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Dissatisfaction and Eroding Institutional Confidence: Examining German Perspectives of the Alternative für Deutschland and Its Impact on the German Party System

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Dissatisfaction and Eroding Institutional Confidence: Examining German Perspectives of the

Alternative für Deutschland and Its Impact on the German Party System

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by

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has been accepted by the Honors College of Abilene Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the distinction

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Abstract

Support for Germany's contemporary far-right party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) has become more salient in recent years due to multiple crises in the European Union and changes in the German political landscape. The rise of the AfD is met with significant pushback from the majority of the German public due to its similarity to the Nazi party in rhetoric, policy, and action. However, opposition to the party is not unanimous; the AfD polled at 22 percent in January 2024.¹ Through a qualitative analysis of 16 interviews with German citizens on their perspectives of the party, I find there exists dealignment within the German party system, tensions in civil discourse, and collective anxiety over the pariah approach of the AfD. These conclusions emerge through participants' expression of frustration with their choices in parties, a lack of relationship to AfD members, and the belief in the importance of listening to those with different views than oneself. Participants express that although the AfD appears to address issues that could be considered justifiable, the party utilizes the wrong approach towards these issues and inevitably threatens Germany's liberal democracy in the process. The research reveals implications for the state of the German party system, the EU, and the state of civil society in Germany.

Keywords: AfD, dealignment, party system, civil society, pariah, populism, democracy, EU

¹ Politico, "Poll of Polls, Germany — National parliament voting intention," Politico, Politico, Accessed February 3, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/germany/>.

Introduction

Germany's current far-right party, the *Alternativ für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, abbreviated hereafter as 'AfD') has risen to prominence in the German party system as a response to various crises in the European Union, such as the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the 2015 Refugee Crisis. However, as Kilkauer puts it, "the party's original quest to leave the Euro currency zone and NATO were soon superseded by right-wing populism."² The party reached a high point of its legitimacy in the latter months of 2023 with an approval rating of 22 percent.³ The general public has responded to the party with skepticism and disdain because of its policies that are considered too closely akin to those of the National Socialist era of 1933-1945. The party failed to surpass the electoral threshold of 5 percent of the total vote share in the 2013 federal election, only receiving 4.7 percent, thus it was not awarded seats in the German parliament.⁴ However, after the 2015 Refugee Crisis and former Chancellor Angela Merkel's admittance of over one million refugees into Germany, the AfD transitioned its platform from a purely Euroskeptic one to that of a populist, anti-immigration one and garnered 12.6 percent of the total vote share in the 2017 federal election.⁵ For the first time in its history, the party had surpassed the minimum vote requirement and entered the German parliament. Thus, the last decade saw the rise of the contemporary far-right in Germany with a 168-percent increase between the 2013 and 2017 elections. That being said, the AfD fell in popularity during

² Thomas, Kilkauer. *Alternative Für Deutschland: The AfD: Germany's New Nazis or Another Populist Party?* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), 6. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv3029sdf>.

³ Politico, "Poll of Polls, Germany — National parliament voting intention," Politico, Politico, Accessed February 3, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/germany/>.

⁴ Federal Returning Officer, "Bundestag Election 2013 Results," Federal Returning Officer, Bundestag, September 22, 2013, <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2013/ergebnisse.html>.

⁵ Federal Returning Officer, "Bundestag Election 2017 Results," Federal Returning Officer, Bundestag, September 24, 2017, <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2017/ergebnisse/bund-99.html>.

the 2021 federal election and gained only 10.4 percent of the vote.⁶ The last decade also shows that more Germans seek representation from non-traditional parties like the AfD because they are frustrated with their choices in political parties. No singular party represents them best, signaling a shift in voter alignment which will undoubtedly affect the outcome of the 2025 federal election.

In a qualitative, thematic analysis of 16 interviews with German citizens in regard to their perspectives on the *Alternative für Deutschland*, participants express frustration with political party options, a lack of personal relationships between themselves and AfD members and supporters, and the importance of listening to different beliefs than one's own. Participants feel the AfD ideology threatens German democracy, but there is a conflicted status over the party's legitimacy in Germany. As a result of the themes expressed by participants, this study finds that Germany is experiencing voter dealignment, tensions in civil discourse, and collective anxiety over the pariah status of the AfD. The research reveals implications for the state of the German party system, the EU, and the state of civil society and discourse in liberal democratic societies like Germany and the United States.

Theory and Background

Initially founded in 2013 as an anti-establishment party that was mostly dissatisfied with Angela Merkel's Chancellery and Germany's rescue of Greece during the financial crisis of 2008, the AfD found very little salience among the general population regarding the bailout of EU member states during the Euro debt crisis. This was shown by the party's failure to pass the minimum vote share of 5 percent in the 2013 federal election. Notably, the AfD performs better in the states of former East Germany: Brandenburg, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Saxony,

⁶ Federal Returning Officer, Bundestag Election 2021 Results," Federal Returning Officer, Bundestag, September 26, 2021, <https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2021/ergebnisse/bund-99.html>.

Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia. Norris and Inglehart pose a *cultural backlash* theory in which people who feel that their way of life, social norms, and customs are threatened engage in authoritarian and populist attitudes.⁷ In the context of the AfD's concentrated support in the east and the cultural identity of East Germans, the existing literature indicates that, "AfD supporters have attained an economically stable middle-class existence with relatively prosperous incomes and secure jobs, but they have also experienced profound political and cultural disruption over the past three decades that have endangered a sense of disillusion and marginality."⁸ Lemke also says that,

"[A]ccording to a Pew Research study, in many countries, dissatisfaction with democracy is tied to views about economic conditions and a negative outlook on the economy even if the country is generally wealthy. Both Germany and the United States have enjoyed fairly smooth economic times in recent years, suggesting that socioeconomic factors alone are insufficient to explain the rise of right-wing populism; rather, people's perceptions in the context of regional, cultural, and historical factors play an important role."⁹

The AfD was not able to gain momentum with its original platform regarding the Eurozone crisis and Merkel's bailout of other EU member states, because as Decker states, "AfD voters see a threat not to their own economic status," but rather, "to the traditional value system that they feel is being eroded by the opening of society to more diversity and tolerance."¹⁰ The party's identity is not as overtly fascist as the extremist far-right party, *Die Heimat* (the Homeland, formerly known as the National Democratic Party of Germany), which has been

⁷ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, "Cultural Backlash Theory," in *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 32-64.

⁸ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 261-2.

⁹ Christiane Lemke, "Right-Wing Populism and International Issues: A Case Study of the AfD," *German Politics & Society* 38, no. 2 (2020): 93, accessed February 27, 2024, <https://www-jstor-org.acu.idm.oclc.org/stable/48588130>.

¹⁰ Oliver Decker, Johannes Kiess, and Elmer Brähler, *The Dynamics of Right-Wing Extremism within German Society: Escape into Authoritarianism*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 20, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003218616>.

declared ineligible for federal funding due to the party's fascist positions.¹¹ Those who do hold populist, authoritarian views but do not want to ostracize themselves by association with *Die Heimat* find a haven in the AfD, as its platform is not as extreme in some areas as other pariah parties. A pariah party is defined as one that is “outside the ‘region of acceptability’ in any given party system and is portrayed as illegitimate and dangerous.”¹² Since the beginning of the AfD's success in 2017, it has struggled to separate its identity and public perception from Nazism. Participants in this study express anxiety about the party's future and its impact on German society. Some Germans feel that the AfD may be justified in the issues it prioritizes, however, the approach that the party employs or intends to take is too extreme. Three of the policy issues that people see as the party taking too extreme of a position on are that of immigration— paying special attention to migrants from predominantly-Muslim countries—, Germany's membership in the European Union and NATO, and the AfD's proposed partnership for Germany with Russia in lieu of the United States.

In regard to immigration, the AfD “consistently frames the topic of migration with reference to Islam,” and the existing literature shows the significance of anti-Muslim attitudes as a deciding factor in the election of populist parties.¹³ Biskamp explains that, the policies that the AfD proposes,

¹¹ Kirsten Grieshaber, “Germany's top court rules a far-right party is ineligible for funding because of its ideology,” Reuters, Reuters, January 23, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/germany-far-right-party-constitutional-court-ruling-funding-64eb91d080a73ff0804f04b5812f3921>.

¹² Benjamin Moffitt, “How Do Mainstream Parties ‘Become’ Mainstream, and Pariah Parties ‘Become’ Pariahs? Conceptualizing the Processes of Mainstreaming and Pariahing in the Labelling of Political Parties,” *Government and Opposition* 57, no. 3 (2022): 386, accessed March 2, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1017/gov.2021.5>.

¹³ Floris Biskamp, “Populism, Religion, and Distorted Communication: Public Discourse, Islam, and the Anti-Muslim Mobilization of the Alternative for Germany.” *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 2 no. 2 (2018): 251, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41682-018-0022-1>.

[A]re in tension with the high level of protection the German Grundgesetz [Basic Law] grants to refugees making the right to asylum a basic human right as well as with international agreements concerning the protection of refugees—and they admit that their plans require constitutional reform as well as a revision of international agreements.¹⁴

In a measurement of sociocultural attitudes, the literature reveals that, “AfD voters are above all, and more often than average, both hostile to Muslims and authoritarian.”¹⁵ Personal experience confirms this. In December 2023, I was in Dresden on the evening of a PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident) demonstration, and stumbled upon a public meeting of the group. I heard Jörg Urban, the leader of the AfD in Saxony, speak at the emotionally-charged event regarding the EU’s immigration policy and the claimed Islamization of Germany. Many AfD supporters were in attendance, waving AfD, Saxon, and German flags. The overlap between movements like Pegida and the AfD demonstrates that the proposed policy priorities of right-wing extremist groups and the party are congruent with each other, and this tends to be unpalatable to the public. Hutter and Weisskircher find that interaction between social protest movements like Pegida and parties are “interrelated mechanisms that more indirectly link the streets with the electoral breakthrough of a challenger party,” such as the AfD.¹⁶

Islam and Muslim immigration were not the only subjects of opposition at the aforementioned meeting. The crowd was also peppered with protesters holding signs written in English saying, “U.S.A., GET OUT OF EUROPE!” and other anti-U.S., anti-NATO, and Euroskeptic sentiments. One leader of the AfD, Alice Weidel, has previously spoken about a

¹⁴ Ibid, 252.

¹⁵ Oliver Decker, et al., *The Dynamics of Right-Wing Extremism within German Society: Escape into Authoritarianism*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 167, doi:10.4324/9781003218616.

¹⁶ Swen Hutter and Manès Weisskircher, “New Contentious Politics. Civil Society, Social Movements, and the Polarisation of German Politics,” *German Politics* 32, no. 3 (2022): 413, accessed February 29, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2022.2044474>.

“Dexit”, a German exit from the European Union; the party has more formally proposed the reformation of EU institutions and the strengthening of members’ national sovereignty in its basic program of policies. As a whole, the AfD takes a moderate position on the idea of leaving the EU, as only 10 percent of all Germans are in favor of a “Dexit” according to the Eurobarometer in 2019.¹⁷ In the aftermath of an investigative report by Korrektiv— which I will elaborate on later— and subsequent nationwide protests, Chancellor Olaf Scholz said that the idea of “Dexit” would be, “the greatest destruction of prosperity that could happen to Germany and Europe.”¹⁸ Germany is the leading contributor of EU funding, giving over twenty billion euros per year.¹⁹ Considering Germany’s financial contribution to Europe, an estranged relationship between Berlin and Brussels would indeed prove difficult in the years to come. Lemke states that, “most European populist parties share the anti-EU rhetoric and they strongly oppose immigration. Because of its rejection of Islam, the German variant,” draws on, “nationalist, authoritarian, and antidemocratic traditions. It embraces nationalism in the form of populism.”²⁰

Germans currently see the AfD as a pariah party and are conflicted between the norms of representative democracy that suggest parties have the right to exist and the potential danger that the AfD poses to German society. Parties can fluctuate in their status as mainstream or pariah parties, and the best example of this dynamic is the trajectory of the National Front (FN) in

¹⁷ Martin Baloge, “From Brexit to Dexit? Alternative für Deutschland's Euroscepticism on European debates in the Bundestag,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 29, no. 4 (2021): 563, accessed February 23, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2021.1902290>.

¹⁸ Madeline Chambers, “Scholz evokes Nazi era as he urges Germans to reject far right,” Reuters, Reuters, January 31, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/scholz-evokes-nazi-era-he-urges-germans-reject-far-right-2024-01-31/>.

¹⁹ James McBride, “How Does the European Union Work?,” Council on Foreign Relations, last modified March 11, 2022, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/how-does-european-union-work#chapter-title-0-10>.

²⁰ Christiane Lemke, “Right-Wing Populism and International Issues: A Case Study of the AfD,” *German Politics & Society* 38, no. 2 (2020): 92, accessed February 27, 2024, <https://www-jstor-org.acu.idm.oclc.org/stable/48588130>.

France. Once ostracized for its stark policies on immigration, the leading figure of the party, Marine Le Pen, has mellowed out the harsh positions of the party's history, and thus, the FN is more widely accepted as a mainstream contender in French society.²¹ In a similar way, the AfD is swinging between its legitimacy and its waning influence, trying to balance its regional success with its acceptance in the entire national electorate. The AfD is neither an accepted mainstream party, nor has it been so extreme as to ostracize itself in the style *Die Heimat* to the point of becoming a pariah party. Due to the AfD's simultaneous high approval ratings in individual states in conjunction with a recent scandal that is addressed later in this paper, the party holds a precarious status as a successful electoral contender heading into the 2025 election.

The AfD has an intense stronghold in eastern Germany in part because of an affinity and connection to Russian culture and ideology, as well as “reservations about immigration and integration,” that are “concentrated in areas where few migrants live, such as the eastern German states.”²² The AfD seeks to replace the German-American partnership with that of a German-Russian partnership, expressing that, “the U.S. remains our partner. Russia should become it.”²³ Jolkver states that, “Russian-born Germans in recent years received increased media attention, as surveys show that the far-right performs notably better in areas that are densely populated by Russian-born Germans.”²⁴ These Russian-Germans make up a significant portion of the AfD electorate, and are being mobilized by both the party and Russia itself, as

²¹ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, “Cultural Backlash Theory,” in *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 231, 262-3.

²² Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy Erodes from the Top: Leaders, Citizens, and the Challenge of Populism in Europe*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2023, 105.

²³ AfD, “Basic Program for Germany,” AfD, AfD, May 1, 2016, <https://www.afd.de/grundsatzprogramm/#>.

²⁴ Nikita Jolkver, “Russian ‘Ghettos’ and AfD Bastions in Germany,” last modified April 14, 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/are-russian-germans-the-backbone-of-the-populist-afd/a-48321687>.

there is evidence of bribery and pro-AfD propaganda on the part of Russia.²⁵ The AfD holds a nationalistic view that NATO, the EU, and the U.S. threaten Germany; Russia undoubtedly benefits from an isolated Germany among its European neighbors and partners that is dependent upon Russian oil and natural gas. In relation to the role of NATO in the opposition to the war in Ukraine, Russia uses the AfD to sow further discord in the German political system. However, Putin's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has divided many of the members on the party's relationship with Russia post-invasion. The AfD condemned the actions of Russia shortly after the invasion, but they did not offer a total repudiation of the war in Ukraine. Instead, the party leveraged the war in Ukraine as an opportunity to criticize the U.S. and NATO for their "escalation," of Russia's relationship with the West.²⁶ The disregard for liberal democratic values and the tolerance for authoritarianism is not concentrated solely within Germany, or even the European continent; Decker says that,

Populism is driven by the right, which can be seen very clearly across the world: Viktor Orbán, Donald Trump... What lies behind these populist movements, parties or leaders, and what programmes or goals they pursue, can be very different.²⁷

Similarly, the refugee crisis became a 'wedge' between the established German parties and gave smaller parties the opportunity to capitalize on the gap between voter disillusionment and the established parties. Dostal says that, "groups of the electorate, including former supporters of left-of-centre parties," lost "confidence in the ability of the political system to

²⁵ Annabelle Krause, "The Russified German Far-Right," Harvard International Review, Harvard International Review, July 4, 2022, <https://hir.harvard.edu/the-russified-german-far-right/>.

²⁶ AfD, "Bundesvorstand fordert sofortige Einstellung aller Kampfhandlungen russischer Streitkräfte," AfD, AfD, February 25, 2022, <https://www.afd.de/bundesvorstand-fordert-sofortige-einstellung-aller-kampfhandlungen-russischer-streitkraefte/>

²⁷ Oliver Decker, et al., *The Dynamics of Right-Wing Extremism within German Society: Escape into Authoritarianism*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 10, doi:10.4324/9781003218616.

deliver stability and social integration.”²⁸ In the broader European context, Meyer et al, suggest that,

The Third Way of European social democracy was aimed at winning votes...from the political centre. As a result, core electorates of the social democratic parties lost relevance for the party. The representation gap that ensued was exploited by newly formed, highly ideologised parties on the left, which captured the attitudes of... underprivileged groups.²⁹

Although this specific work of scholarship predates the formation of the AfD, the claims that smaller parties would edge out parties at the ideological center foreshadowed the rise and subsequent success of smaller parties on the right, rather than on the left, as the AfD has performed far better than its counterpart on the left, *Die Linke*.

The rise of the far-right in Germany has brought about negative consequences for the state of German civil society, which represents the “interests and aspirations of citizens organized and united by common interests, goals, values or traditions, and [is] mobilized into collective action.”³⁰ Hummel states that, “populist movements and the antagonistic social configuration have a serious impact on civil society because it leads to a more observable conflict between conservative, right-wing and left-liberal parts of civil society.”³¹ When communication between people who disagree lessens, the social structures that contribute to a

²⁸ Jörg Michael Dostal, “The German Federal Election of 2017: How the Issue of Refugees and Migration took the Shine off Chancellor Merkel and Transformed the Party System” *Political Quarterly* 88 no. 4 (2017): 589, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12445>.

²⁹ Thomas Meyer, Wolfgang Merkel, Christina Schildmann, Wolfgang Jüttner, and Julia Nida-Rümelin. “The Future of the SPD as a Catch-All Party.” *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung*, (2012): 5. <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/ipa/08969-20120412.pdf>.

³⁰ African Development Bank Group, “Framework for Enhanced Engagement with Civil Society Organizations,” accessed 30 March, 2024, https://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Policy-Documents/Framework_for_Enhanced_Engagement_with_Civil_Society_Organizations-06_2015.pdf.

³¹ Siri Hummel, “Germany’s Contested Civil Society in a Time of Politization,” *Nonprofit Policy Forum* 13, no. 3, (2022): 200, <https://doi.org/10.1515/npf-2021-0060>.

healthy, thriving civil society are broken down. This study finds that the prominence of the AfD has negatively affected participants' perceptions of the state of German civil society today.

Method

The primary source in this research is a short, 14-question, semi-structured interview that was conducted in English, both over Zoom and in-person with sixteen German citizens. A semi-structured interview is an “in-depth interview where the respondents have to answer preset open-ended questions.”³² The questions of this research consist of Yes/No, multiple choice, scaled, and open-ended questions; the comprehensive list of questions can be found in [Appendix A](#). The selection of participants was achieved through an informal referral network, also known as a snowball sample, which began through my personal contacts in Germany. Participants always had the option to refuse to answer any question if they preferred. When quoting or referring to a participant, I have given them first-name pseudonyms in order to protect their identities and political affiliations; any similarities in the names to real people are coincidental. A list of the participants' pseudonyms and basic identifiers can be found in [Appendix B](#).

This study uses both primary and secondary sources to illustrate the narrative between the primary interview data and the secondary sources that discuss the current state of the far-right in Germany and Europe. The primary sources are interviews conducted with German citizens; I gave participants the option of speaking in English or their native language of German, and all chose English. The secondary sources are either scholarly, peer-reviewed works and works of journalists from mainstream news outlets in Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Due to a lack of previous empirical research on the opinions of AfD supporters, this research was open to emerging inductive themes. Initially, I expected to find that those who live

³² Shazia Jamshed, “Qualitative research method-interviewing and observation,” *Journal of Basic and Clinical Pharmacy* 5, (2014): 87, <https://doi.org/10.4103/0976-0105.141942>.

in urban areas had a more negative view of the AfD than those who live in rural areas. Norris and Inglehart use the disparate economic performance between the former-East and West Germany as one example in which they expected to find that economic conditions were a factor in an individual's possession of authoritarian and populist values. Instead, they found that, "radical right parties performed more strongly in European areas with high proportions of college-educated populations, not low, as well as in rural communities with few foreign residents and immigrants."³³ After conducting the study, I too found that there was no real differentiation between the rural and urban divide when it comes to one's perspective on the AfD. What mattered more, rather, was how a person felt about their current choices of parties and their ability to sympathize with the frustration that comes from the dilemma of not feeling represented in government. Dealignment within the German party system, tensions in civil discourse, and collective anxiety over the pariah approach of the AfD arose inductively in this research.

Discussion

An in-depth discussion of the main themes is found here, which resulted mostly from the open-ended questions, in addition to participants' desire to clarify or elaborate on their answers. I evaluated the primary interview data through a qualitative, thematic analysis in which I coded participants' responses and sentiments from their interview transcripts into separate themes. Participants consistently expressed four themes: frustration with party choices, no relationship to AfD members, neutral perspectives on the AfD and the importance of listening to AfD members, and the feeling that the AfD threatens democracy. As a result of these themes, I find that there is increasing dealignment within the German party system, tensions in civil discourse, and collective anxiety over the pariah approach of the AfD arise within this research.

³³ Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 262.

Frustration with Party Choices

The primary, overarching theme that surfaced in the interview process is that people are frustrated with the established parties in Germany. This is evidence of what V.O. Key calls dealignment, where “established connections between party and society break down, but are not replaced by new structural associations. Instead, the party system floats increasingly free of social moorings, with a smaller proportion of the electorate maintaining any general partisan loyalty.”³⁴ Koller and Miglbauer describe the voter motivation of the past as being that of “party allegiance according to class and other social structural variables, which ensured votes for traditional parties. Yet, as Western societies experienced diversification and increased liberalisation of society, topics – so-called short-term factors – became increasingly relevant to voters at elections.”³⁵ I found this to be true, as respondents identified climate change, the economy, immigration, and the war in Ukraine to be the most important political issues to them. When asked, “What political party do your personal views most closely align with?” most respondents expressed that there was not one party that completely represents them, because each party represents at least one issue that they find important to some degree or another. To give a clearer visual, Max lamented the fact that, “nowadays all of these parties are always in chunks that you wish to have.” Hannah said,

[E]very party has some subjects that I support. So does the AfD. But I think if you're not male, straight, and have some good income, it's [the AfD] not a party that would support you because I feel like it's not supporting women. It's not supporting people that are not originally from Germany. It doesn't support democracy. It doesn't really support anything apart from that. It's not 100% negative because they do have some good things, but not when you see the total thing.

³⁴ Paul Webb and Tim Bale, “Understanding Electoral Change: Realignment or Dealignment?,” in *The Modern British Party System*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 67.

³⁵ Veronika Koller and Marlene Miglbauer, “What Drives the Right-Wing Populist Vote? Topics, Motivations and Representations in an Online Vox Pop with Voters for the Alternative für Deutschland,” *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 68, no. 3 (2019): 287, accessed February 20, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zaa-2019-0024>.

The establishment parties themselves have employed a ‘catch-all’ strategy, in which they try to attract many voters by attempting to address a wide array of policy matters. Such a catch-all strategy was successful when the major governing parties of the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the center-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) were struggling to achieve electoral success in the 2000s. In the last decade, however, it has only fragmented the German political system by complicating party platforms and policies and voter intention. In 2021, the SPD was able to scrape by and win a majority to govern in a coalition with the Greens and the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP). Since then, the SPD’s approval ratings have since plummeted from 26 percent during the 2021 federal election to 15 percent (as of February 2024) in the aftermath of the war in Ukraine and the subsequent energy crisis as a result of German dependence on Russian energy.³⁶ One respondent, Johannes, echoed the sentiment that as Germany is governed by two major parties in decline, the party system inevitably lends itself to the rise of these smaller, more radical parties. He himself most closely aligns with *Die Linke* and said that,

[W]hile I do see the AfD as a significant danger to our democratic system, I also see why people would vote for them and see how the reason why they're so popular is a shortcoming of a lot of other parties, which isn't to say that I would vote for them or would support them, but I feel like it's established parties' fault that a third of the nation is voting for them.

It is unlikely that this figure of voting percentages attained to the actual figure at the national level, but rather at the regional level in regard to the states of Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia, all of which are holding their respective state elections in the fall of 2024. His perspective highlights the appeal to voters that the AfD employs in ways that the establishment parties do not. It was not just Johannes who felt this way. When I asked about the party that most

³⁶ Politico, “Poll of Polls, Germany — National parliament voting intention,” Politico, Politico, Accessed February 3, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/germany/>.⁴

closely represents him, Felix stated that he aligns with the values of the FDP, but strongly feels that,

[U]nfortunately the FDP is full of a bunch of liars who never deliver on their election promises. Twice I voted for them because of specific things on their platform that they then abandoned within weeks of being elected. So [I'm] certainly not going to vote for them again. I'd love to have a discussion about this, but at the moment, it is the AfD. Not because I like them, but because it's a vote against all the others.

Felix's frustration with the failure of the FDP to stay committed to its policy issues led him to his reconsideration of the FDP and to his current alignment with the AfD. Klaus' opinion of German politics is that, "from outside, politics sometimes seems really slow, like nothing's happened." When people feel the way that Klaus and Felix do, they begin to doubt that the party system is working how it ought to, and thus the AfD provides another avenue for people to seek representation despite its controversial status in German society. Felix's experience of voting for the AfD as a protest vote contributes to the understanding of why people vote for and are attracted to alternative options like the AfD. While the literature does show that anti-Muslim attitudes contribute to the success of parties like the AfD, what remains,

[U]nclear is the significance that these attitudes have in comparison to other factors. The electoral successes of the AfD could also be due to pure protest, to people's own experiences of being devalued (for example, as a member of the social group of East Germans), or a mixture of underlying authoritarian attitudes.³⁷

The Leipzig Authoritarianism Study found that, "voters with a closed and manifest extreme right-wing mindset have found a form of political expression in the AfD."³⁸ That study used the six following dimensions to measure right-wing attitudes: advocacy of a right-wing authoritarian dictatorship, chauvinism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, social Darwinism, and trivialization of National Socialism. This is congruent with the sentiments expressed by the

³⁷ Oliver Decker, et al., *The Dynamics of Right-Wing Extremism within German Society: Escape into Authoritarianism*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 155, doi:10.4324/9781003218616.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 59.

participants of this research on why people vote for the AfD; Max touched upon the idea that because he feels at a loss for which party to vote for, and because he can ultimately vote for only one party and one candidate, “you pick good and bad, or bad and bad, or good and good. It's very complicated. That's why I think these extreme parties attract other people because they show some edge and they give you the opportunity to express an opinion in a crazy way.”

This lack of clear partisan alignment shows that Germans find themselves less represented than before by the traditional parties, and thus are attracted to the appeal of the AfD as a new alternative to the stale and increasingly-complex parties of the past. The AfD's approval rating dropped to 19 percent in February 2024 due to the publication of an investigative report the month prior. However, Deutsche Welle says that, “despite the AfD's drop in popularity and the potential splintering of the right-wing vote between a handful of established conservative and newer far-right parties, the fact of the matter is that the ruling coalition parties remain extremely unpopular,” in Germany.³⁹

No Relationship to AfD Members

The interview data indicates that there is a high value placed on having relationships with people that one disagrees with, but in practice, it is easier said than done when it comes to the AfD. I argue that not having relationships with people one disagrees with negatively affects the state of civil society. For instance, when asked, “Do you know anyone who is a member of the AfD, and if so, what is your relationship with this person like?” over half of the respondents stated that they did not have a personal relationship with any members of the AfD or people who voted for them. If anything, they only knew of someone who had possibly voted for them.

Immediately following that question, I then asked, “do you think it's important to have

³⁹ Deutsche Welle “Germany: More demos against far-right, AfD slips in polls,” Deutsche Welle, Deutsche Welle, February 18, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-more-demos-against-far-right-afd-slips-in-polls/a-68293689>.

friendships with people you disagree with?” and eleven out of the sixteen respondents said yes, with some elaborating on this view. Clara feels that, “it’s important not to stay within one’s ‘bubble’. It’s essential for democracy to discuss issues, find compromise, exchange views and perspectives.” Matthias gave a particularly profound insight about the state of society’s intermingling with the political sphere. He thinks it is,

[I]mportant to be able to disagree with your friends and to keep friendships not just based on agreeing with them...I think it's probably quite similar in the U.S. Social media has gotten us to a place where you have to immediately just say, “Are you for this or against this?” And there's no in between. If you don't say the ‘right’ answer immediately, then you're wrong. You have to always give your point of view on topics, even if you don't know anything about them. It's not enough to say, “Honestly, I don't really know much about this, so I'd rather not say what my opinion is because I can't have an opinion about something I don't know [about].” That's why I think it has always been important to be able to talk to people even when— especially when— you don't agree, because this is how we create open society, because we can talk to each other.

When people fail to prioritize their relationships with one another rather than protecting their individual beliefs, it leads to a collective mindset of ‘us versus them’, in which the presence of an opposing party (not of the political nature) or view threatens the existence of one’s own. After reflecting on his relationship with a family member who was a member of the AfD at its early years, Sebastian said,

[T]here were years of having pretty heated arguments where we had to find a way of communicating and being together without talking about politics. Democracy is supposed to be able to deal with people with disagreeing views and find a consensus in the end to foster an environment where a conversation is possible. The sort of ways in which discourses are being dealt with now are very moralizing, very camp-ish in terms of if you have [certain] belief[s], then you're automatically grouped into one camp and it's kind of difficult to carve out your own niche in between. I feel like talking to people who don't have the same sort of beliefs just kind of sucks and it's very difficult at times. But I do feel like this is something that we should all work on. So I do believe that it's good to have friends with different beliefs, because then at least the desire to stay friends and to keep your friendship might make you more able to step out of your own perspective and empathize with other people. With families, you have to get along somehow because you are related. But when you feel like you exist in completely separate realities that abide by different sorts of... structures, then that can be very difficult.

Sebastian's experience with a family member whom he disagreed with indicates that there is increasing anxiety and emotional turmoil about how to approach people with differing political views in one's social circle without having contempt for that person. People know and acknowledge that they're supposed to 'get along' with each other, but this study finds that there is a lack of confidence in the ability to supersede these disagreements because these kinds of relationships have become so strained. I argue here that having friendships with people you disagree with is beneficial for civil society, as well as maintaining the relationships which civil society benefits from, like families and local communities. It preserves the ability of a community to overcome the differences of its individual parts, and the sense that what connects them together can surpass the divide in their political opinions. Psychologist, Richard Beck, who studies systems of belief and meaning says that,

[W]hen we feel existentially unsettled or worried, our tendency will be to bolster and protect our cultural worldview. As it is our location of ultimate meaning and significance, we want to experience our worldview as sturdy and durable... Consequently, we defend our worldview by siding with those who share our values and attacking those who do not.⁴⁰

When societies separate or distance themselves from those who hold different beliefs and opinions, it can lead to hostility towards those who are considered to be outside of the majority. The AfD, in this regard, sees outgroup members like foreigners, whether they be Muslim or not, as an existential threat to the core of the traditional German identity and culture, as shown by quasi-affiliation to anti-Islamic groups like PEGIDA.⁴¹ Beck posits that, "when existentially threatened we defend our cultural worldviews (our path toward meaning and significance...) by

⁴⁰ Richard Beck, *The Authenticity of Faith*, (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012), 88.

⁴¹ Floris Biskamp, "Populism, Religion, and Distorted Communication: Public Discourse, Islam, and the Anti-Muslim Mobilization of the Alternative for Germany." *Zeitschrift für Religion, Gesellschaft und Politik* 2 no. 2 (2018): 251, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41682-018-0022-1>.

favoring in-group members and denigrating out-group members.”⁴² When social networks become isolated, or camp-ish, as Sebastian put it, civil society suffers. When societal networks have no links between different perspectives and groups, there exist no ways to easily bridge the divides between them, and this is when hostility between in-group and out-groups occurs.

Neutral Perspectives and the Importance of Listening to AfD Voters

Listening to those with different opinions is important to a healthy civil society and aids in the maintenance of relationships which connect different parts of society. Yet, there is tension between listening to those with whom one disagrees and approving of the content of their opinions. All participants expressed a highly negative, somewhat negative, or neutral view of the AfD; no participant expressed a positive view of the AfD to any varying degree. An explanation must be made for a neutral view. Participants who expressed neutral views of the AfD held such a view because they leaned one of two ways: either they believed that the AfD had a right to exist as a part of a democratic society, or they felt that although they are not overtly supportive of the AfD, they chose the AfD as a protest vote against the established parties. Amelia holds a neutral view of the AfD for the first reason in that she believes they ought to be allowed as a part of Germany’s liberal democracy, even though she may not completely agree with the outcomes of some of their policies. She highlighted the danger of excluding the AfD and anyone who may feel aligned with them to any degree. Elaborating on her neutral perspective of the AfD, Amelia stated that,

We seem to have a coalition of all parties together against the AfD, which is ‘politically correct’. So not hearing people speak who are from the AfD is ‘politically correct’ and being against them is also ‘politically correct’ Many people elect the AfD, or understand what they are saying, and these people are not allowed to be heard because they say we cannot hear these people— but this is not democracy. The more we exclude this party, the more these voices will be stronger. They say AfD are Nazis, which I don't think [they

⁴² Richard Beck, *The Authenticity of Faith*, (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012), 90.

are], but if they *are* Nazis, they have the chance of growing stronger, so the less they're allowed. So it's become a platform for them by treating them the way we treat them. There is one mainstream opinion that you have to have, and if you don't have it, you're a Nazi. If the AfD says something different, then they're Nazis... I have many friends who say, "the AfD has some points that we support, but we cannot say that because then people think we're Nazis." When you're called a Nazi, there is no discussion after this.

Existing literature supports Amelia's perspective on the danger of isolating the AfD and its members. In a rhetorical analysis using Brexit as a lens by which to examine the AfD's relationship to the other parties in the Bundestag, Baloge concludes that, "the German partisan system is characterized by the exclusion of the AfD, whose positions on European issues are too radical compared to the other parties."⁴³ Felix also holds a neutral view of the AfD, but for the second reason in that he is frustrated with the other parties. He said, "I guess my neutral position on the AfD is that they're the only ones that challenge the establishment to at least any degree, even though we have a large opposition, the CDU is doing absolutely nothing." At the end of his interview, Max shared his perspective on the AfD and his response quite accurately encompasses the existing literature and several of the themes from this research. He believes that,

[S]ociety should not always be afraid of people that have different opinions. You should always listen because it's always the voice of frustration or people that are desperate. If you would shut them off, I think their pain and their aggression would just grow. I think in some cases it's important to at least listen and to not be ignorant because of a "stamp" that they have, and start a dialogue to understand why people think that way. I think also voters are sometimes just frustrated and don't have a choice with other political parties.

AfD Threatens Democracy

The AfD achieved electoral legitimacy in 2017, but is experiencing a backsliding of this legitimacy, as shown by its fluctuation in vote share from the 2017 to 2021 federal elections. Recent events have simultaneously contributed to the degradation of the party's status as an accepted mainstream party, especially in specific regions like eastern Germany. A private

⁴³ Martin Baloge, "From Brexit to Dexit? Alternative für Deutschland's Euroscepticism on European debates in the Bundestag," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 29, no. 4 (2021): 563, accessed February 23, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2021.1902290>.

meeting between high-ranking AfD politicians, self-proclaimed neo-Nazis, and others took place at a hotel near Potsdam in November 2023 to discuss the mass deportation of German asylum-seekers and German citizens of foreign origin, which was reported by the investigative outlet, Korrektiv.⁴⁴ In response to the meeting, a massive wave of protests was sparked across Germany, and the party said that, “the AfD won’t change its position on immigration policy because of a single opinion at a non-AfD meeting.”⁴⁵ Much of the outrage that has been expressed by people in this recent wave of anti-fascist protests can be attributed to the fact that the members of the AfD, and by extension, the AfD, are now seen as closely resembling the Nazi party and has reached an unacceptable level of comparison. This is a tangible example of how the party has drifted into the region of a pariah party, because although some people agree with various issues the AfD takes up, they cannot accept the length that the party will go to in order to achieve its policy aims. At one point in the AfD’s short history, the party’s policy concerns about Germany were justifiable, relatable even, and not yet dangerous to Germany’s democracy. In this specific instance, however, the similarities between the meeting in Potsdam and the 1942 Wannsee Conference were too similar. In 1942, fifteen high-ranking Nazi officials and the German government met to “coordinate the implementation of what they called the “Final Solution of the Jewish Question,” which resulted in the systematic extermination of six-million Jews in Europe and the Holocaust.⁴⁶ In both rhetoric, public memory, and geographic proximity,

⁴⁴ Korrektiv, “Secret plan against Germany,” Korrektiv, Korrektiv, January 15, 2024, <https://correctiv.org/en/latest-stories/2024/01/15/secret-plan-against-germany/>.

⁴⁵ Philip Oltermann, “Politicians from Germany’s AfD met extremist group to discuss deportation ‘masterplan’,” The Guardian, The Guardian, January 10, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/jan/10/politicians-from-germany-afd-met-extremist-group-to-discuss-deportation-masterplan>.

⁴⁶ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Wannsee Conference and the “Final Solution,”” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed February 19, 2024, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/wannsee-conference-and-the-final-solution>.

Germans have found the meeting in Potsdam and the Wannsee Conference far too similar, as the hotel in Potsdam is eight kilometers from the infamous Wannsee villa. Thus, a robust anti-fascist movement has been revived in much of the nation after a period of tolerance for the AfD's right-wing sympathies since the party's inception.

Many people feel very negatively toward the party and express anxiety about the party's status as a legitimate electoral contender because of the nature of its rhetoric, policy, and action. Leader of the AfD in Thuringia, "Björn Höcke, is on trial for concluding a 2021 speech with the phrase "Everything for Germany"—a slogan widely used by the Nazis. Under German law, the use of speech, propaganda, and symbolism associated with the Nazi Party and other terrorist groups is prohibited."⁴⁷ Ingrid views the AfD highly negatively because she thinks "they are a racist party. They continue the work of the National Socialists... They're anti-Semites. There's so many reasons why one wouldn't like them." Mia also views the AfD highly negatively and thinks "they're fascists. I think they are not good for this country. I think they aim to overthrow... democracy. They're too much on the Nazi path." Sabine feels similarly in that the AfD is "against the *Verfassung*" (Constitution), against the very grounds that our governmental system stands on. I think they're a danger to democracy."

Current events in Germany reflect the respondents who feel very negative about the AfD. In the aftermath of the Korrektiv report on the meeting to discuss race-based deportations, the phrase, "*Nie wieder ist jetzt!*" ("Never again is now!") is being widely used in protests and in Parliamentarian addresses. On the anniversary of *Kristallnacht* (the Night of Broken Glass), Federal Minister of the Interior, Nancy Faeser, said to the Bundestag, "what happened during those 12 years of our history must never be allowed to happen again – what Germans did and

⁴⁷ Stefanie Glinski, "'Anyone Who Dares Call Us Nazis Will Be Reported'," Foreign Policy Magazine, Foreign Policy Magazine, March 30, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/30/sonneberg-afd-elections-germany-far-right-sesselmann/>.

what they allowed to happen by remaining silent. This lesson remains fundamental for the Federal Republic of Germany and its constitutional order. ‘Never again’ is now!”⁴⁸ This phrase represents Germany’s intolerance for and rejection of fascism and anti-Semitism. It represents Germany’s commitment to the collective memory of the Holocaust and the process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or ‘coming to terms with the past’. Lemke notes that, “downplaying German guilt and responsibility for the Nazi past has become an important feature of [AfD] rhetoric and ideology,” and contributes to the party’s controversial status as a legitimate party in Germany.⁴⁹ In the wake of the recent war between Israel and Hamas and the scandal of the Korrektiv report, “*Nie wieder ist jetzt!*” has a particular salience in German society today, as it is committed to ensuring that the Nazi era is never to be repeated.

This is demonstrated through recent protests where an estimate of over two million Germans attended protests against right-wing extremism in large cities like Berlin, Hamburg, and Munich in the latter half of January 2024. Anna Sauerbrey of the *New York Times* writes that,

[T]he problem is not just the rise of the AfD, which has become strong enough in some regions to aspire to positions of power or at least to seriously disrupt the process of forming stable governments. It’s that in many parts of the country, a general sense of discontent has tipped over into disdain. People now reject not just the current government but the whole political system.⁵⁰

In spite of that, support for the AfD is more potent in the states of the former East Germany (with the exception of Berlin) than it is in the states of the former West Germany. As

⁴⁸ Bundestag, “‘Never again’ is now!,” Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, Bundestag, November 9, 2023. <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/kurzmeldungen/EN/2023/11/9nov23.html;jsessionid=45375A9750AFD756C26AAEC0C7732318.live892>.

⁴⁹ Christiane Lemke, “Right-Wing Populism and International Issues: A Case Study of the AfD,” *German Politics & Society* 38, no. 2 (2020): 102, accessed February 27, 2024. <https://www.jstor-org.acu.idm.oclc.org/stable/48588130>.

⁵⁰ Anna Sauerbrey, “Germany Has Finally Woken Up,” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, January 31, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/31/opinion/germany-protests-far-right.html>.

previously mentioned, state elections for Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia are on the horizon and support for the AfD is around 30 percent since late 2023.⁵¹ In 2023, the district of Sonneberg, Thuringia elected Robert Sessselmann “as the district administrator in a runoff with 52.8 percent of the vote,” and was “the first county in Germany to elect a far-right candidate since the Nazi era.”⁵² In the 2021 federal election, the AfD won 20.9 percent on average in the former eastern states, excluding Berlin, whereas the party won just 8.9 percent on average in the former western states.⁵³ Sauberey makes note that while there are significant numbers of protesters in massive urban centers like Berlin, there have been protests in smaller cities and villages, particularly in the east where support for the AfD is stronger. Sauerbrey’s notion of a discontented German electorate aligns with the findings of this research in regard to the fragmentation of its party system and increasing voter dealignment.

When it comes to the pariah status of the AfD, it is not just that Germans feel that the ideology of the party itself is dangerous, but also that the outcomes of its policies and its members are too extreme. Sabine feels that AfD politicians are “disruptive in an unproductive way.” Max has a skeptical point of view on the party’s approach to policy issues. In his observation, the AfD distracts voters with “misleading information,” and he thinks the party is,

⁵¹ MDR, “ThuringiaTREND March 2024,” Infratest Dimap, Infratest Dimap, March 2024, <https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundeslaender/thueringen/laendertrend/2024/maerz/>; MDR, “SachsenTREND January 2024,” Infratest Dimap, Infratest Dimap, January 2024, <https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundeslaender/sachsen/laendertrend/2024/januar/>; MDR, “BrandenburgTREND September 2023,” Infratest Dimap, Infratest Dimap, September 2023, <https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundeslaender/brandenburg/laendertrend/2023/september/>.

⁵² Stefanie Glinski, “‘Anyone Who Dares Call Us Nazis Will Be Reported,’” Foreign Policy Magazine, Foreign Policy Magazine, March 30, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/03/30/sonneberg-afd-elections-germany-far-right-sesselmann/>.

⁵³ Antonio Voce and Seán Clarke, “German Election 2021: Full Results and Analysis,” *The Guardian* (London), September 27, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2021/sep/26/german-election-results-exit-poll-and-possible-coalitions>.

[T]oo far right with their approach... It sometimes seems that they try to just get attention with highlights or with headlines. It's just trying to catch attention without any kind of based explanation. Why would they prefer this, or why are they proposing other things? On the other hand, when I observe them in some kind of political argumentation, they seem to always be quite stubborn. They seem to be always against everything, and they don't seem to be cooperative.”

Finn, who did not vote in the 2021 election, explains his somewhat negative view on the AfD as connected to his ability to relate to specific issues of the AfD’s platform:

I feel like they criticize things that I would also criticize, for example, immigration, or the way it is being dealt with. Their views on radical Islam, as well. I don't necessarily agree with the outcome to deal with those issues, because if they would have political power, it's not what I would want. So it's complicated. In the end, it is similar to many Trump voters, right? They don't necessarily agree with what Trump says or what he stands for, but he touches upon certain things that the Democratic establishment cannot talk about or just fails to address... I would not vote for the AfD as a protest vote. I'd rather not vote than vote for the AfD.

Sofie touched upon this kind of nationalist slant in light of Germany’s leadership in the EU by saying that the party “aligns so much with our Nazi history and the Third Reich. I get why people decide to vote for them because of their view to do something for Germany, and not just always be too social for others.” This comment harks back to the AfD’s origins as a Euroskeptic party as one source of its policy agenda, and rounds out the discussion. The policies of the AfD regarding immigration, Germany’s role in the EU and NATO, and Germany’s relationship with Russia and the United States are examples of why Germans feel the AfD approach is too extreme, in addition to the similarity to the Nazi party. Thus, the AfD has difficulty in balancing its complex status as neither a mainstream nor a pariah party within German society.

Implications

It seems to many that countries are experiencing a barrage of crises, whether it be financial, social, or environmental. Economist, Adam Tooze, explains that rather than it being one separate crisis after another, we are experiencing a polycrisis— one in which regional affairs

are intertwined and interactive with each other— and therefore, stability is needed now more than in the past. As Tooze explains, a polycrisis is a situation in which the conglomerate of multiple-occurring crises is more dangerous than the individual crises themselves.⁵⁴ For Germany, the war in Ukraine, an energy crisis, inflation and “an ambitious government green transition agenda hamstrung by brutal infighting,” results in “a grim picture.”⁵⁵ A solution to the individual crises that make up the all-encompassing polycrisis requires a joint approach from all countries and actors; some have greater responsibility in this kind of unilateral approach based on one’s specific capacities, fiscal contributions, and technological innovations. The dealignment that the German party system is experiencing will contribute to a less cohesive approach on how best to solve domestic and foreign policy issues that necessitate cooperation, particularly under a coalition government. A coalition might seem like the best solution to approach various policy issues, as two, or even three parties can form a government. However, as seen in the months following the 2021 federal election in Germany, coalition governments can take months to form before the work can begin.⁵⁶ Even still, policy issues can be excluded when certain parties are not among the governing coalition members. As seen by Felix, a participant of this study, dissatisfaction with traditional party options will lead German citizens to seek new alternatives like the AfD, or not vote at all, like Finn. Parties like the AfD speak to the current dissatisfaction

⁵⁴ Adam Tooze, “Chartbook #130 Defining Polycrisis— From Crisis Pictures To The Crisis Matrix,” *Chartbook* (Blog), June 24, 2022, <https://adamtooze.com/2022/0/24/chartbook-130-defining-polycrisis-from-crisis-pictures-to-the-crisis-matrix/>.

⁵⁵ Anna Sauerbrey, “Germany Has Finally Woken Up,” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, January 31, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/31/opinion/germany-protests-far-right.html>.

⁵⁶ Nigel Walker and Eleanor Gadd, “Germany: 2021 Election and a New Coalition Government,” House of Commons Library, UK Parliament, January 5, 2022, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9324/>.

among the electorate without offering a viable and reasonable alternative to policy matters in Germany.

As Germany's transatlantic relationship with the United States remains deeply entrenched, "rhetoric from far-right parties, such as the AfD, poses a challenge to international engagement."⁵⁷ Transatlantic partnerships are of-course, two-sided. Former U.S. President, Donald Trump, is an unpredictable and highly volatile factor for the international system; he has the potential to fracture long-standing alliances and erode confidence in the reliability of an American-led security. At a 2024 conference in Paris hosting 20 countries supporting Ukraine, "European nations have... concerns that former President Donald Trump might return to the White House and change the course of U.S. policy on the continent."⁵⁸ This public statement came two weeks after Trump declared at a campaign rally that if reelected, he " would encourage Russia to do "whatever the hell they want" to any NATO member country that doesn't meet spending guidelines."⁵⁹ No one is more concerned about the United States' wavering reliability and commitment to its allies than is German Chancellor, Olaf Scholz. In an address to the German Parliament, Scholz warned that, "if the world becomes even more difficult, for example if you look at what is possible in the U.S. election, then the European Union must become all the stronger," given the polycrisis of Germany's energy sector, inflation, and the looming threat of an

⁵⁷ Christiane Lemke, "Right-Wing Populism and International Issues: A Case Study of the AfD," *German Politics & Society* 38, no. 2 (2020): 91, accessed February 27, 2024. <https://www-jstor-org.acu.idm.oclc.org/stable/48588130>.

⁵⁸ Lorne Cook and Karel Janicek, "Germany and Poland say they're not sending troops to Ukraine as the Kremlin warns of a wider war," The Associated Press, The Associated Press, February 27, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/nato-stoltenberg-ukraine-troops-france-slovakia-5d4ed747861a3c0edb8f922fa36427c2>.

⁵⁹ Kate Sullivan, "Trump says he would encourage Russia to 'do whatever the hell they want' to any NATO country that doesn't pay enough," CNN, CNN, February 11, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/10/politics/trump-russia-nato/index.html>.

aggressive Russia.⁶⁰ The AfD's success of its policy aims at disintegrating Germany from the EU, its adjacent responsibilities to NATO, and the prospect of an isolationist American partner spells out chaos for Germany while at the helm of Europe. The war in Ukraine is a particularly salient example; due to a congressional stalemate, as the U.S. fails to provide timely aid to Ukraine in the second year of the war, Germany intends to provide “unwavering support for Ukraine for as long as it takes in order to help Ukraine defend itself, restore its territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders, secure its free and democratic future, enable Ukraine to continue providing services to its people and to uphold a functioning Ukrainian economy, and deter future Russian aggression.”⁶¹

The increasing dealignment of the German party system has implications for the entirety of the European Union. Lemke warns that the prominence of the AfD should “not simply be viewed as the rise of just another right-wing populist party in Europe. Rather, its significance reaches beyond programmatic issues to redefining the core beliefs on which German foreign policy are grounded,” and this is relevant to many countries experiencing populism from the right:

Antipathy to further European integration was a substantial source of support for right-wing populist parties in Finland, Switzerland, Denmark, Austria, Sweden, and Germany... Distrust of political elites contributed significantly to electoral support for the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, the Alternative for Germany, Vox in Spain, and Jobbik in Hungary, while dissatisfaction with democracy was strongly associated with voting for Jobbik, the Sweden Democrats, the Alternative for Germany, and UKIP...⁶²

⁶⁰ Madeline Chambers, “Scholz evokes Nazi era as he urges Germans to reject far right,” Reuters, Reuters, January 31, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/scholz-evokes-nazi-era-he-urges-germans-reject-far-right-2024-01-31/>.

⁶¹ Volodymyr Zelenskyy, “Agreement on security cooperation and long-term support between Ukraine and the Federal Republic of Germany,” President of Ukraine Official Website, President of Ukraine Official Website, February 16, 2024, <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/ugoda-pro-spivrobotnictvo-u-sferi-bezpeki-ta-dovgostrokovu-p-88985#:~:text=Germany%20intends%20to%20provide%20unwavering,people%20and%20to%20uphold%20a>.

⁶² Christiane Lemke, “Right-Wing Populism and International Issues: A Case Study of the AfD,” *German Politics & Society* 38, no. 2 (2020): 103, accessed February 27, 2024.

Frustration within the party system in Germany is similar to that of the United States. In the two-party system, half of the United States is left feeling unsatisfied with the result of the election, which has resulted in a loss of people's confidence in American democracy and its institutions. The Pew Research Center conducted a survey which found that there are "signs of frustration with the two-party system and the parties themselves," and that 39 percent of people in the United States wish there were more than two parties to choose from.⁶³ As Germany demonstrates, people are still left unsatisfied with their choices even in a multi-party system. The Pew Research Center also finds that, "Republicans and Democrats view not just the opposing party but also the *people* in that party in a negative light."⁶⁴ There are similar feelings that the state of German civil society is dismal. People are increasingly finding it more difficult to be friends or even have a conversation with someone of a different political opinion or party than oneself. The respondents of this study express positive feelings towards engaging people with different views than themselves, but feel that it is a delicate balance to maintain because of a civil society that is fraught with ideological and political tension for fear that the AfD threatens democracy in Germany. The state of civil society, their party systems, and the rise of the far-right in both the U.S. and Germany are indicators of what is to come when voices of frustration are met with hostility, anger, contempt, and fierce identity politics.

The AfD poses an issue for Germany and its relationship to its neighbors and allies, and it sows discord among German society, internally weakening German civil society. Between

<https://www-jstor-org.acu.idm.oclc.org/stable/48588130>; Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy Erodes from the Top: Leaders, Citizens, and the Challenge of Populism in Europe*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 2023, 155.

⁶³ Pew Research Center, "As Partisan Hostility Grows, Signs of Frustration With the Two-Party System," Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, August 9, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/08/09/as-partisan-hostility-grows-signs-of-frustration-with-the-two-party-system/>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

managing its fiscal responsibilities to the Eurozone, support for Ukraine, and domestic affairs, Germany it seems, is spread too thin, and the AfD is a wedge in the party system, eroding confidence in the German political system from the inside out.

Conclusion

This study finds that there is an increasing sense of dissatisfaction with the traditional German party system among its citizens. Germans do not feel like they are represented by any one party, in part because each individual party represents an array of policy issues that many people care about. Germans perceive the Alternative for Germany as a danger to democracy because of the way in which the AfD approaches matters like immigration, the EU, and religious freedom, although they themselves may be concerned about those same issues. Participants highlight the importance and value of an open society because that is what is essential to a thriving liberal democracy. They express the importance of listening to the AfD and those who vote for the AfD because there are justifiable concerns and reasons why people vote for a party that holds such a controversial status in German society. Ostracizing and isolating those with minority opinions only builds upon existing frustration, and will eventually be disastrous. In reality, this can be difficult. The AfD is attempting to leave its status as a pariah party in the past by prioritizing issues it feels that other parties have disregarded in their platforms, such as immigration and fiscal concerns regarding Germany's responsibilities to the EU and NATO. However, the challenge of legitimizing itself is proving difficult for the AfD. The party's inability to separate itself from other far-right extremist groups like PEGIDA and the opinions of its more extreme politicians causes the general consensus that the party is fascist, full of neo-Nazis, and is bound to follow the path of the Third Reich if it accumulates enough power in the party system. Therefore, because of Germany's commitment to ensure that the era of

National Socialism is never repeated, there exists a collective anxiety about the perceived threat of the rise of the *Alternative für Deutschland* within the Bundestag. Facing a global polycrisis with a less stable network of European allies and partners in addition to the prospect of a wavering U.S. ally, the AfD contributes to a fractured German society and a less stable liberal international order in a time where multilateral cooperation is crucial to the preservation of liberal democratic societies.

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Appendix A

The following questions were asked of every participant. The participants were informed immediately preceding the interview that they always had the option to decline to answer any of the questions if they preferred, even where this list does not indicate that as an option. In regard to the open-ended questions, they were allowed to share as much or as little information as they wished.

1. "What is your age?"
2. "What is your gender?"
3. "Which of the following best describes the area you grew up in?"
 - a. Rural (A village or home in the country, or a town with less than 100,000 people)
 - b. Suburban (On the outskirts of a large city that has more than 100,000 people)
 - c. Urban (In a city proper that has more than 100,000 people)
4. "Which of the following best describes the area you currently live in?"
 - a. Rural (A village or home in the country, or a town with less than 100,000 people)
 - b. Suburban (On the outskirts of a large city that has more than 100,000 people)
 - c. Urban (In a city proper that has more than 100,000 people)
5. "What religion do you most identify with, and to what extent?"
 - a. Catholic:
 - b. Protestant:
 - c. Orthodox:
 - d. Judaism:
 - e. Islam:
 - f. Other:
6. "What political party do your personal views most closely align with?"
 - a. CDU/CSU:
 - b. SPD:
 - c. FDP:
 - d. Bündnis 90/Die Grünen
 - e. AfD
 - f. Die Linke
 - g. Other:
7. "Did you vote in the last election?"
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
8. "What are the most significant political issues to you?"
9. "What is your general view of the AfD?"
 - a. Highly Negative
 - b. Somewhat Negative
 - c. Neutral
 - d. Somewhat Positive
 - e. Highly Positive
10. "Why do you have this view of the AfD?"
11. "Do you know anyone who is a member of the AfD, and if so, what is your relationship with this person like?"
12. "Do you think it's important to have friendships with people you disagree with?"
13. "How often do you read or watch the news?"

14. "Which news outlets do you primarily consume, if any?"

Appendix B

The following is a list of the pseudonyms of participants and identifiers for those whom I have referenced in this paper. Not all sixteen participants that were interviewed are listed below because I did not quote all sixteen participants. Every participant was notified before agreeing to participate in this study that they would only be referenced in this paper by their gender and their age group in order to protect their identities. For clarity and continuity in the study, each participant has been given a pseudonym; any similarity in name to real people is coincidental.

1. Amelia: female, 45-54
2. Clara: female, 55-64
3. Felix: male, 35-44
4. Finn: male, 35-44
5. Hannah: female, 25-34
6. Johannes: male, 25-34
7. Katherine: female, 25-34
8. Klaus: male, 18-24
9. Matthias: male, 35-44
10. Max: male, 35-44
11. Mia: female, 65-74
12. Sabine: female, 25-34
13. Sebastian: male, 25-34
14. Sofie: female, 25-34

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