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## NON-PARTISAN GROUPS IN GERMAN LOCAL POLITICS: BETWEEN POPULISM AND ‚POLITICS AS USUAL‘?

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The article aims to give an overview of the current state of research concerning the presence and success of German non-partisan groups in local politics. It can be shown that their presence in German municipalities rose between 2008 and 2015, so they are active in more than 80 per cent of all municipalities up to now. The author also focuses on the current problems of definition for international comparison and raises the question whether or not it is useful to analyse these local groups within the concept of populism (Barr 2009) and anti-establishment parties (Schedler 1996). Special attention is given to possible spill-over effects from successful anti-party rhetoric of non-partisan groups in local politics to higher levels of the political system.

*Key words:* non-partisan groups; independent local lists; local parties; populism; anti-establishment parties; local politics.

### 1. Introduction

In the last few decades non-partisan groups in German local politics have developed as serious competitors to national parties. In some regions they even dominate the political competition, especially in Southern Germany [50, 124]. The estimated number of 280.000 members, organized in regional associations of the so called Free Voters, are more than the members of the German green, left and liberal party together [22]. But despite their widespread presence and success, party researchers have ignored the phenomenon of local voter associations for a long time: Until the middle of the last decade, only a few case and regional studies had focused on these non-parties at the local level [e.g. 23; 54; 17]. A first national wide study to explore the reasons of their success and their attitudes to the local political sphere started in 2001 [e.g. 43; 44; 19; 47; 31], followed by a comparative overview of non-partisan groups in European countries [46].

Due to the programmatic and organizational heterogeneity of these local actors [43, 278; 58, 65; 33], it is tricky to find a common definition for systematic international comparison. Up to now, empirical evidence for Germany is still missing, concerning their attitudes towards established parties and the democratic

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process at the national level<sup>1</sup>. Because of this, it is unknown if their self-described picture as non-parties or even anti-parties is rooted in the beliefs of their members and manifests itself in the political decisions of their representatives in the local arena. Especially in small municipalities, the presence of non-partisan groups need not necessarily be the result of a refusal to party democracy. Instead, it could be also a result of the absence of national party branches, as Holtmann (2012) [30] has shown. Nevertheless, their declaration as independent actors and promoters of a factual style of local politics seems to be a core component of non-partisan groups in Germany [29, 141].

In so far, this article attempts to give an overview about the recent state of research concerning the presence and success of non-partisan groups in Germany and the efforts to find a definition that captures the phenomenon adequately as well as a critical reflection of their claim to pursue anti-ideological and objective policies.

## 2. Problems of definition

Despite the widespread presence of non-partisan groups in different European countries [1; 7; 18; 46], it is hard to find a common definition for cross-national research. So what is the problem of definition and which attempts exist to solve it?

Next to political parties at the local level exists a lot of different kinds of groups, which try to influence local political decision making. Prominent examples are citizens' initiatives and political movements, but different to the non-partisan groups discussed here, they do not try to influence local politics directly by engaging in the electoral competition [40, 35f.]. Consequently, it is inherent for non-partisan groups to participate at the local election process. Naßmacher (1996) [39] calls these local groups "town-hall parties" (own translation), because they are regularly bounded to a municipality. The term seems to be inadequately, due to the fact that they are not parties in the sense of the German party law [29, 128]: An integral part to be a political party in Germany is the participation at state and/or federal elections (German party law § 2). Recent approaches for definition respect this aspect and propose the term "independent local lists" [46], specified as "groups participating in local elections, and being not political parties in the sense of the German party law" [19, 128]. The definition distinguishes between two lines: They are not a political party, but require a higher degree of organization than independent candidates [19, 128] and it also captures the aspect that they are running for *local* elections.

Although this definition is the recent term to grab the phenomenon, it may be problematically for an international comparison. First, because in other countries political *parties* exist that are bound to the local level and being absent from national elections. Second, it is questionable to what extent these groups are really 'independent': On one hand this may indicate that they have no formal linkages to

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<sup>1</sup> For empirical evidence regarding their attitudes and beliefs to *local* political processes see also Holtmann 2012.

parties, on the other hand it suggests that they are ideologically independent. Both can be confusing in the attempt to classify them unambiguously, because some non-partisan groups de facto have linkages to a national party, but renounce the party label in their name [45, 77ff.]. Previous research has also shown that different kinds of non-partisan groups exist, which are supporting different ideologies: The ‘old type’ of non-partisan groups represents a conservative profile, while more postmaterialistic groups support leftwing policies, next to populist right-wing groups [24, 357; 47; 33]. For the purpose of the present article, I refer to the definition from Reiser and Holtmann [e.g. 31; 49], mentioned above. For further comparative research it may be useful to remove the condition of being a non-party. So, my recommendation is to define them as a political group which presents candidates exclusively at local and/or regional elections. The definition is able to capture the whole spectrum of local and regional parties and independent local lists, exclusively acting below the national or federal political arena. Also, a certain degree of organizational cohesiveness is necessary. The following typology from Reiser [45, 80] recaps the presented problems of definition:

Table 1: Typology of local political groups

		Party linkage	
		no party linkage	party linkage
Focus	local	I) Non-partisan groups / independent local lists	II) ‘hidden party lists’
	Local / supralocal	III) Multi-level organized ‘Free Voters’	IV) local party branches

Source: Reiser 2012 [45, 80], own translation

Type I is the idealtypical German non-partisan group, without party linkages and focused exclusively on one municipality. Type II de facto has linkages to a national party but covered it by using a different label [57, 152]. The reasons for the emergence of this type can be the legal ban for national parties to participate in local elections, e.g. like in Greece [45, 86] or that the members of the local party branch share the belief that they will benefit from existing anti-party sentiments in the electorate. A somewhat hybrid phenomenon are the Free Voters in Germany, which are organized in a state association and so be present in more than one municipality.

This may be comparable with local parties in other European countries, acting in different cities but always restricted to the local or regional level [e.g. 1; 7; 18]. Type IV presents the classic party branch with formal ties to higher levels of the political system and is in this way unproblematic to identify empirically.

### 3. Presence and Success of non-partisan groups in Germany

Up to the 1990's, the thesis of a rising party politicisation in German local politics had been widespread among political scientists [e.g. 28]. Following that, the national parties 'colonise' the local level more and more. But instead of a growing politicisation, non-partisan groups have become more and more successful [27]: Especially in Southern Germany, non-partisan groups had been established since 1945 [47, 198]. Also in Eastern Germany they were able to become an integral part of the new forming local political system after the fall of communism [39; 30, 27]. In all West-German states the average success rose up until 1990<sup>1</sup>. Also in Eastern Germany the average success of non-partisan groups rose up in every State between 1990 and 2010 [30, 27]<sup>2</sup>.

Table 2: Presence and success of non-partisan groups in Germany

Federal State / Province	Presence (in % of all city councils)	Success (Average number of vote share in %)
Baden-Wuerttemberg	89,5	47,9
Bavaria	94,2	45,6
Hesse	82,4	17,0
Lower Saxony	60,8	20,9
North Rhine-Westphalia	72,5	9,6
Rhineland-Palatinate	37,7	17,9
Saarland	58,6	6,6
<b>Average West-Germany</b>	<b>69,8</b>	<b>30,0</b>
Brandenburg	91,4	45,0
Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania	72,3	43,6
Saxony	90,1	39,4
Saxony-Anhalt	73,8	41,0
Thuringia	84,4	56,3
<b>Average East-Germany</b>	<b>80,3</b>	<b>45,7</b>

<sup>1</sup> An exception is Rhineland-Palatinate, where the success between 2004 and 2009 drop down from 35,1 percent to 18,7 percent of all votes (Holtmann 2012: 26)

<sup>2</sup> Newer data are up to now not available

Average Germany	73,4 (2015: 81,1)	35,5
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Source: Göhlert et al. 2008 [20, 132]. The data for 2015 in brackets is a first result of the Free Voters Membership Study<sup>1</sup>

The results presented in table two show that despite the rising success, huge differences exist between the federal states in Germany: While in Baden-Wuerttemberg and Bavaria non-partisan groups traditionally reach their biggest electoral successes (more than 40 per cent of all votes in average), they are not able to connect at these triumphs in Saarland and North Rhine-Westphalia (less than 10 per cent of all votes on average), whereas in Eastern Germany the differences between the federal states are much lower. Obviously, the average success in the newly-formed German states is more than 15 percentage points higher than in Western Germany.

Noteworthy is also the continuous spread between 2008 and 2015: In 2008, non-partisan groups were present in 73,4 percent of all German municipalities while there are now present in more than 80 percent of all municipalities<sup>2</sup>. The result can be seen as an (weak) indicator for the continuous depoliticisation of the local level.

Despite their continuous success in Germany, the differences between the federal States raise two questions: (1) How can the continuing success for German non-partisan groups be explained *in general* and (2) what are the *specific* reasons for the different levels between the federal States?

#### 4. Theoretical assumptions to explain the rising success of non-partisan groups in Germany

In the literature, different hypotheses compete against one another to explain the different levels of success [e.g. 39; 43; 27; 40], summarized by Holtmann (2012) [30] as institutional, structural, organizational and cultural factors:

(1) Institutional aspects refer to the different arrangements of the electoral law in the federal states. Especially two aspects seem to be important. The electoral threshold and the ability to panachage and accumulate one's vote at the ballot [20, 133ff.]. From an individualistic point of view, high thresholds may influence voters' belief that a choice for a non-partisan group is a wasted one, because high thresholds complicate the chance to obtain a seat in the town hall [e.g. 53; 6]. If all or at least a lot of voters share this belief, the phenomenon can be explained by a self-fulfilling prophecy [13, 179]: Someone will vote for a non-partisan group if a sufficient number of voters would do so, too. But if idealtypically every potential voter of a

<sup>1</sup> Both based on data from the State Statistical Offices in Germany

<sup>2</sup> Attention should be paid to the fact that the percentage share of communities in Germany, in which non-partisan groups are present in 2015, based on a random sampling of all German municipalities, while the rest of the results based on a full census by Göhlert et al. (2008).

non-partisan group shares the belief that there are too little followers for this group, no one takes the chance and the non-partisan group will in fact not achieve the threshold. The second aspect is the opportunity to split one's vote. Because non-partisan groups are focused on regional and/or local topics, prominent people at the local level have a good chance to gain a seat in the town hall [24, 342]. In this way personality matters more than party ideology and the right to split one's vote reduces the costs of promoting the desired candidate.

(2) Structural aspects refer to the region and size of municipality as potential variables to influence the success. While empirical findings show that the region (rural vs. urban) has no impact on the success, the size of the municipality has an impact: The less citizens live in a municipality, the bigger is the success [43, 284]. How can this correlation be explained in detail? Two different ways to interpret are conceivable: In smaller communities exist less anonymity between the citizens and in succession less need for parties to bundle and aggregate interests. Ideology and conflict are in this view reserved to national politics and the success of non-partisan groups is the consequence of the absence or uselessness of parties in small municipalities [27, 263; 30, 42]. Another interpretation may be that people in small municipalities have stronger ties to a limited number of people with similar social-economic characteristics [21] and as a result forming particular trust to the citizens of their own community along with a generalized distrust towards their fellow citizens and their representatives outside one's own community [2; 4]. If the latter is right, anti-party sentiments should be the reason for a specific or general rejection of parties [e.g. 41; 42] at the local level and a preference for anti-party voting in the (local) electoral arena [5].

Thesis three, regarding the organizational degree of parties at the local level, is suited to discriminate between the two different possibilities standing behind the size of the municipality as a potential explanatory variable. A multivariate analysis by Holtmann [30, 42] shows, that it is not the size of the municipality itself that leads to a greater success: Instead, a small number of citizens in a municipality correlates statistically with a small number of parties in this municipality. But causally responsible for the success is the small number of parties, not the sheer number of citizens, as regression analysis indicates. So even in cities with a small number of inhabitants, parties are successful – if they participate at local elections.

At last, the political culture (4) is seen to have an impact (see also Eith/Mikhaleva 2014) [12]. An indication for this assumption is the great success on non-partisan groups in Baden-Wuerttemberg in contrast to North Rhine-Westphalia. Indeed, in both States the success has risen in recent years [30, 26], but in Baden-Wuerttemberg these groups had been well established even before the success has risen in North Rhine-Westphalia. Different political cultures may also explain the different levels of success between Eastern and Western Germany: The negative experience with the SED regime in Eastern Germany may foster “cultural antipartyism”, which “might be closely associated with other cynical or negative

assessments of various dimensions of democratic politics, forming part of a broader syndrome of political disaffection” [55, 262].

5. Non-partisan groups as advocates of a factual political style

Despite the heterogenous nature of non-partisan groups, their identifying feature is the promotion of factual politics on the local level [48]. More than 95 percent of group chairmen from non-partisan groups agreed to the statement that “factual politics has to have priority over party politics on the local level” [20, 141]. In contrast: Nearly 80 percent of party group chairmen at the local level agreed to the statement [20, 141]. The empirical findings refer to an ongoing controversy between political scientists: Is the local level anyway “a place to party” as Copus et al. (2012) [9] points out? Two different explanatory models polarize the current debate: One the one hand, “local self government was considered to be outside of the political sphere, and seen as purely factual and harmonic. In this view, the political sphere existed only on state and federal levels, mainly characterised by competition between political parties” [20, 129]. Maybe this view can be best captured by the english saying: “there is no Socialist or Conservative way to dig a ditch” [9, 221]. But, as Copus et al. [9, 221] in contrast to this expression underline, “there is a Republican and Democratic, Socialist and Conservative view about how many of these things there are, who builds them, who maintains them, where they are and who pays for them”. It is not the aim of this article to evaluate both statements, but to point out that this controversy gives an indication to understand the high level of acceptance to a somewhat factual style of local politics by both, party politicians and non-partisan politicians. In spite of commonalities, the difference of 15 percentage points to the statement above shows that members of non-partisan groups accept an harmonious political style even more. The following application tries to recapitulate the debate:

Table 3: Differences between local and national politics

Local politics	National politics
Independent candidates and non-partisan groups	Political Parties
Parties as a ‘necessary evil’	Parties as a linkage between state and citizen
Factual politics	Ideology and interest
‘big family’	Government and Opposition
common sense	Competition

Source: Jüptner 2008 [32, 35]

From a normative point of view, it may be interesting whether non-partisan groups challenge the established parties, because they promote a different political style. But up to now it is unclear if the non-partisan councillors behave and decide in a different manner than their party member counterparts in the town hall. As Holtkamp [25; 26] argues, we can distinguish between two ideal types of political behavior at the local level: Concordance and concurrence democracy, while the latter is characterised by a strong party politicisation and majority decisions and the former by a domination of non-partisan groups and the de facto dominance of unanimity decision making. But even if non-partisan groups frequently occur in concordance democracy, this may be no indicator to assume that they substantially differ from party politicians in the decision making process, because the behavior of both, party and non-partisan councillors can be influenced by the local settings<sup>1</sup>: If a cooperative political style dominates the local political process, both types of political groups may behave differently than in a more competitive setting. That in turn means that there would be no causal influence of the membership in a non-partisan group for explaining an orientation towards a harmonious political style.

#### 6. Populism or ‘Politics as Usual’ ?

The German Free Voters association, the oldest association of non-partisan groups in Germany, describes their political style as “people-oriented common sense politics” and themselves as the “political force of the middle grounds” (Free Voters 2015, own translation). But what does that mean in everyday political practise is still unknown. To get a deeper understanding of how the members of non-partisan groups behave and what are their beliefs and attitudes, we are currently aim to study the members of the German non-partisan groups by a survey to close the gap. Because empirical results are currently not yet available, my assumptions of whether non-partisan groups are populist actors in local politics or not must be restricted to theoretical assumptions, based on literature available to the topic of populism in general. Of course, previous results concerning the heterogeneity of these actors have pointed out that there will be no general answer. Instead, it seems to depend on the specific type of non-partisan group as well as the contextual conditions<sup>2</sup>. To put it pointedly: Is it a problem for representative democracy if non-partisan groups foster a factual political style? Top put it ironically, at least for the type of local concordance

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted here, that this refers to a common phenomenon, explained by Lehbruch (1979) as “janus-faced local party branches” (own translation): In this perspective party members have to deny their party membership and focus on local issues instead of ideology and interest (see Table 3 above) and simultaneously promote the party programme in national election campaigns.

<sup>2</sup> For example, as Reiser and Holtmann (2009: 209) have demonstrated empirically, the acceptance of different interests and ideologies is more widespread among non-partisan councilors in bigger cities than in smaller ones.

democracy it seems to be common that local decision making is reached by an unanimity rule and factual politics is dominating, but nevertheless political scientists in Germany are not afraid that democracy is endangered at the local level by non-partisan groups in these municipalities. But it could become problematically if the refusal of party politics will not just be restricted to the local political sphere and instead spill over to the national political system: “As party leaderships become increasingly remote from the wider society, and as they also appear increasingly similar to one another in ideological or policy terms, it simply becomes that much easier for populist protestors to rally against the supposed privileges of an undifferentiated political class. As party democracy weakens, therefore, the opportunities for populist protest clearly increase” [37, 519]. Therefore, I propose to distinguish between anti-party sentiments restricted to the local level and such which are directed against specific parties or parties in general [41; 42] at the federal or national level.

A current example to show that the electoral success from anti-party parties or anti-establishment parties [e.g. 51] can spread from the local to the national level is the Five Star Movement from Beppe Grillo in Italy [8]. In comparison, also the Free Voters are rooted at the local level for a long time, especially in Baden-Wuerttemberg and Bavaria (see table 1) and have managed to overcome the five percent hurdle at the state elections in Bavaria in 2008 and 2013 [52, 34]. But the success in Bavaria is seen as an exception [52; 38, 11] as well as their chance to become a nationwide successful actor [14].

Surprisingly, the question whether the Free Voters, as a spearhead of a factual and anti-ideological style of politics [36], are a populist or anti-establishment political group or not has not been investigated empirically up to now (for theoretical assumptions see Eith 2012 [11]; Lütjen 2012 [36]). A characteristic feature of the concept of populism and anti-establishment or anti-party parties is the distinction between ‘us and them’. As Schedler [51, 294] points out, the fundamental cleavage in this respect is “between the ‘ruled’ and the ‘rulers’, or alternatively, the conflict between audience and politics, voters and parties, citizens and politicians [...]. The semantic clothing may vary but the basic message remains the same: public officials form an anti-popular coalition; they have degenerated into a political class”. Schedler [ibid.: 51, 295] calls this rhetoric strategy “de-differentiation”, because it sets out the binary code ‘government vs. opposition’. This de-differentiation can in fact be seen in the anti-party rhetoric of the Free Voters, which do not separate between the different political parties [e.g. 36, 163]. Evidently is also the apparent contradiction between the citizens in the local community and the role of political parties: “While citizens and anti-political establishment actors live in peace and harmony, their relationship with the political establishment is deeply antagonistic. Those ‘above’ do not even belong to the pre-established community of those ‘below’” [59, 293]. This distinction comes very close to the presented distinction between local politics and national politics. But on the contrary, it is noteworthy that in some German

municipalities the Free Voters are established actors and so it may seem contradictory to define them as anti-establishment. One way to resolve this is to distinguish between their anti-party rhetoric and their actual behavior. This raises the question whether they will be able to maintain their anti-establishment appeal in the electorate, even if they have responsibility in local government.

Furthermore, Barr [3, 37] emphasizes that as a reaction to the behavior of the 'political class', the claim to improve accountability is an essential characteristic of populist groups. He identifies two different kinds in this regard: First, the vertical and top-down form ("I can do it for you") which leads to the claim that the possibility or the sheer number of direct democratic decisions must be enhanced. Second, the claim to promote citizen participation ("We can do it for ourselves") [3, 37]. And in fact, we can find both in the electoral programme of the Free Voters (Free Voters election program - 2013) [15, 5]. In spite of these sketchy considerations, the question whether or not the Free Voters, as the most known non-partisan group in Germany, are a kind of populist actor in German local politics deserves more attention in future research activities. But let me conclude this aspect by reiterating and point out very clearly that the Free Voters are only one non-partisan group among others. Currently, we do not know how much of the non-partisan groups are members in the Free Voters association. Likewise, it would be irresponsible to capture non-partisan groups as a homogenous actor.

In contrast to the presented skeptical point of view here, non-partisan groups may enhance the participation of otherwise political passive citizens in the local political sphere [e.g. 56; 29, 144] and establish a new cleavage: "Parties with a localist profile emphasise the contrast between municipal interests on one side, and regional, provincial, or national interests, on the other. They stress that independent local party councillors are in a better position to promote local interests than representatives of party branches, who are assumed to be more responsive to pressures from fellow party members at higher administrative levels" [7, 85]. Also from a normative point of view it may be questionable if populism is, simplified, always bad for (local) democracy. The construction of a homogenous identity is seen to be a core element of populism and may be incompatible with liberal democracy [e.g. 10, 26f.], but if the political class itself tends to become illiberal, it may be evaluated positively to distance oneself from the political class above. In this way, the option to form a non-partisan group without a lot of bureaucratic burden may allow oneself room for promoting local topics that would have been ignored otherwise.

## 7. Conclusion

The article aimed to give a short summary of the current status of research about non-partisan groups in German local politics and raised the question, if (a subsample of) non-partisan groups fit into the concept of populism. I have pointed out that these groups are characterised by their role as non-parties in German local

politics. A reasonable definition has proposed by Göhlert et al. (2008) [20], which separate non-partisan groups from single candidates and political parties. For an international comparison it also may be useful to apply a broader definition which removes the criteria of a non-party and stresses their limitation to the local and/or regional political sphere. This will be possible to compare local political groups between different countries, regardless of their legal status and provides a common analytical framework. So, even if the number of articles, focused on local political parties or non-partisan groups in local politics, has risen in the last years, a systematic comparison is still lacking<sup>1</sup>. The presented empirical findings indicate that non-partisan groups are a widespread phenomenon in Germany: In 2015, non-partisan groups are present in more than 80 percent of all German municipalities.

For future research it may be interesting to compare different countries to get a deeper understanding of how different levels of presence and electoral success can be explained by institutional factors of the national political system as well as the political culture. As Reiser and Krappidel [48, 91] have presented first insights into the beliefs of political group chairmen concerning local political processes, it will be also relevant to analyse their attitudes and beliefs towards political processes and democracy in general. This would improve our understanding whether the proclaimed anti-partyism of non-partisan groups is rooted in the beliefs and behavior of their members, or just political marketing, combined with politics as usual.

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<sup>1</sup> A notable exception in this way is Reiser/Holtmann (2008).

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## НЕ-ПАРТИЙНЫЕ ГРУППЫ В НЕМЕЦКОЙ ЛОКАЛЬНОЙ ПОЛИТИКЕ: МЕЖДУ ПОПУЛИЗМОМ И ПОЛИТИКОЙ

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В статье представлен обзор современного состояния исследований, посвященных успехам немецких непартийных групп в локальной политике. Показано, что их присутствие в немецких муниципалитетах возросло в период между 2008 и 2015 гг., и сегодня они активно присутствуют в политической жизни более чем 80% муниципалитетов. Эмпирические данные по периоду начиная с 2008 г. базируются в основном на данных проекта "Локальные списки независимых кандидатов как гибридные политические акторы" (Холтман, 2012; Райзер и др., 2008; Голерт и др., 2008). Данные по 2015 г. являются одними из первых исследовательских результатов проекта "Членство в независимых избирательных объединениях", который ведется в Университете им. Генриха Гейне в Дюссельдорфе автором и его коллегами. Кроме того, автор использует данные Государственного Бюро Статистики (Германия). Отдельно рассмотрены ситуа-

ции с представительством независимых групп в разных регионах Германии, особое внимание уделено политической ситуации в Южной Германии, где такого рода группы присутствуют с 1945 г. Также в статье автор сосредоточился на текущих проблемах определения локальных непартийных групп, что необходимо для межстрановых сравнений, и поднял вопрос о целесообразности анализа данных групп в связи с концепциями популизма (в трактовке Барра, 2009 г.) и партий антиистеблишмента (в трактовке Шедлера, 1996 г.). Автор обращает отдельное внимание на возможность эффекта перехода от успешной антипартийной риторики на локальном уровне к более высоким политическим уровням.

*Ключевые слова:* непартийные группы; локальные независимые избирательные списки; локальные партии; популизм; партии антиистеблишмента; локальная политика.

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