German Volk directly, which it certainly does, but much less frequently and in a less structured and coherent way than, for example, the FPÖ. The following example from a press release exemplifies how the AfD uses the term Volk in a foreign policy context.

Example AfD (AfD 2018):

According to a draft motion currently being prepared, an Article 7 procedure is to be initiated against the government in Budapest for alleged violations of fundamental EU values. So far, the EU procedure has only only been launched—in December of last year against Poland. On this, AfD Bundestag member and member of the European Affairs Committee Siegbert Droese comments as follows: "The European Parliament continues to be relentless and keeps Hungary in its sights. Since the parliamentary elections in Hungary did not turn out according to Brussels' expectations, they now want to try an EU procedure to 'bring Viktor Orbán in line'. Green Party politician Judith Sargentini is a key supporter of such a procedure. That Hungary, as a sovereign European country, has consistently opposed mass immigration from foreign cultures has long been unacceptable to the Brussels bureaucracy. The Hungarian **people**, with their vote in early April, have backed Viktor Orbán's reforms. Brussels should finally respect that!"

To sum up, the AfD's discourse on Volk clearly differs from that of the other two parties. Although the party actively tries to normalize this term, the populist far-right party uses it differently, with a focus on foreign politics that we did not see in the FPÖ's or SVP's discourse. This way, the AfD tries to link the situation in Germany to other countries by presenting their struggle as a role model.

5.4 Robustness Check

We included two robustness tests. Firstly, for each of the three parties, we ran the same analysis for the term "citizen" (*Bürger*) to test whether Volk is associated with a specific context compared to Bürger, which has a similar meaning but should be without any ethnic content (Meijers and Van Der Velden

2023). The results are rather similar. We did not find any terms related to immigration or the European Union in the FPÖ's discourse on citizens, and only a few related to sovereignty. Regarding the SVP, we see a fundamental discourse that is not linked to direct democracy and sovereignty, unlike the discourse around Volk. Instead, we see some terms related to finances, although not necessarily from the plebs dimension ("tax increase", "prosperity", "financial centre", "wallet"). Similarly, we see some terms in the AfD's discourse on citizens that relate to social and economic policies, such as "taxation", "middle class", "taxpayer" and "distribution policy". However, here as well, this discourse is fundamentally different from its discourse on Volk—there are no references to other nations.

Secondly, we ran the Volk models for three non-populist social-democratic parties: the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ) and the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland (SP). As expected, the press releases of these parties showed very little populist context (see Appendix). In the case of the German SPD, it is difficult to find any words that belong to the demos dimension, suggesting that the party lacks a clear semantic context for this term. In the case of the Austrian SPÖ, we find a rather anti-populist discourse that uses terms such as "right-wing radicals" or "right-wing populists". In the case of SP, the word Volk is frequently accompanied by terms such as "voter", "voting", "electorate" and, on one occasion, "referendum" and "initiative". In contrast to the SVP, however, there is no emphasis on will and sovereignty, and the topic of immigration referendums is absent. None of these parties exhibited typical populist content, such as that of the aforementioned PRRPs.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This empirical analysis of press releases from three populist parties in, respectively, Austria, Switzerland and Germany challenges the implicit assumption in the literature on European PRRPs that nativist ideology translates into an exclusionary understanding of "the people".

Firstly, we show that the understanding of Volk in communication within these parties is associated with populist content related to the demos and ethnos dimensions of the people; this does not apply to non-populist terms such as citizens (Bürger), where the content is very different. This confirms the special role of Volk for populism in German-speaking countries.

Secondly, we show that the meanings associated with Volk differ greatly among the three parties. In the case of the FPÖ, there is a close association between nativism and the concept of the people, as expected in the literature; by contrast, the cases of the SVP and AfD differ. As far as the SVP is concerned, the concept of the people is understood primarily in connection with direct democracy and the sovereignty of the people in the context of referendums and citizens' initiatives—the demos dimension. Nativism and migration issues are secondary; they are present as the sovereignty and will of the people expressed in direct democracy not as a specific cultural or ethnic understanding of the people. The ethnos dimension is thus expressed indirectly. The most surprising case is that of the AfD. Rather than focusing on the German Volk directly, the AfD frames the struggles of other nations in a

populist-nativist manner, presenting them as a blueprint for the German Volk and as role models for Germans. It is surely no coincidence that the party often refers to the populist far-right governments in Hungary and Poland. This may reflect that despite strong attempts to normalize terms such as Volk or völkisch in public discourse (Völker 2026), the historical baggage of this term still casts a shadow over contemporary German populist far-right actors.

Thus, what is usually perceived as a given (a nativist-exclusionary understanding of the people) takes different forms in the discourse of PRRPs. The results show that the context of the countries in question influences the understanding and use of the word Volk. In the case of the SVP, this is clearly the institutional context of direct democracy, while in the case of the AfD, it is the historical connotations of the term Volk that lead the AfD to indirectly articulate the concept of the people. Only in the case of the FPÖ is the articulation rather direct, reflecting a lower degree of taboo compared to Germany and the significantly longer presence of PRRPs in this country.

The upshot of our analysis is that the nativist dimension of PRRPs does not necessarily take the form of exclusionary logic pitting native populations against immigrants. It is only one of the ways in which PRRPs can apply this dimension. The shared and common ideology (populism and nativism) does not necessarily lead to the same discursive articulation of the people, even within highly similar cultural contexts. Discourse can be used strategically, is contextually bound and can express the ideological content differently.

Since word embeddings are a relatively new NLP method, we would like to point out some limitations. The most obvious limitation concerns time and communication channels, as we examine official party communication through press releases from 2016 to 2019 to ensure comparability. As mentioned above, the results do not say anything about the weight or frequency of the individual dimensions. The results describe the context of the word Volk, thus pointing to the meaning of this term. At the same time, the fact that some meanings are missing (economic grievances in the case of the FPÖ and nativism in the case of the AfD) does not mean that the party does not talk about them; rather, that these meanings are not closely linked to the concept of the people. Finally, our analysis centres on the word Volk and German words that have Volk as their root. This is due to the exclusive position of this word's meaning for people-centric dimensions and populism in general (Canovan 2005).

Nevertheless, our study has implications for the analysis of populist parties from an ideational perspective when it comes to the relationship between ideology and discourse. This is because if we find such heterogeneity in very similar cases, the differences may be even greater in other countries, where people-centrist terms with nationalist connotations are used (e.g., the "narod" word stem in Slavic languages). Word embeddings are a suitable tool for this, as they enable comparable comparative analyses based on a statistical model.

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Footnotes

1. The press releases were obtained from the official party websites for the AfD and SVP. The FPÖ does not archive older press releases but links to ots.at, a portal that stores press releases for most Austrian organizations, which we therefore used. In the case of the AfD, we used press releases from the official party website and the parliamentary group—the other two parties did not make this distinction.
2. For parameters of the model were used predefined values from the gensim python package. gensim.models.word2vec.Word2Vec(*sentences=None*, *corpus_file=None*, *vector_size = 100*, *alpha = 0.025*, *window = 5*, *min_count = 5*, *max_vocab_size=None*, *sample = 0.001*, *seed = 1*, *workers = 3*, *min_alpha = 0.0001*, *sg = 0*, *hs = 0*, *negative = 5*, *ns_exponent = 0.75*, *cbow_mean = 1*, *hashfxn = < built-in function hash>*, *epochs = 5*, *null_word = 0*, *trim_rule=None*, *sorted_vocab = 1*, *batch_words = 10000*, *compute_loss=False*, *callbacks=()*, *comment=None*, *max_final_vocab=None*, *shrink_windows=True*)

Figures

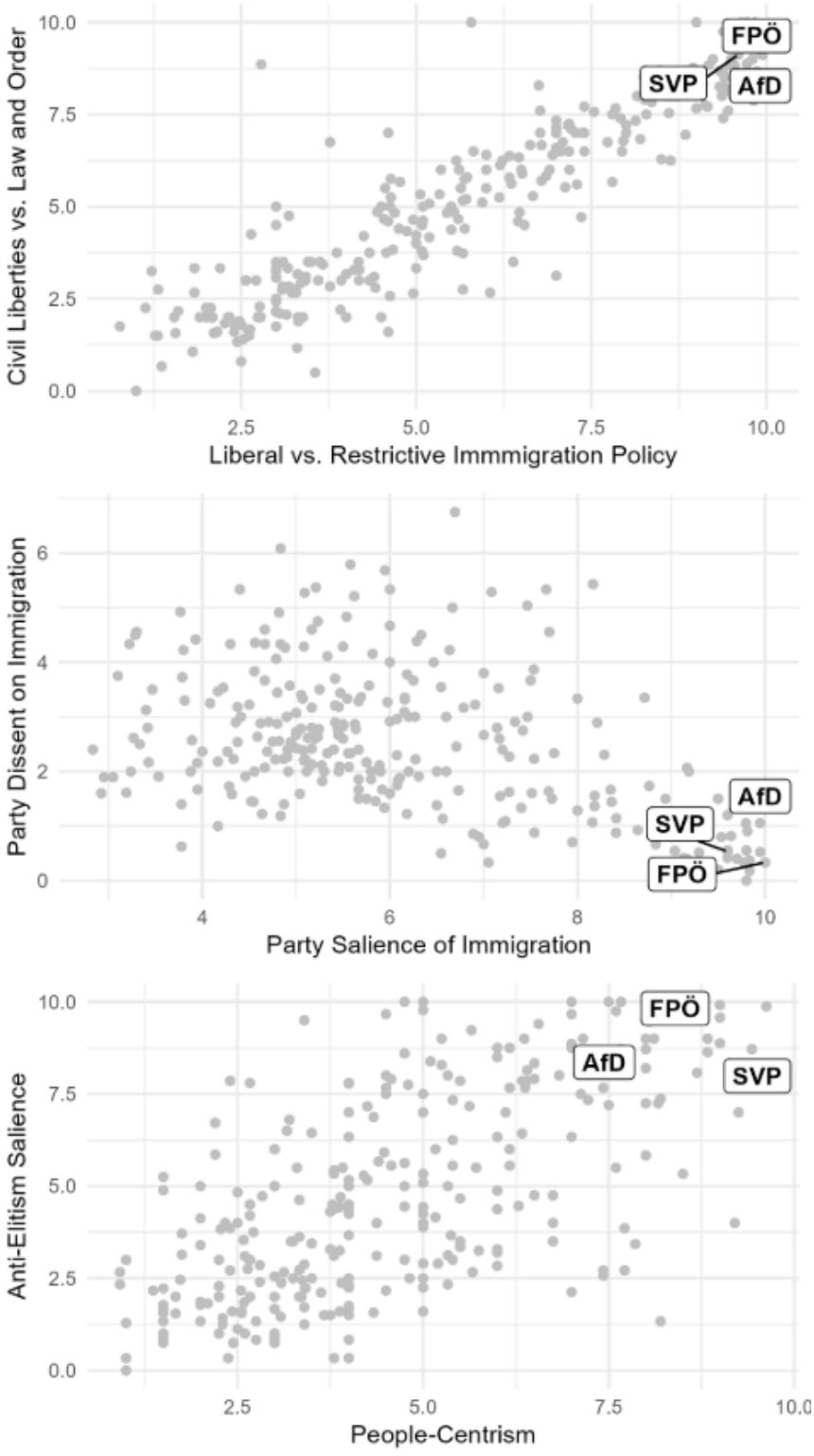


Figure 1

PRRPs in expert view: issue positions. CHES 2025.

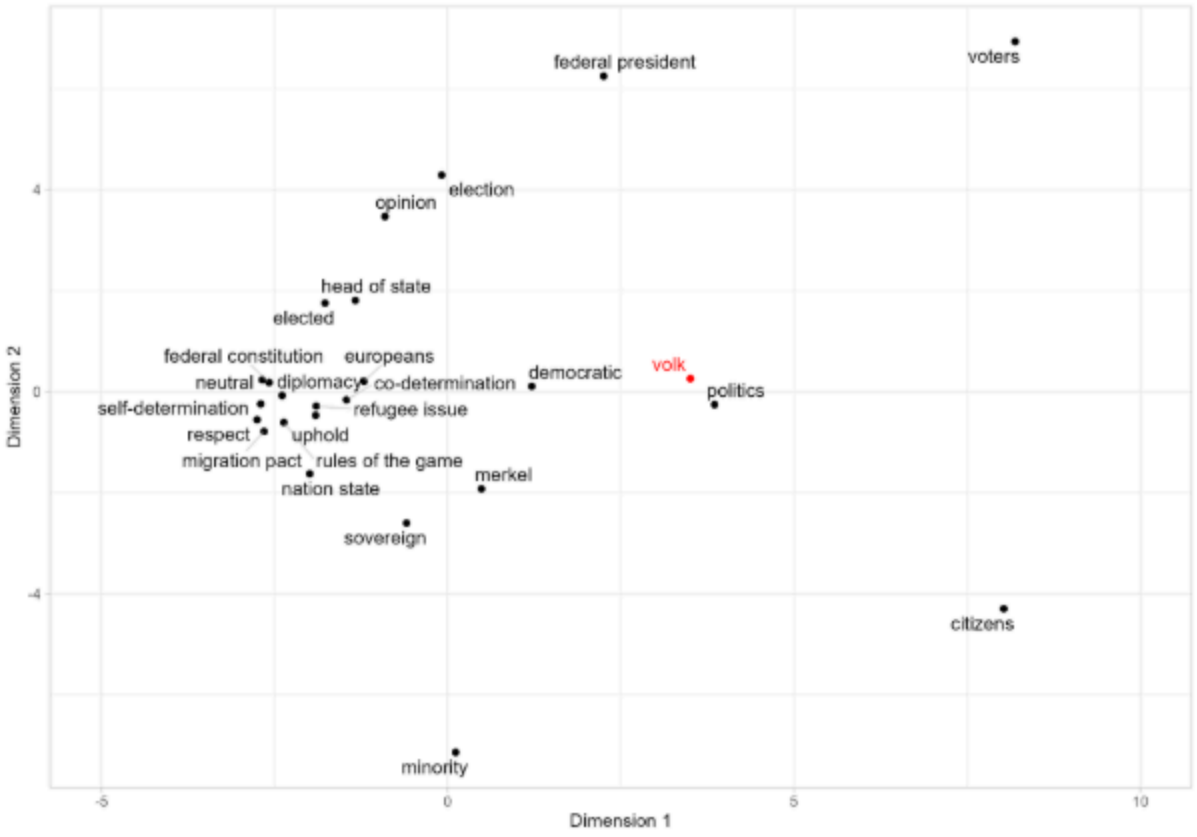


Figure 2

Word embeddings for FPÖ; 30 nearest neighbours of the term “Volk” based on cosine distance in a Word2Vec model. Visualization obtained using principal component analysis (PCA).

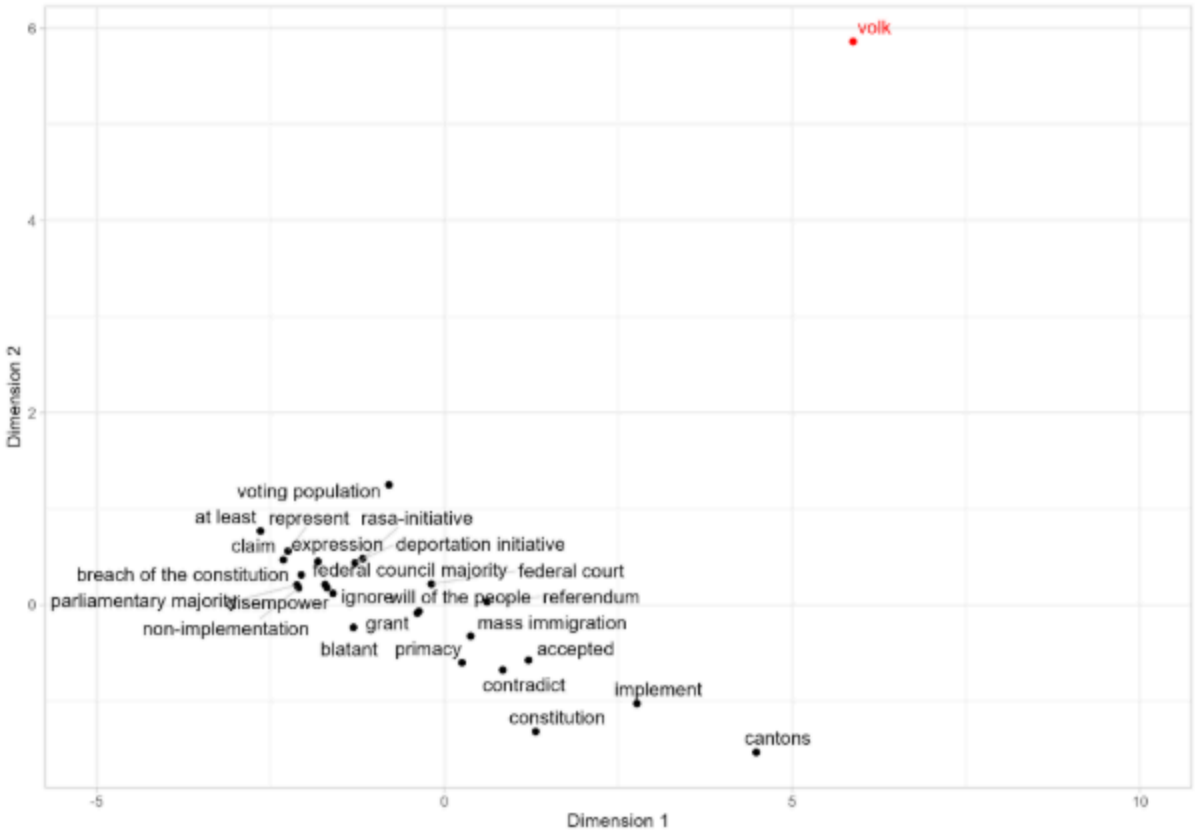


Figure 3

Word embeddings for SVP; 30 nearest neighbours of the term “Volk” based on cosine distance in a Word2Vec model. Visualization obtained using principal component analysis (PCA).

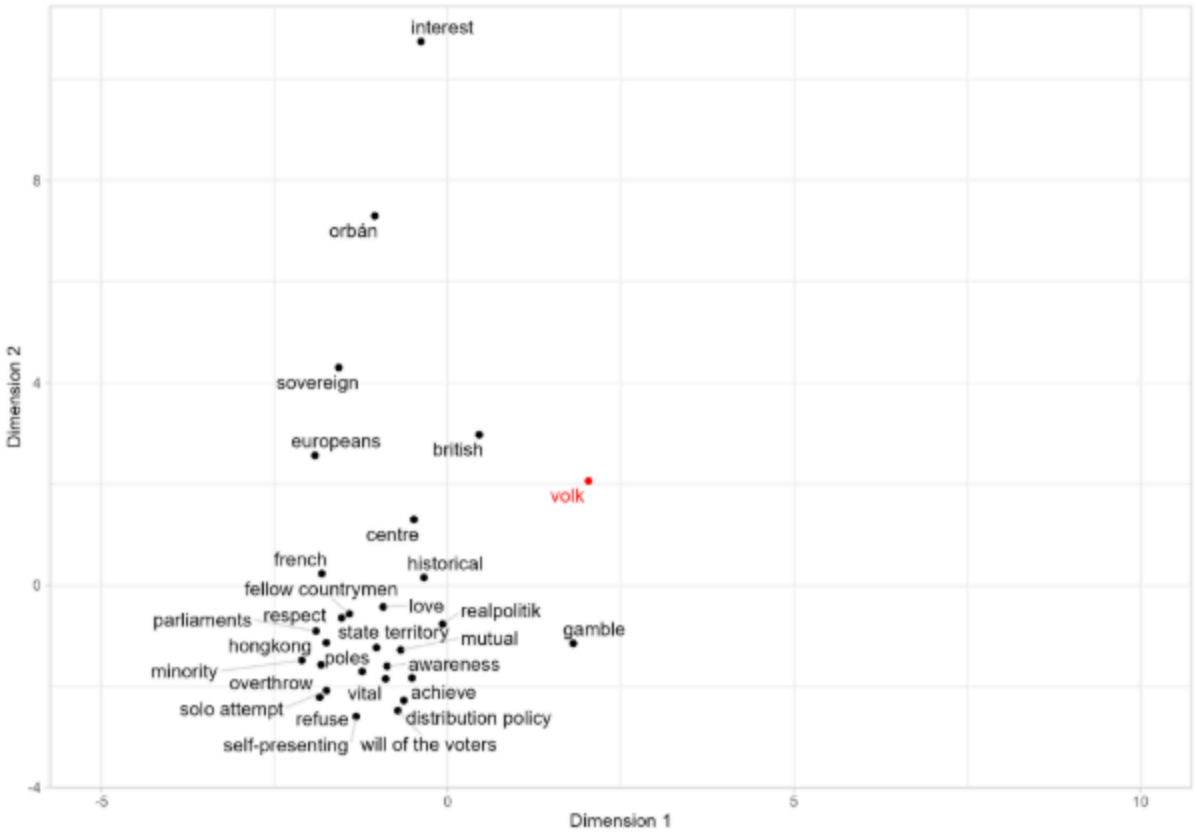


Figure 4

Word embeddings for AfD; 30 nearest neighbours of the term “Volk” based on cosine distance in a Word2Vec model. Visualization obtained using principal component analysis (PCA).