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ARTICLE

# The Self-Proclaimed Defender of Freedom: The AfD and the Pandemic

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## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged nearly every aspect of life and superseded issues at the core of populist radical right (PRR) parties' ideology, dispossessing them of one of their main narratives. This also challenged the Alternative for Germany (AfD), a relatively young but strong PRR party in opposition. We explore how the party has adjusted its policy supply to this unprecedented situation and how this has affected its popularity among German voters, building our analysis on press releases issued by the AfD between January 2020 and March 2021, vote intention data and recent election results. Initially, the party's reaction was inconsistent, but from autumn 2020 the AfD focused on fuelling discontent with the government's lockdown measures, acting as a supporter of the anti-coronavirus demonstrations. It framed its response as elite critique. So far, its siding with the lockdown protesters, however, has not had any positive effect on support for the party.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; populism; political parties; press releases; AfD

The COVID-19 pandemic has challenged nearly every aspect of life. By becoming the dominating issue in public discourse, it has superseded issues at the core of populist radical right (PRR) parties' ideology, dispossessing them of one of their main narratives. In a matter of days the pandemic dominated the policy agenda, not only depriving PRRs of one of their core issues (migration) but also creating a dilemma for PRR parties in opposition on how to position themselves with regard to two of their main characteristics: anti-elitism and authoritarianism. As governments were taking hard measures, the PRR parties in opposition had to choose between either criticizing the government and thereby giving up on supporting harsh measures or demanding such measures but thereby siding with the government. This also challenged the Alternative for Germany (AfD), which has established itself in the German party system after a long period without a successful PRR party. How did the AfD react to this unprecedented situation and was the party able to profit from the crises or did it lose support?

This article is part of a special issue that explores how PRR parties reacted to the pandemic by means of single-country case studies. Here, we look at the case of a relatively young but strong PRR party in opposition. For ease of comparison all articles in this special issue address the same three research questions: How did the PRR party respond to the pandemic (question 1), how did it frame it (question 2) and what effects did the pandemic have on its popularity (question 3)?

A crisis requires fast and drastic measures. Thus, in such a situation the focus lies on the executive, while the possible courses of action for the opposition are limited. Especially at the beginning of the crisis, the main question for opposition parties was whether to side with the government or to oppose it. Their main tool of influence in this situation was how they communicated about the crisis and how they framed the pandemic. Therefore, we study the AfD's response to and its framing of the pandemic, building on an analysis of the press releases issued by the AfD and the party's parliamentary group between January 2020 and March 2021. We find that at the beginning of the pandemic the AfD took the coronavirus very seriously and demanded even stricter measures. By late April, however, the party had switched positions and criticized the government for locking down the population at the cost of civil rights and an economic crisis. This position stayed quite stable over the course of the pandemic, with the AfD continually demanding the reopening of shops, restaurants, hotels and so on, describing masks as useless and essentially criticizing all measures taken by the government to contain the virus.

The frames the party used clearly follow PRR parties' core ideology. In an anti-elitist way it continued to criticize the government and experts, who would 'govern like autocrats' (AfD 29.03.2021, Brandner) against the people. In a nativist fashion the AfD published press releases which described the virus as being brought to Germany from other countries and expressed its pleasure that 'the legend that German borders could not be controlled ... was now obsolete' (AfD 21.01.2021, Gauland).<sup>1</sup> Authoritarianism only played a role at the beginning of the pandemic, when the party had not yet found its positions with regard to COVID-19 and actually demanded stronger containment measures than the ones taken by the government.

Despite the growing number of coronavirus-related protests, this policy supply seems to not have had any positive effect on support for the party. Vote intention for the AfD dropped to below 10% at the start of the pandemic and stayed quite stable for the whole period under examination. One reason for this seems to be the 'rally-round-the-flag effect' (Mueller 1970), according to which in times of crisis voters turn to the parties in power. Even when the previously continuously high support for the government and the measures collapsed in 2021 (Infratest dimap 2021: 8), it did not strongly benefit the AfD. These findings go against the notion that populist parties profit from crises (Moffitt 2015; Pappas and Kriesi 2016). However, this might be due to the fact that, first, the possible reactions of an opposition party are limited and that, second, the AfD could not promote two of the defining attributes of the PRR. Issues connected to nativism (such as migration) have not been as salient during the pandemic and, as the AfD presented itself as a defender of freedom, the party could not rely on authoritarianism either. Being left with populism only, this did not pay off in terms of popularity. As Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) have noted, it is the *combination* of nativism, authoritarianism and populism which makes PRR parties successful.

## Right-wing populism in Germany

For a long time, Germany was considered a 'laggard in international comparison' (Bebnowski 2015: 33) and a 'large negative outlier' (Arzheimer 2015: 540), as no right-wing populist party had managed to establish itself on the national level. Why this was the case is beyond the scope of this article (see, for example, Decker 2008 and Dolezal 2008).

What is significant is that this changed when the AfD entered the political scene in 2013. Originally the party's focus was on economic issues, but this quickly changed. At first, the AfD developed from an anti-elitist, Eurosceptic party to being a 'functional equivalent' of a right-wing populist party (Berbair et al. 2015: 174) that could fill this gap in Germany (Häusler and Roeser 2014), if the situation arose. Such a 'window of opportunity' (Caiani and Graziano 2019) presented itself in 2015 with the so-called refugee crisis, which caused the party to shift its thematic focus (Franzmann 2016; Lewandowsky et al. 2016) towards the three defining attributes of the PRR: nativism, populism and authoritarianism (Mudde 2007), now undeniably turning it into a PRR. In the 2017 general election, the AfD received 12.6% of the votes and not only entered the German parliament, but also became the biggest opposition party, thereby belonging to the group of PRR parties in opposition analysed in this special issue.

Although the AfD's reactions to the pandemic as an opposition party are constrained, it can unfold its full potential as a PRR party by framing the pandemic in relation to the three core characteristics of the PRR's ideology. Here we refrain from discussing these characteristics in detail as they have been presented in more length in the theoretical framework of the introductory contribution to this special issue (Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart 2022). Instead we directly apply them to the case of the AfD, where they apply in varying intensity.

*Nativism*, which describes a form of xenophobic nationalism (Betz 2017) that 'subsumes racism, ethnocentrism, and anti-immigrant sentiment' (Arzheimer 2015: 537), has become a core feature of the AfD. Everything that the party counts as non-native is seen as a threat to the nation state and its homogeneity, claiming that the cultural identity of immigrants, especially of those from Muslim countries, is incompatible with Western values. Policies like closing borders and restricting migration are therefore supported. With this policy profile, the party exploited the fact that immigration dominated the political discourse in Germany for quite some time. The coronavirus crisis, however, shifted attention from immigration towards health and economic policies. As the AfD has no issue ownership in these fields, this represents a challenging situation to the party. We therefore expect the party to counteract this by framing the virus in nativist terms and connecting it to immigration.

*Populism* as a 'thin-centred ideology' (Mudde 2004: 544) comes into full play in connection with nativism. The 'pure people' are identical with the native Germans only, while the people's antagonist is portrayed as the 'corrupt elite', which refers to actors on the national, international and EU levels. Since the party's foundation, criticism of the elite has played an important role in the AfD's messaging: from critique of EU elites to demonizing the German government and Chancellor Merkel in the so-called 'refugee crisis' (Rosenfelder 2017). With the start of the COVID-19

crisis, public health authorities (such as the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) in Germany) as well as virologists and epidemiologists have played an unprecedented role in informing and advising the German government. Simultaneously, with the lengthening duration of the pandemic, the popularity of and support for measures like the lockdown have declined (Infratest dimap 2021: 2). To criticize these scientific authorities and the government is in line with the AfD's populist notion and one that might seem worthwhile given the growing dissatisfaction with the measures. We therefore presume that the party uses the pandemic to criticize the government and its handling of the crisis to at least the same extent as in times before COVID-19. Moreover, in line with the decreasing support for the measures, the longer the pandemic lasted, the stronger the attacks by the AfD on the establishment.

*Authoritarianism* describes the idea of a hierarchical notion of society in which traditional values are the norm. Any deviation from this norm is supposed to be severely punished. Authoritarianism is not anti-democratic per se, but rather illiberal, as it rejects pluralism and minority rights (Mudde 2007). The policy programme of the AfD stresses such authoritarian values. The protection of traditional moral values especially plays an important role in the AfD's programme, which supports the conservation of traditional family values, argues for strict drug policies and calls for a strengthening of police forces (Lehmann et al. 2019: 128–130). The pandemic created a situation in which national states, including Germany, adopted harsh measures like closing borders and exerting national sovereignty. As steps had to be taken quickly, the German government had put its focus on the 'own' population, before seeking international or at least EU-wide solutions. Exerting control and adopting strong restrictions are typical authoritarian demands. Thus, in other situations the AfD would demand that the government acts more restrictively. But if the government takes this path itself, the AfD – as a strong opponent of the government – has to take a different stand. It cannot criticize the government and support its harsh measures at the same time. In this unusual situation, we anticipate that the AfD – against its core ideology – is promoting less authoritarian measures in order to present itself as the defender of 'freedom'.

### Studying the AfD's COVID-19 response in its press releases

Undoubtedly the COVID-19 crisis has been an unprecedented situation, challenging the whole state and also the political parties. While government parties quickly had to take measures to contain the virus and counteract its impact on public health and all other areas of public and private life, the possibilities for opposition parties to react were much narrower.<sup>2</sup> They could mainly impact the situation by how strongly they criticized the government and by how they framed the pandemic itself and the government measures. An important aspect of the opposition's reaction can thus be captured in how they communicated about the crisis. A relevant source for a party's communication strategy are its press releases. Parties use press releases to address the media directly, and through that the public (Franzmann 2016: 6). In contrast to, for example, parliamentary speeches, parties do not face any constraints here; they can decide freely which issues to address and which to

**Table 1.** Saliency of Topics in AfD Press Releases between January 2020 and March 2021

Topic	N	Share (%)
COVID-19 measures	310	15.06
Migration, asylum and integration	175	8.50
External relations	143	6.95
Interparty dispute	132	6.41
EU	130	6.31
Islam and identity politics	127	6.17
Democracy and rule of law (incl. corruption)	115	5.59
Law and order	112	5.44
Economy and COVID	96	4.66
Health and social security	91	4.42
Energy and climate	86	4.18
Agriculture	82	3.98
Economy and labour	74	3.59
Women, gender and family	64	3.11
Vaccination	55	2.67
Self-victimization	53	2.57
Public service broadcasting and media critique	52	2.53
Finance	42	2.04
Transport	31	1.51
Residuals (topics appearing in fewer than 15 press releases)	89	4.32
Total	2059	100.00

ignore and when and how to do this (Klüver and Sagarzazu 2016: 386). At the same time this means that press releases only capture the message a party wants to send; they are not reflecting each reaction given in public appearances by party officials or in the speeches by AfD parliamentarians. In addition, press releases are published throughout the whole year and thus allow us to study how a party reacts to a certain situation over time.

In this study we therefore use the AfD's press releases to analyse how the AfD reacted to the pandemic over time and how it framed the politics of the pandemic. We collected all press releases issued by the party headquarters and the parliamentary group in the Bundestag between January 2020 and March 2021.<sup>3</sup> In total there are 2,059 press releases; 1,504 of them published by the parliamentary group and 555 by the party.<sup>4</sup>

To study the AfD's response to COVID-19 and the government measures, we manually coded the main focus of each press release. To do this we developed a category scheme specifying 19 policy topics and a residuals category (see Table 1). The category scheme was created inductively. We started by clustering

all press releases into 15 groups with the help of a topic model. Based on these clusters we determined the main underlying topics, which served as the starting point for our coding scheme. However, we decided to split some of these categories. For example, we divided the category ‘economy and COVID’ into one category that dealt with all press releases that specifically focused on the impact of COVID-19 and the government measures on the economy and a second category that subsumed press releases that made statements on economic issues without any reference to the pandemic. Finally, we also added a ‘residuals’ category for all press releases that did not fit into any of the existing categories. Equipped with this category scheme, we manually coded all press releases.

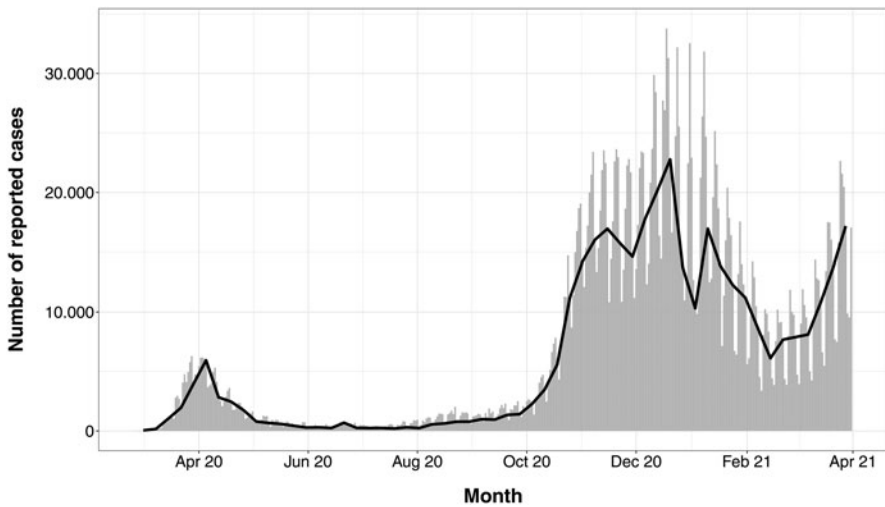
### **The AfD and the pandemic: reactions and frames**

In this section we will first use the quantitative coding results to analyse how COVID-19 and the government measures have influenced the AfD’s policy agenda over different phases of the pandemic, and then we will look at the press releases in more detail to study which measures and reactions the AfD proposed in light of the pandemic and to illustrate if and how the party applied the typical PRR frames to the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> With this three-step process we keep zooming in, starting with the analysis of how the overall policy agenda was affected by COVID-19, then looking at the specific answers to the pandemic and finally the frames the AfD used for these answers.

Our analysis is structured along five phases: a pre-COVID-19 phase (January–February 2020), a first wave (March–mid-May 2020), summer (mid-May–mid-September 2020), a second wave (mid-September 2020–mid-February 2021), and a third wave (mid-February–end of March 2021). We identified these phases based on the number of COVID-19 cases (Figure 1) and COVID-related deaths (Figure B1 in the Online Appendix).<sup>6</sup>

#### **Pre-COVID**

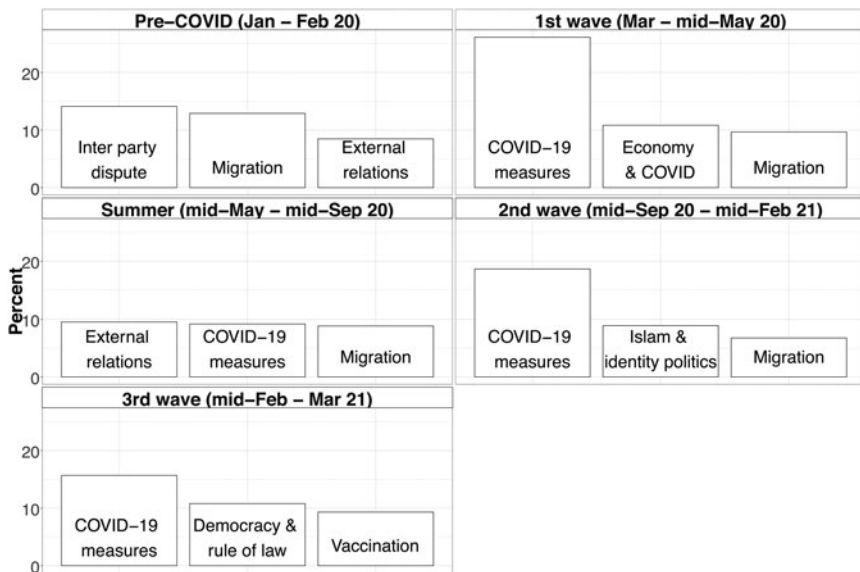
The most dominant topic in the pre-COVID phase is ‘interparty dispute’ – that is, press releases which more or less focused on criticizing the established parties (Figure 2), a focus mainly driven by press releases from the party headquarters. This topic clearly feeds into the populist narrative. The second most important topic in this phase is ‘migration, asylum and integration’ – a topic at the core of the PRR ideology aligning with nativist views. While the first coronavirus case in Germany was reported on 27 January 2020, the first time the AfD mentioned the coronavirus was in a press release from 13 February, one day after a debate in parliament on matters of topical interest (*Aktuelle Stunde*), which was called by the governing coalition of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD).<sup>7</sup> The AfD described the dangers of the virus and called for ‘controls and effective measures against further spread’ and even suggested a ‘worldwide action plan’, but also criticized the ‘irresponsible dependence [of Germany] on Asian manufacturers’ regarding pharmaceutical products (AfD 13.02.2020, Spangenberg/Schlund).<sup>8</sup> While the party here takes the virus and the consequences of a



**Figure 1.** Daily COVID-19 Cases: March 2020–March 2021 in Germany

Source: Data from Robert Koch Institute.

Note: Bar graph displays the daily COVID-19 cases, line graph displays the weekly mean.

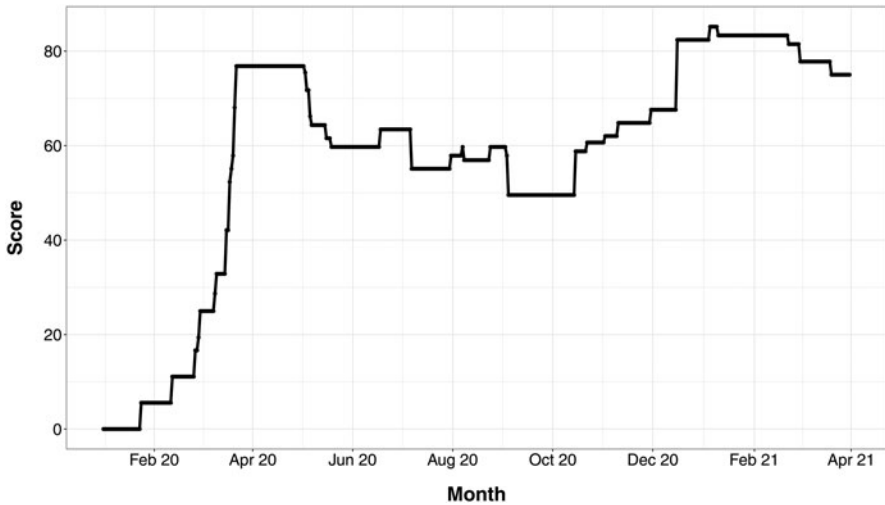


**Figure 2.** The Three Most Important Topics in AfD Press Releases, per Phase

Note: Migration includes asylum and integration.

worldwide spread seriously, it also shifts the attention to another issue, namely Germany's dependence on other countries, which fits into the populist frame of a strong, independent nation state.





**Figure 3.** Government Stringency Index in Germany

Source: Data from Hale et al. (2021).

### **First wave**

By March, the number of cases started to increase quickly (Figure 1); as a consequence the government started taking stricter containment measures which, according to the Government Response Tracker from the University of Oxford, reached a high plateau from the end of March through to April (Figure 3). The data track the measures governments all over the world have taken to counteract the COVID-19 crisis. Reported here is the stringency index, which is built from eight containment indicators.

The two most important topics in the press releases at this time are the ‘COVID-19 measures’, followed by ‘economy and COVID’ (Figure 2). In third place we find ‘migration, asylum and integration’. In conjunction this shows that even though the AfD’s core issues lie in other fields, the party needs to react to changes on the political agenda. Once COVID-19 had captured the agenda, the AfD, too, turned its focus to these issues. Nonetheless it also continually tried to put its core issue on the agenda, which was more or less eliminated from public discourse at the time.

*A party searching for its position: unsettled between strict measures and civil liberties*  
While, as just shown, the COVID-19 measures dominated the AfD’s agenda, the party needed some time to define its position on these issues. In the beginning, the AfD responded to the rising numbers by recommendations ‘to cancel all public party events that are not absolutely necessary for prevention reasons until further notice’ (AfD 04.03.2020a), demanding that schools should be closed, warning about consequences the pandemic might have for the German economy, explicitly stating that ‘the outbreak of the coronavirus is no longer only a health crisis’ (AfD 04.03.2020b, Schielke-Ziesing/Pohl). However, the AfD’s position towards the

containment measures and restrictions quickly became inconsistent, sometimes downright contradictory. On the one hand, the party called for an ‘exit strategy for the restriction of civil rights’ (AfD 01.04.2020, von Storch) and stressed the importance of civil rights, especially in times of crisis. On the other hand, the party called for travel warnings and travel restrictions, demanded and endorsed the closing of borders as well as controls at the airport and asked for the establishment of a ‘corona crisis cabinet’ representing a ‘strong, determined and capable state’ (AfD 11.03.2020, Meuthen).

At the beginning of April, the AfD put forward a demand for a ‘national corona immunity register’ (AfD 06.04.2020, Holm), which would allow those recovered from COVID to move freely, work and go on holidays. Only a month later, however, the party strictly opposed immunization cards, as those would either force people to get vaccinated (*Zwangsimpfung*) or motivate them to infect themselves on purpose (AfD 02.05.2020, Brandner). In a similar vein, the party feared a ‘two-tier society’ where only those that accept the deal ‘freedom in exchange for data’ regain their civil rights (AfD 04.05.2020, Weidel). This call for more self-determination not only concerns the decision to get vaccinated, but stands in a bigger context of the AfD’s attempt to present itself as the protector of freedom. In that respect the party opposed the use of tracking data on mobile phones (AfD 31.03.2020, Cotar) and compulsory use of the coronavirus tracing app by the government, as this would be the ‘first step towards total surveillance of citizens’ (AfD 17.04.2020, Chrupalla/Hartwig). Concerning the use of masks in trains, the AfD advocated ‘voluntariness’ and rejected ‘coercive measures and punishments for non-compliance’ (AfD 27.04.2020b, Wiehle).

In late April and early May the party called for an immediate lift of the ‘shutdown’ to prevent an ‘economic crisis of historic extent’ (AfD 28.04.2020, Weidel/Gauland), which marks a clear shift of attention from health towards economic policies. Moreover, the prolonging of worldwide travel warnings was criticized (AfD 30.04.2020, Gauland) and opposed (AfD 14.05.2020, Münzenmaier/Hartwig). In line with that, the party stated that freedom of expression as well as freedom of assembly are civil rights that should also be exerted in times of crisis (AfD 07.05.2020a, Spangenberg) and not only showed ‘understanding for the Germany-wide demonstrations against the coronavirus measures’, but also criticized the ‘general defamation of participants as right-wing extremists, weirdos, scatterbrains or conspiracy theorists’ (AfD 11.05.2020, Gauland). The support for the protests against COVID measures, whose number peaked in May and June 2020, became the unique selling point of the AfD, as no other party endorsed these protests so much. It was combined with a strong (and populist) critique of the government and a call for further easing of the measures.

#### *COVID-19: blaming and demonizing the government and ‘foreigners’*

In an anti-elite fashion, the party first blamed the ‘WHO [World Health Organization] together with the communist regime in China’ for underestimating the danger of the virus for too long (AfD 16.04.2020a, Bystron), explicitly sharing the view of then US president Donald Trump (AfD 16.04.2020b, Friesen). Second, it criticized the federal government for bad management of the pandemic, and for ignoring a study, ‘Risk Analysis in Civil Protection 2012’, by the RKI, which

described a scenario comparable to the outbreak of the coronavirus, including proposals for action (AfD 24.04.2020, Spangenberg). Additionally, the AfD claimed that ‘experts outside the RKI are not heard’ and proposed a ‘team of advisers from different and independent experts in order to protect Germany from further disastrous wrong decisions’ (AfD 23.04.2020, Spangenberg/Schlund). This demand reflects the ambiguous relationship between the AfD and experts. When the latter are in line with the AfD’s positions, they are supported (AfD 14.04.2020a, Gauland), but when there is disagreement, they are criticized (AfD 15.04.2020).

In an attempt to redirect attention to issues in the party’s core ideology, the AfD tried to connect the situation caused by the pandemic to traditional values and migration. For example, it argued strongly against a civil organization’s proposal to lower the hurdles for abortions because of increased utilization of hospitals and containment measures (AfD 24.03.2020, Beatrix von Storch; AfD 25.03.2020, Harder-Kühnel). Instead the AfD called for a ‘protective screen for unborn life’ (AfD 30.04.2020a, Felser). The party criticized the fact that asylum seekers were not affected by entry restrictions (AfD 17.03.2020, von Storch) and that the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) did not issue rejection notices to asylum seekers (AfD 09.04.2020, Curio) and suggested that free capacity in the aviation industry could be used for the fast and effective repatriation of migrants obliged to leave the country (AfD 18.03.2020, Wirth).

By pointing out the success of border controls (AfD 14.04.2020b, Brandner), the AfD connected policy decisions taken in light of the pandemic to both authoritarianism and nativism. The party demanded that borders should be kept closed in the long run, not only to prevent people from the Middle East and Africa ‘spread[ing] the epidemic again’ (AfD 27.04.2020a, Friesen), but also to avert a ‘return to uncontrolled illegal immigration from the pre-corona period’ (AfD 13.05.2020, von Storch). When there was a cluster outbreak in a slaughterhouse in southern Germany, the AfD asked ‘Corona – Made in Romania?’ (AfD 30.04.2020b, Witt), thereby again framing the virus as something brought into the country by foreigners.

### **Summer 2020**

After the first wave’s peak in COVID-19 cases at the end of March, the numbers decreased continuously and from mid-May until early August the number of daily reported cases constantly stayed below 1,000 (Figure 1). In line with the decrease in cases, the German government started loosening, though not completely lifting, the containment measures (Figure 3). At the same time protests against the containment measures increased (Grande et al. 2021).

Looking at the quantitative data, no single topic clearly overshadowed the others over the summer (Figure 2). In fact, even the most important topic at this time, ‘external relations’, is the focus of less than 10% of the press releases, directly followed by the ‘COVID-19 measures’ and ‘migration asylum, and integration’. The focus on external relations might come as a surprise. It is mainly driven by press releases from the parliamentary group. If we look at only the press releases from the party headquarters, it is migration and Islam that dominate the agenda, depicting very nicely that once COVID-19 did not dominate the public agenda, the AfD tried to redirect attention to its main policy focus.

*More freedom, fewer restrictions*

This does not mean, though, that COVID-related issues disappeared completely from the party's agenda. In fact, the AfD clearly sided with the protesters by calling for a loosening of containment measures and cautioning against interventions in the constitutional law (e.g. AfD 01.09.2020, Seitz; AfD 15.05.2020, Schlund). In contrast to the government, the AfD strongly opposed most of the containment measures. It called for the reopening of schools and kindergartens (e.g. AfD 05.08.2020, Frömming), objected to mandatory face masks (e.g. AfD, 06.07.2020, Chrupalla), demanded that restrictions on travel were lifted (e.g. AfD, 28.07.2020, Münzenmaier) and that restrictions on restaurants and bars were removed (e.g. AfD, 18.08.2020, Spangenberg). Interestingly though, while the AfD asked for the lifting of travel restrictions for Germans, it demanded strict border controls to prevent immigrants from entering Germany and the EU (AfD 15.05.2020, Gauland).

*Condemning the elites and supporting demonstrators*

The AfD's framing of the COVID-19 crisis over the summer continued to be marked by populist elite critique. The party strongly opposed nearly all measures taken to contain the coronavirus and accused the minister of health, Jens Spahn, and Chancellor Merkel of taking the wrong measures and acting 'unconstitutionally' (AfD 02.06.2020, Huber). It suggested that the government was 'blindly' following the experts from the RKI and the Charité. As in the previous phase, the AfD was, however, eager to refer to experts and scientific studies that were opposing the government's actions. By doing this, it was trying to suggest that the experts were not united and that the government measures were ill-advised (e.g. AfD 29.05.2020, von Storch; AfD 30.05.2020, Gehrke; AfD 11.08.2020, Hollnagel; AfD 02.09.2020, Witt). What the party did not mention, though, was that it was mostly referring to minority positions.

With its critique against the measures, the party addressed the corona-sceptics and condemned any restrictions on the freedom of assembly (e.g. AfD 06.08.2020, Gauland). When a planned demonstration on 29 August was banned by the Berlin senate, the AfD heavily criticized this measure: 'At an unprecedented pace are those in power leaving democratic grounds in the direction of a dictatorship comfort zone' (AfD 26.8.2020, Curio). Correspondingly, it strongly approved the annulment of the ban by the Berlin Administrative Court as 'a victory for freedom over an anti-democratic, ideology-driven policy of prohibition and paternalism by the established parties' (AfD 28.8.2020, Chrupalla). The demonstration culminated when a couple of demonstrators breached the police line and stormed the stairs of the Reichstag, the German parliament building. In contrast to the events in the US half a year later, they did not manage to enter. After this event, Alice Weidel, co-speaker of the AfD parliamentary group, condemned the protesters for breaching the police line (AfD 30.08.2020). But – without cause – Weidel also included protest events by Greenpeace in her critique, an organization located on the left side of the political spectrum and not present at this event. It is a typical frame that right-wing populist actors use to relativize critiques of violent actors from the right.

Finally, a clearly nativist positioning becomes visible again in the AfD's critique of German or EU assistance to other countries in fighting the coronavirus. The party criticizes the EU recovery fund as wrongheaded and accuses 'these southerners' (*diese Südländer*) of having an unsound public budget (AfD 19.05.2020, von Storch/Boehringer). In a similar vein it assails initiatives to help developing countries to vaccinate their populations (AfD 10.07.2020, Huber) or send them masks (AfD 14.08.2020, Brandner).

### **Second wave**

In retrospect, evidence for a second wave could already be seen in August 2020; by mid-September daily numbers of new cases clearly headed towards an exponential growth (Figure 1). In contrast to that, in September, containment measures were eased, restrictions on internal movements were lifted and schools opened more widely (Figure 3). In mid-October these steps were then steadily scaled back and the public were recommended to stay at home and to avoid travelling. Nevertheless, the cases continued to increase, and a week before Christmas schools were closed again, as well as all shops not selling essential products. Moreover, strict limits were put in place for the holidays to prevent superspreading under the Christmas tree. On 18 December the highest number of daily cases was reached with almost 34,000 new infections (Figure 1). About a month later, on 14 January, the sad peak of COVID-related deaths was reported, when 1,244 people died in one day (Online Appendix, Figure A1).

Unsurprisingly, in this situation the COVID-19 measures became the primary focus of the AfD's press releases again (Figure 2). Interestingly, 'Islam and identity politics' as well as 'migration, asylum and integration' were the second and third most important topics, which fits well into the AfD's nativist ideology. The focus on COVID-related issues was thus less drastic than it had been during the first wave. Instead, the AfD might have realized that it could still gain the most when focusing on its unique selling point, immigration.

#### *Disapproval of containment measures and ambiguous attitude towards vaccinations*

But while COVID-related issues did not dominate the party's agenda to the same extent as during the first wave, its position on these issues was much clearer now: the containment measures were regarded as too strict, ill-advised, unconstitutional and unnecessary. Every time the lockdown was prolonged by the government, the AfD strongly criticized and opposed this decision and instead called for a 'clear and binding exit strategy' (AfD 21.01.21, Weidel).

Towards the end of the year when the first vaccines against COVID-19 were about to be approved by the European Medicines Agency (EMA), vaccination became an issue in the press releases too. Here the AfD's position was not straightforward, though. On the one hand, it was arguing against a possible 'forced vaccination' (*Zwangsimpfung*) (AfD 17.11.2020, Limmer), which has never been a realistic scenario,<sup>9</sup> and it demanded that the government put a hold on mass vaccinations (AfD 10.12.2020, Podolay) – at a time when not a single vaccination had yet taken place in Germany. On the other hand, it questioned why a vaccine that had been developed in Germany was first being distributed in Great Britain and the US

(AfD 15.12.2020, Gauland). Similarly, the AfD criticized both the vaccine order procedure by the EU and the German government (AfD 02.01.2021, Frömming) and called for parliamentary inquiry committees on both the national and the EU levels (AfD 05.01.2021, Meuthen; AfD 05.01.2021, Weidel/Gauland), but at the same time rejected plans to deviate from the original recommendation of the Standing Committee on Vaccination (STIKO), since ‘citizens are not allowed to be test subjects’ (AfD 04.01.2021, Podolay). However, when it was reported that vaccines were being thrown away due to a lack of people currently entitled by the STIKO categorization, the AfD instead demanded more flexibility and the involvement of family practices for faster vaccination (AfD 08.02.2021, Spangenberg). Furthermore, the AfD opposed restraints for those people who did not want to get vaccinated, as the ‘exercise of fundamental rights should not be linked to the vaccination status’ and should not be seen as privileges for vaccinated persons (AfD 03.02.21, Brandner).

*The coronavirus measures as an ‘unlawful attack of the government against the people’*  
In clear populist fashion, the government was blamed for taking decisions against the will and the needs of the people, speaking of ‘notorious constitution breaker Merkel’ who has ‘lost any sense for Germany and the people in this country!’ (AfD 29.09.2020, Brandner). The people were pictured as victims of ‘dictatorial’ measures by the government: ‘The price paid by the German people for ministers and sovereigns (*Landesfürsten*) to live out their insane fantasies of prohibition in an uncontrolled manner is gigantic’ (AfD 13.10.2020, Gauland/Münzenmaier). But some press releases also broached a divide among the people – those citizens disagreeing with the corona measures and those supporting them. Here the AfD postulated an atmosphere of spying as had been known under the GDR’s secret police (STASI) (AfD 17.09.2020, Podolay). The party also attacked the EU and especially Ursula van der Leyen, the president of the European Commission, for her ‘core competency of incompetence’ (AfD 10.02.21, Meuthen).

While the federal and state governments were its main point of attack, the AfD also criticized certain experts. In general, however, it focused on those experts and reports that were in line with the AfD’s positions, to justify its critique against the government’s measures (e.g. AfD 21.10.2020, Spangenberg; AfD 25.11.2020, Podolay). As before, it argued that the government was basing its decisions on ‘wrong’ or non-existent data: ‘These haunting facts show how logic and reason have become scarce goods these days and how urgent our appeal to the government is to finally stick to numbers and data’ (AfD 27.11.2020, Podolay; see also AfD 09.11.2020, Gehrke). Therefore, the government should ‘finally listen to the numerous, well-known scientists who consider the previous approach to be in vain’ (AfD 13.01.2021, Münzenmaier/Spangenberg). Notwithstanding that the majority of experts were of a different opinion.

When Chancellor Merkel threatened to reintroduce border controls to neighbouring countries, should they take a different approach to fighting the pandemic, the AfD framed this in an authoritarian and nativist fashion as a ‘glimmer of hope’ which ‘would finally create the conditions for more internal security in the entire EU’ (AfD 21.01.2021, Gauland).

**Third wave**

The third wave was born out of the second. Unlike between the first and second wave, there was no time between these two waves where numbers were low and a moment of relaxation could take place. In fact, the numbers started increasing again in mid-February 2021 (Figure 1) and the government, instead of tightening the measures, started loosening them in mid-March (Figure 3). In this situation the COVID-19 measures stayed the single most important issue in the AfD press releases overall, but its dominance decreased even more (from around 19% during the second wave, to around 16%). What is more, this saliency is mainly due to the parliamentary group, whereas in the press releases from the party headquarters the COVID-19 measures are the main focus in only a little more than 5%. Next to it the most salient topics were ‘democracy and rule of law’ and ‘vaccination’ (Figure 2). The former includes press releases on corruption, which became a major topic after it was made public that some CDU and CSU members had received high commissions for brokering face mask deals. The latter became an issue with the – in the beginning very slow – roll-out of the vaccination campaign.

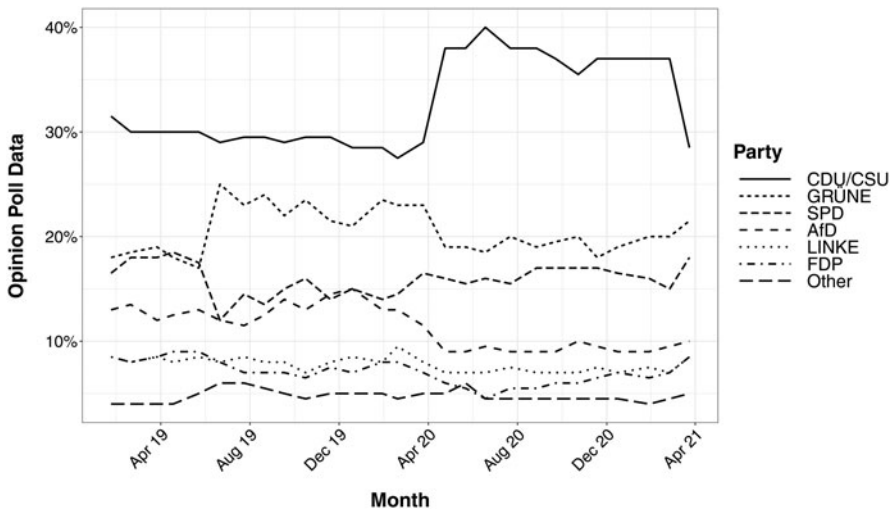
*Disapproval of containment measures and ambiguous attitude towards vaccinations 2.0*

Strict containment measures had been in place for quite a while at the beginning of the third wave and the AfD continued criticizing them. It clamoured for an end to the lockdown, calling it a ‘cul-de-sac road’ (AfD 22.02.2021, Gauland) and claiming that binding the possibility of loosening the lockdown to the incidence is ill-advised, as these numbers would not be comparable (AfD 18.03.2021, Weidel). Critique also arose around the travel restrictions, which allowed travel to Mallorca, but forbade holidays in Germany. This was regarded as ‘a serious blow’ for the German hotel and catering industry, who had to wait for a reopening, while ‘sales revenues are being diverted to other countries’ (AfD 17.03.2021, Gauland).

An issue that started to receive even more attention than before was vaccination. The AfD’s reactions to the vaccination strategy can be clustered along three lines. First, it strongly criticized the government for the slow roll-out, which would be equivalent to state failure, especially considering the progress other countries were making (AfD 01.03.2021, Gauland). Second, it called for a fast licensing of the Russian Sputnik V to increase the pace of vaccination (AfD 26.03.2021, Gauland/Frömming). Third, it strongly opposed a vaccination certificate that would create a ‘two-tier society’ and ‘make vaccination mandatory through the back door’ (AfD 18.03.2021, Meuthen).

*Fabrications about power fantasies by the government and a true scandal*

Populist elite critique continued to be the dominant frame: the government was blamed for acting without concept or plan (AfD 24.03.2021, Meuthen), described as being obsessed with power: ‘[Merkel] acts more and more as an autocrat over Germany’ (AfD 29.03.2021, Brandner), and hence trying to concentrate all power in the federal government (AfD 30.3.2021, Gauland). A special situation arose when in March news emerged that a couple of CDU and CSU politicians had received commissions for brokering deals with face mask suppliers. The AfD demanded a fast elucidation of the respective cases and AfD co-chairman Tino



**Figure 4.** Sonntagsfrage Allensbach

Source: Data from Allensbach Institute, Sonntagsfrage.

Chrupalla asked whether this was ‘a structural problem within the Union’ (AfD 08.03.2021, Chrupalla).

### The AfD’s popularity

Our analysis of the AfD’s press releases demonstrated that the AfD’s main strategy during the pandemic was to criticize the government and its measures, trying to portray itself as the only defender of freedom rights. But did this communication strategy pay off for the AfD in terms of popularity among the German population? To assess this, we rely on monthly reported vote intention data (so-called *Sonntagsfrage*) from the Allensbach Institute (IfD 2021). Figure 4 clearly shows the ‘rally-round-the-flag effect’ (Mueller 1970) for the German government in 2020. While in March 2020 support for the CDU/CSU, Chancellor Merkel’s party, was around 29%, it rose to 38% in April and May and even cracked 40% in June. Support rates dropped slightly thereafter, but with 37% reported in December, this was still significantly more than before the pandemic. This increase of almost one-third is exceptional: ‘no other governing party came even close to these numbers’ (Wondreys and Mudde 2020: 7). However, the situation drastically changed in March 2021, when the public became increasingly impatient with the slow vaccination roll-out, scandals about ‘mask deals’ became public (Olterman 2021) and the third wave commenced. In succession the rates for the CDU/CSU dropped to 28.5%.

The junior partner in the grand coalition, the SPD, had from the start not benefited from the rally-round-the-flag effect to the same extent. In fact, estimated votes increased only slightly by around 2–3 percentage points from 14.5% in February and stayed on this plateau for the whole period under examination. This is in line with the ‘almost invisible [effect] for junior coalition parties’ (Wondreys and Mudde 2020: 7).



Being the biggest opposition party in Germany, the AfD is the harshest detractor of the government even in non-pandemic times. Before the pandemic hit Germany, the AfD was continually estimated to win between 13% and 15% of the votes if an election were to take place next Sunday, but by April 2020 support had dropped to 9% and rose only slightly after that, culminating in a result of just above 10% at the federal election in September 2021.<sup>10</sup> In that sense, the AfD can be seen as one of the ‘victims of the pandemic’ (Wondreys and Mudde 2020), at least in terms of electoral support.

This is an interesting finding, because even though support for the government was high throughout most parts of the pandemic, there has also been increasing dissatisfaction with the government, creating a reservoir of potential AfD voters. To capture the size of this protest potential and to study why the AfD was not able to make better use of it we draw on data from the Monitoring System and Transfer Platform Radicalization (MOTRA) project (Grande et al. 2021).<sup>11</sup>

The MOTRA survey data (Grande et al. 2021) reveal that not all protesters are necessarily potential AfD supporters. Among those who show understanding for the protests (*Protestverstehender*), identification with the AfD is highest (25.8% on average) and has increased over time (up to 30.2% in November 2020). While in comparison to the other parties this is a high number, it also means that around 70% of the protesters are not (yet) AfD voters, and because of the high diversity of protesters it remains unclear whether the AfD will ever be able to win their support. The common denominator among the coronavirus protesters is a strong distrust towards the federal governments as well as concerns about the restrictions of freedom. So far the AfD has not been able to use this dissatisfaction to mobilize more support for the party. However, due to the susceptibility to conspiracy theories, a considerable potential for radicalization towards the extreme right exists, which might also offer an increased voter potential for the AfD.

## Conclusion

When the COVID-19 crisis hit Germany, the AfD was still a very young PRR party. Founded in 2013, it had only entered the German Bundestag for the first time at the previous election. The party had gained most of its support in the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ in 2015 and had since then focused on the immigration issue, playing a nativist card, its policy programme scaled high on the authoritarian dimension, and in all its statements it stood out as the strongest opponent to the government.

The COVID-19 crisis imposed a clear challenge to the party, as it not only suppressed its main issue, immigration, but also created conflict between the other two frames the party had so far relied on: elite critique and authoritarianism. In this article we have studied how the AfD reacted to this challenge and whether and how it managed to apply the core frames of PRR parties to the pandemic.

We studied the AfD’s response to the pandemic based on its press releases issued between January 2020 and March 2021. By looking at the press releases we focused our analysis on the party’s strategically chosen communication strategy. As a PRR party in opposition the AfD’s possibilities of reaction were limited, motivating our decision to study its official communications strategy, but the choice of press releases as the primary data source does not come without limitations either.

While this communication channel can be used without external constraints, the AfD and its parliamentarians also positioned themselves in further arenas. Future studies should also look at the communicative (re-)actions of PRR parties on social media and in parliament to get an encompassing picture of the PRR not only in times of a pandemic, but during crises more generally. However, we believe that this study of the AfD's official communication is an important part of this picture.

The analysis has shown us that the frames the AfD used to describe the pandemic are clearly connected to the defining attributes of the PRR, which played a distinct role in the party's communication and were used to different extents at various points in time. Since one of its core issues, migration, was nearly eliminated from public discourse, it tried to find other ways to express its nativist stances by framing the pandemic, how it developed, and how it should be overcome in this way. In an anti-elite fashion, the AfD strongly criticized the government's handling of the pandemic, discrediting its measures as 'unlawful' and dangerous and opposing nearly all coronavirus measures taken by the government. In times of stay-at-home recommendations and mandatory face masks in supermarkets or public buildings, the AfD demanded more freedom rights and criticized others as being too authoritarian, while – in non-pandemic times – being an authoritarian party itself.

The fact that the AfD could not rely on two of its main core features, nativism and authoritarianism, left the PRR party in opposition with populism only. In terms of popularity this has not won the AfD considerable voter support. While opinion polls saw AfD support around 13% before the pandemic, support dropped below 10% in April 2020 and stayed there for the rest of 2020 and the beginning of 2021. As the self-proclaimed defender of freedom, the AfD could not profit from the crisis – even when satisfaction with the government was low – which is in line with the assessment that the key to PRR success is the combination of the three defining features (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017).

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## Notes

- 1 Online Appendix A lists all the press releases with their full source information. See also note 3 below.
- 2 Here it is important to note that the AfD was the only 'pure' opposition party in Germany at the time, as all other parties were, at least on the Länder level, part of one or more government(s).
- 3 The press releases have been scraped from the websites of the AfD ([www.afd.de/presse/](http://www.afd.de/presse/)) and the AfD's parliamentary group ([www.afdbundestag.de/pressemitteilungen/](http://www.afdbundestag.de/pressemitteilungen/)). The scraping took place between 2 and 11 February 2021 (for the press releases from 2020) and on 12 April 2021 (for the press releases from 2021). If we directly refer to a specific press releases in the analysis, we cite it by presenting date and author. Online Appendix A lists all these press releases with their full source information.
- 4 We excluded 74 press releases, because they did not contain any information about when they were published.

- 5 When speaking of frames here, we refer to the concept of ‘emphasis frames’, where actors stress or put emphasis on specific aspects of a certain topic and thereby influence its perception (Druckman 2001; Nelson et al. 1997).
- 6 The source we rely on for this data is the Robert Koch Institute. This is the German federal agency responsible for infectious diseases. It publishes the official data on COVID-19 cases and COVID-related deaths (Robert Koch Institute 2021).
- 7 [www.bundestag.de/en/parliament/function/scrutiny/instruments\\_scrutiny-245710](http://www.bundestag.de/en/parliament/function/scrutiny/instruments_scrutiny-245710).
- 8 All quotes from the press releases have been translated by the authors.
- 9 At the time of writing, a mandatory vaccination is being discussed – which is, however, not the same as forced vaccination.
- 10 It must be noted, though, that AfD support might have also been affected by several decisions by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesverfassungsschutz), which decided to classify the AfD-suborganization ‘Der Flügel’ as a right-wing extremist endeavour and to upgrade it from a suspected case to a classic object of observation in March 2020 ([www.verfassungsschutz.de/de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/presse/pm-20200312-bfv-stuft-afd-teilorganisation-der-fluegel-als-gesichert-rechtsextremistische-bestrebung-ein](http://www.verfassungsschutz.de/de/oeffentlichkeitsarbeit/presse/pm-20200312-bfv-stuft-afd-teilorganisation-der-fluegel-als-gesichert-rechtsextremistische-bestrebung-ein)). In March 2021 the whole party was then declared a ‘suspected case’ (Diehl et al. 2021), a decision that was, however, suspended by the Cologne administrative court only a few days later (Deutsche Welle 2021). At the time of writing, no final decision has been made (Tagesschau 2021).
- 11 Their study first presents information about protests that took place in Germany, the number of participants as well as the thematic focus of these protests, and second the results of a representative nationwide survey among more than 5,000 respondents with questions about the coronavirus demonstrations. The eight survey waves were carried out between June and November 2020.

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