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Argumentative Patterns of Right-Wing Populism: The Example of the “Alternative for Germany”

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Populism has become one of the most intensely discussed topics in both public debate and academic research. So far there has been no systematic argumentation theoretic analysis of populism, however. This paper is intended to provide first steps towards such an analysis by giving a full argumentation theoretic reconstruction of the political manifesto of the German right-wing populist party “Alternative for Germany” (AfD). This allows to draw preliminary conclusions about the AfD’s argumentative strategy as exemplary for right-wing populism.

KEYWORDS: argument reconstruction, argument analysis, discourse analysis, populism, right-wing populism, post-truth, populist argumentation, argumentative strategy

1. INTRODUCTION

Populism has become one of the most intensely discussed topics in both the public debate and academic research. Many scholars are investigating, trying to explain and theorizing about the new rise of – especially right-wing – populism in Western societies.¹ However, there has been no systematic argumentation theoretic analysis of right-wing populism so far. This is astonishing, since both scholars and practitioners frequently refer to “right-wing populist argumentation” and “right-wing populist argumentative strategies” in their political assessments.

This paper is intended to provide first steps toward an analysis of such “right-wing populist argumentative strategies” by giving a full argumentation theoretic reconstruction of the political manifesto for the federal election in 2017 by the German right-wing populist party

¹ See Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2017) for an introduction, Pappas (2016) for an overview, Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008) for an anthology, and Rooduijn (2019) for a recent state of the field overview.

“Alternative for Germany” (AfD).² In this manifesto, as in the one for the European elections in 2018 and in their party platform from 2016, the AfD claims to identify the “real problems” of Germany that (supposedly) go unnoticed by the public debate. According to the AfD, downfall, chaos, and disaster for “the people” are imminent.

The argumentative strategy in both manifestos and the party platform seems the following: The AfD takes justified and unjustified fears in the population, nourishes them with doomsday scenarios, and then presents itself as the only savior in time of existential need. This pattern can also consistently be found in the political arguments of the AfD (and arguably most other right-wing populists).³ In this paper I will elaborate on that pattern and call it the “core argument of populism.”

It is the central argument in the AfD’s party programs; most other arguments merely provide support to its premises.⁴ Its reconstruction draws on the argumentation theoretic framework of Betz and Brun (2016), which is able to bring comparably high clarity to the subject of the analysis due to its level of detail and focus on inferential relations within the argumentation (see also Betz 2010). It requires the interpreter to reconstruct the arguments in question in their most plausible and coherent way (Brun and Hirsch Hadorn 2018).

The first step consists in reconstructing the conclusions and premises of the arguments and the inferential relations between them and other arguments in the argumentation. This first step is conducted without directly evaluating the argumentation. Note, however, that no reconstruction can be entirely objective; it is an interpretive act and thus guided by a certain point of view. It is one way (of several possible ways) to read the AfD’s party programs. The self-imposed demand is, however, that the reconstruction will also be acceptable to the authors (i.e., the political leaders of the AfD) due to its focus on plausibility and coherence.

Only in a second step will the findings then be evaluated. There are three key findings. First, the AfD’s argumentation is impressively consistent. Second, it relies on verifiably false premises for its arguments. Third, the AfD’s pattern of argumentation is based on a dichotomy of doom by “them” and salvation by “us.”

² This paper has immensely benefitted from helpful comments and suggestions by Gregor Betz, Georg Brun, Romy Jaster and Kathrin Kazmaier.

³ See Quent (2019). See also Adorno (2019).

⁴ This reconstruction builds on Lanius (2017), which is an analysis of the AfD’s manifesto for the federal election 2017 (in German).

2. THE CORE ARGUMENT OF POPULISM

The basic idea of the core argument of populism is that the populists have to come to power because only they can save society from imminent doom. Let's examine it in standard form:

- (1) **[Will of the People]:** Society can only be saved, if the will of the people is realized.
- (2) **[Voice of the People]:** Only if the populists come to power, the will of the people will be realized.

- (3) **[Salvation]:** Society can only be saved, if the populists come to power.
- (4) **[Doom]:** Society is doomed and must be saved.

- (5) **[Power]:** The populists must come to power.

Figure 1 shows how it looks as an argument map:

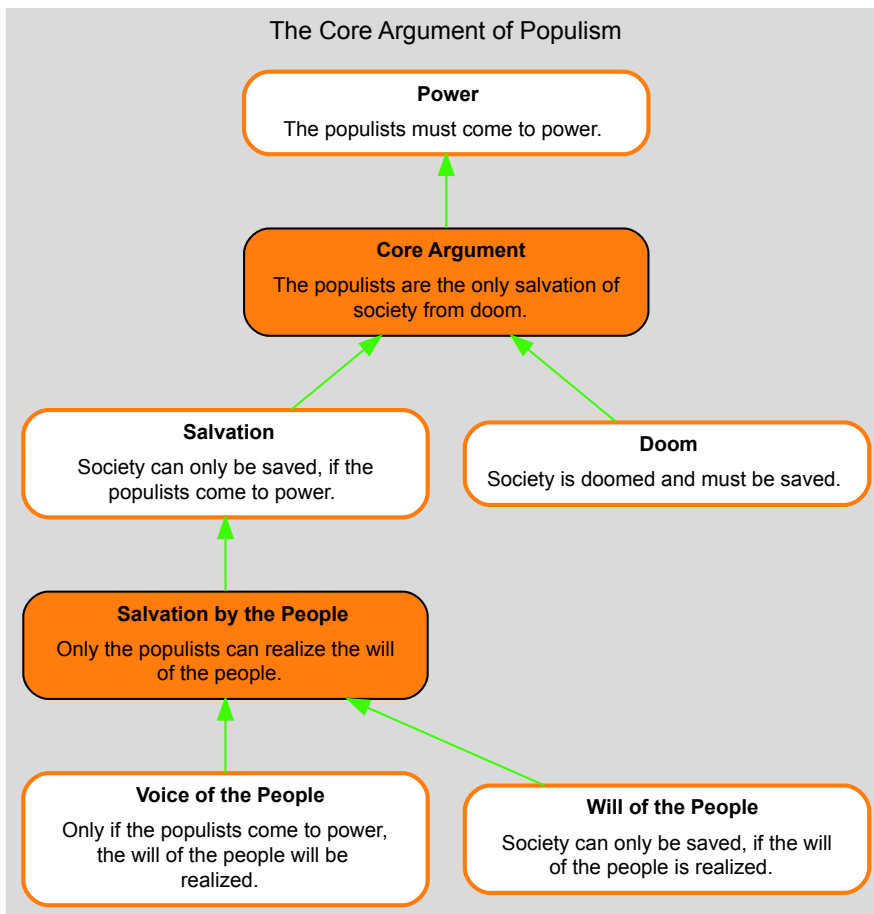


Figure 1 – The Core Argument of Populism

The argument consists of two sub-arguments. The first sub-argument consists of two premises and one conclusion. The first premise [Doom] states that society is doomed and must be saved. The second premise [Salvation] states that society can only be saved if the populists come to power. The conclusion [Power] states that the populists must come to power and follows logically from [Doom] and [Salvation].

Donald Trump's campaign slogans, for example, were based almost explicitly on this argument. His most important campaign slogan "Make America great again" presupposes that America is no longer great. Embedded in the context of his rhetoric, many of Trump's assertions and arguments during his campaign and presidency can only be understood as assuming that America is facing doom and must be saved.

Another important slogan of Trump is "Only I can fix it!" It presupposes that *it* needs fixing. What "it" exactly refers to is not entirely clear. Presumably, however, "it" refers to the United States itself or its government. Trump's slogan is thus almost synonymous with the second premise [Salvation]. The conclusion [Power] is implicit, as it is usual with natural language arguments: Donald Trump must come to and stay in power.

Both premises can also be found in many statements by AfD politicians, but also in the manifestos for the German federal election in 2017 and the European election in 2019. In the former it says: "The rule of law, especially the separation of powers, must be restored and the state must once again be able to guarantee its core tasks."⁵ This presupposes that the rule of law no longer exists in Germany and that the state no longer guarantees its core tasks. In the words (of the party platform from 2016): "We could not and did not want to stand idly by the violation of law and order, the destruction of the rule of law, and the irresponsible political action against the principles of economic reason." This presupposes that law and order are not being upheld, the rule of law is being destroyed and Germany is economically failing. The AfD assumes quite clearly in both passages that Germany is in one form or another on the brink of doom and in need of salvation.⁶

Implicitly, premise [Salvation] is even part of the AfD's name. It claims to be *the* alternative for Germany: the only party that is not part of the "political class whose primary interest is its power, its status, and its success at the polls," as it says in the manifesto from 2017. Only the AfD can save Germany.

⁵ All quotes from the AfD's political programs have been translated by the author.

⁶ As we will see, a significant part of the AfD's argumentation in its political programs is directed at showing that Germany is doomed, which seems a general strategy to justify radical action against the "establishment." Cf. Lilla (2016).

Premises [Doom] and [Salvation] are further justified. This means that new arguments are made, each supporting one of the two premises. The AfD's party platform and its manifestos, but also its (social) media messages contain such arguments. Premise [Doom] is justified by several threats to society such as immigration, Islam, and the loss of cultural identity. Across the various populist camps, these scenarios are surprisingly similar, and they demonstrably play a vital role in the AfD's political programs.

The justification for premise [Salvation] consists in the claim that the AfD and only the AfD speaks for "the people". This claim to sole representation is considered by Müller (2017) as defining feature of populism and is found almost literally in the AfD's political programs. The supporting – and by Müller's definition truly populist – argument for premise [Salvation] is the second sub-argument.⁷ It says that society can only be saved if the populists come to power because only then can the people's will be realized. Only if the AfD realizes its demands, will the "people be given the opportunity to introduce their own legislative initiatives and to pass them by referendum," as it says in the manifestos and party platform.

Only if the people become sovereign again can society be saved from imminent doom. Or in the words of the AfD from both manifestos: "We are convinced that the fundamental financial, energy, and migration crises, as well as the societal clash with Islam, cannot be managed viably by either the government or the parliament alone. This cannot and must not happen without the direct participation of the people." The AfD must hence come to power to give "the people" its voice. The premise [Will of the People] captures this fundamental assumption.

There are three unjustified premises in this argument: [Doom], [Voice of the People], and [Will of the People]. Despite being controversially debated in the political science literature, premise [Will of the People] is taken for granted. Lots of reasons are given, however, to further substantiate [Doom] and [Voice of the People].⁸

In the manifestos from 2017 and 2019, three main reasons can be found for [Voice of the people] in the form of arguments against the "Fake News", the political "Establishment" and the European Union. However, let us first look at several scenarios of doom, which are given as justifications for [Doom].

⁷ Cf. Taguieff (2006) for a more sceptical perspective on the project to define populism.

⁸ A reconstruction of the entire argumentation fully visualized with Argdown is available online as the example "The Core Argument of Populism" here: <https://argdown.org/sandbox>.

3. SCENARIOS OF DOOM

Premise [Doom] of the core argument is justified in various ways in the AfD's manifestos and party platform. The AfD puts forward (at least) nine arguments to show that society is doomed and must be saved. They all have [Doom] as their conclusions and can either be understood as inductive reasons for it or as a conjunctive deductive inference:

- **Immigration:** Immigration is a threat to society. (FE17: 5)⁹
- **Crime:** Crime and terrorism are threats to society. (FE17: 4)
- **Islam:** Islam is a threat to society. (FE17: 6)
- **Culture:** The disappearance of cultural identity is a threat to society. (FE17: 8, 9)
- **Globalization:** Globalization is a threat to society. (FE17: 3)
- **Iniquity:** Social injustice is a threat to society. (FE17: 10, 11)
- **Demography:** Demographic change is a threat to society. (FE17: 11)
- **Healthcare:** The failure of healthcare is a threat to society. (FE17: 12)
- **Innovation:** Technophobia is a threat to society. (FE17: 13)

Understood as inductive reasons, they each provide some justification to believe that society is doomed and they jointly (are supposed to) warrant the conclusion [Doom]. Being inductive reasons, not every argument must go through to do so, however. For instance, the AfD would still consider it proven that society is doomed if the argument on demographic change turned out to be unsuccessful (by its own standards). Understood as a conjunctive deductive inference, there is an intermediate argument between the nine arguments and [Doom], which contains nine premises about doom by immigration, crime, Islam, culture, globalization, iniquity, demographic change, failure of healthcare, technophobia, and a tenth premise stating that if all these threats exist, society is doomed and must be saved.

For the purposes of this paper it will not matter whether we interpret this argument inductively or deductively.¹⁰ Let's now examine the arguments themselves. One prominent theme runs through much of the argumentation in all political programs; namely the "threat of immigration". I will hence begin with the argument on immigration and show how it is linked to the arguments on crime, Islam, and culture (section 3.1). These arguments are not only closely connected to the argument on immigration, but also play an important role in both the AfD's election and media campaigns and other right-wing populist argumentations. The

⁹ The numbers refer to the section numbers of the AfD's manifesto for the federal election 2017 (FE17).

¹⁰ I take it to be more charitable to interpret the argument as inductive, but nothing of what follows depends on this.

remaining arguments for premise [Doom] will then be discussed collectively in the subsequent section (3.2).

3.1 Immigration, Crime, Islam, and Culture

Let's take a closer look at the argument on immigration. It is discussed in detail in Chapter 9 of the party platform (PP), Chapter 5 of the manifesto for the federal election in Germany 2017 (FE17), and Chapter 6 of the manifesto for the European election 2019 (EE19). It is strongly connected to the arguments on crime and Islam, but also bears on issues of national sovereignty, the national budget, the national healthcare system, and cultural identity. It can be reconstructed in form depicted in Figure 2.¹¹

According to the AfD, society is doomed because crime rates are skyrocketing. The link to "Ausländerkriminalität" (crimes committed by foreigners) is drawn at multiple instances in its political programs.¹² Islam is presented as a threat to the rule of law and liberal democracy.¹³ In general, immigration is considered the main threat to Germany and other European nations – due to its (alleged) destabilizing effects on national security, national economies, national healthcare systems, and cultural identities.

¹¹ Please note that Figure 2 and subsequent figures do not represent the entire arguments' reconstruction, which (apart from the structural ambiguity between an inductive and deductive inference discussed above) contains deductively valid arguments only. For the sake of clarity, uncontroversial and other less salient premises have been omitted. The numbers in brackets behind the statements indicate the section in the AfD's manifesto for the federal election in 2017, where the original arguments can be found.

¹² See PP16: 3.4, 3.7, 3.8, 9.6; FE17: 4.1, 4.6, 5.8; EE19: 6.2, 8.1.

¹³ See PP16: 7.6; FE17: 6; EE19: 8.5.

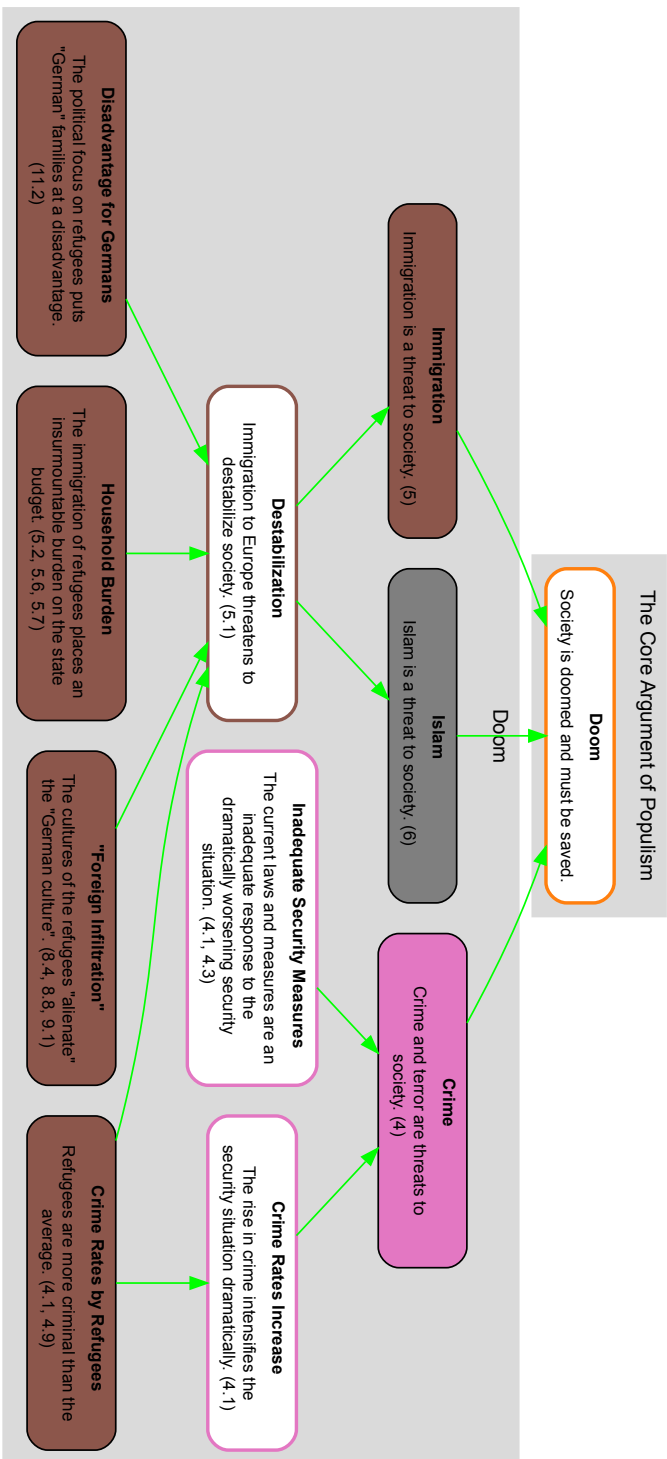


Figure 2: The Doom Arguments of Immigration, Islam, and Crime

According to the AfD's political programs, immigration brings not only criminals, terrorists, and "foreign cultures," but also people who burden the state budget and welfare system. These problems are multiplied because immigrants are reproducing faster than "German families" such that soon there won't be a country recognizable as "our Germany" anymore.¹⁴ This argumentation perfectly ties in with the narrative of the conspiracy theory of the "Great Replacement" – which is increasingly adhered to and propagated by right-wing extremists, masterminds, and high-level politicians, but also by many right-leaning voters.¹⁵

Although interwoven with the previous arguments on crime, Islam, and immigration, the argumentative thread on cultural identity is complex and merits a closer analysis. The loss of cultural identity is supposedly driven by a number of factors. The arguments' key thesis is that the disappearance of cultural identity is a threat to society. Traditionally, right-wing populists and extremists have focused on cultural hegemony and a return to cultural values that are considered in decline.¹⁶

While immigration is considered one major threat to "Germany's cultural identity," there are other independent threats, which are identified in the AfD's political programs. In particular, the AfD fears that the "traditional family" is losing its function. According to the AfD, this is a problem both because it is itself an important value and also because it multiplies, as mentioned, all the other problems due its (alleged) effect to demographic change.

Most room is made for two other (sub-)arguments, however: that "genderism" and "multiculturalism" – coming from within society – threaten "our way of life." "Gender-mainstreaming" destroys, so the AfD's manifesto, the "traditional family values" and "natural gender roles" in families. Furthermore, "gender ideology" is assumed "constitutionally invalid."¹⁷ The argumentation can be reconstructed as depicted in Figure 3.

¹⁴ This is most clearly expressed in FE17: 5.1.

¹⁵ See Betz (2018) or Bergmann (2018).

¹⁶ This has also been the German Nationalsocialists' strategy. Nowadays, the strategists of the AfD (and other right-wing populist parties) draw on Gramsci (2014) for this approach, however. Cf. Kailitz (2004).

¹⁷ See PP16: 7, 8; FE17: 7.7, 9; EE19: 8, 12.

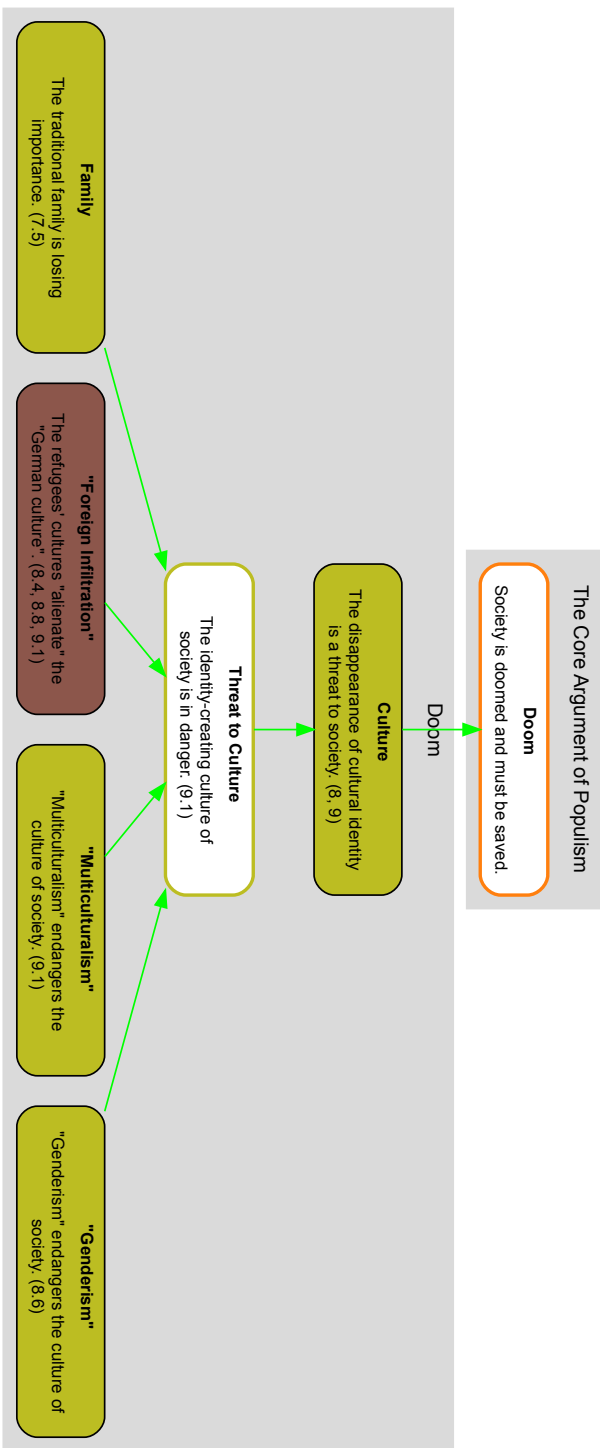


Figure 3: The Doom Argument of Culture

3.2 More Doomsday Scenarios

Various other scenarios of doom identify past achievements that have been lost, according to the AfD, in today's Germany. The AfD wants to reinstate the principles of liberty, democracy, and the rule of law (EE19:2.1/2.2), national sovereignty with respect to banking and finance (EE19:5.5), and to immigration and asylum policy (EE19:6.1), the freedom of research and teaching, and the scientific level of excellence (EE19:12.1), the neutrality of education (EE19:12.4), Germany's ability to defend its borders (EE19:3.2.2), internal security (EE19:8.1), and the competitiveness of German companies (EE19:5.3/13.4.3).¹⁸ The AfD wants to put the state into service of "the people" *again*.¹⁹ This implies – as the slogans of Donald Trump – that the mentioned states of affairs are not there anymore: Just as the United States used to be great, but is not great anymore; Germany used to be a democracy, but is not a democracy anymore.

Moreover, the threats identified to "us" and "the people" show how the AfD employs "us versus them"-schemes.²⁰ Much ink has been spilled on the "us"-part, i.e., the concept of *the people*, identifying it as a constructed concept for a fictitious entity – a culturally homogenous ethnic group (cf. Anderson 2006). Also, the "them"-part has been studied extensively. It usually instantiates a friend-enemy-thinking, which according to Schmitt (2002) governs "all true politics".

Particularly noteworthy is that the "us versus them"-thinking is not only used in relation to threats by "them out there" (the immigrants and Muslims), but also in relation to "them up there". "Those up there" are the reason why, according to the AfD, "the voice of the people" is not heard and the AfD cannot save society. And this is also explicitly shown in the AfD's political programs by specifically three more arguments supporting premise [Voice of the People] in the core argument.

4. THE ONLY SALVATION

The AfD stages itself as the savior from the threats to society discussed in the previous section. Only the AfD can save it because only they are uncorrupted and have not lost connection to "the people". The argumentation is straight-forward and can be found in the manifestos from 2017 and 2019 and party platform from 2016. It can also be found in most

¹⁸ Virtually the same points are made in the party platform from 2016 and the manifesto from 2017 in slightly different order and with slightly different focus.

¹⁹ Cf. Kämper (2017), who analyzes the AfD's party platform with respect to the use of the word "again" specifically.

²⁰ See Greene (2014) or Haidt (2013) for the disruption between moral groups.

other right-wing populist election programs, campaign programs, and political strategy papers. Let us now examine the three key ingredients in detail.

4.1 The “Establishment”

“We the people” against “them up there” – this is the classical topos of populism and it is not missing in the AfD’s argumentation. Also, Donald Trump frequently used the slogan “drain the swamp,” declared to “make our government honest once again,” and railed against the “establishment.” Classically, anti-elitism has been considered a defining feature of populism.²¹

The “establishment” is seen as the “enemy of the people”. The AfD’s manifestos and party platform contain arguments of this kind:

- (1) **[Political Alternative]:** Apart from the “establishment” only the populists can come to power.
- (2) **[Lost Connection]:** The “establishment” does not want to and cannot realize the popular will.
- (3) **[Realization]:** The will of the people will only be realized if a party comes to power that wants to and can realize the will of the people.

- (4) **[Voice of the People]:** Only if the populists come to power, the will of the people will be realized.

The following argument supports premise [Lost Connection] of the previous argument:

- (1) **[Corruption and Inability]:** The “establishment” is corrupt and incompetent.
- (2) **[Will and Ability]:** If the “establishment” is corrupt and incompetent, it cannot and will not realize the will of the people.

- (3) **[Lost Connection]:** The “establishment” does not want to and cannot realize the popular will.

While premise [Lost Connection] says that the “establishment” does not properly connect to the people – as opposed to the AfD, premise [Political Alternative] entails that only the populists are a realistic power that is not part of the “establishment.” The AfD demands that power be given back to the “sovereign citizenship of the Federal Republic of Germany” and that the “people (...) be sovereign again” (FE17: 1.3).

²¹ Cf. Barr (2009).

The AfD then criticizes (in FE17: 1.4) the government: Since the “established parties” (“Altparteien”) are corrupt and incompetent, they cannot and do not want to realize “the will of the people”. Premise [Corruption and Inability] can be found almost literally in the manifesto, where it says that the “omnipotence of the parties and their exploitation of the state endangers our democracy” (FE17: 1.7). It further argues that the current state of the party system be precarious because “numerous laws have allowed the separation of powers in Germany to erode over the years and have led to an exuberant state power” (FE17: 1.5).

The AfD must therefore come to power to give its voice to “the people.” The corruption and inability of the “established parties” prevent that Germany’s problems be solved. Only “the people” can do this and only the AfD is willing and able to facilitate “the people” doing it. The argument is visualized in Figure 4.

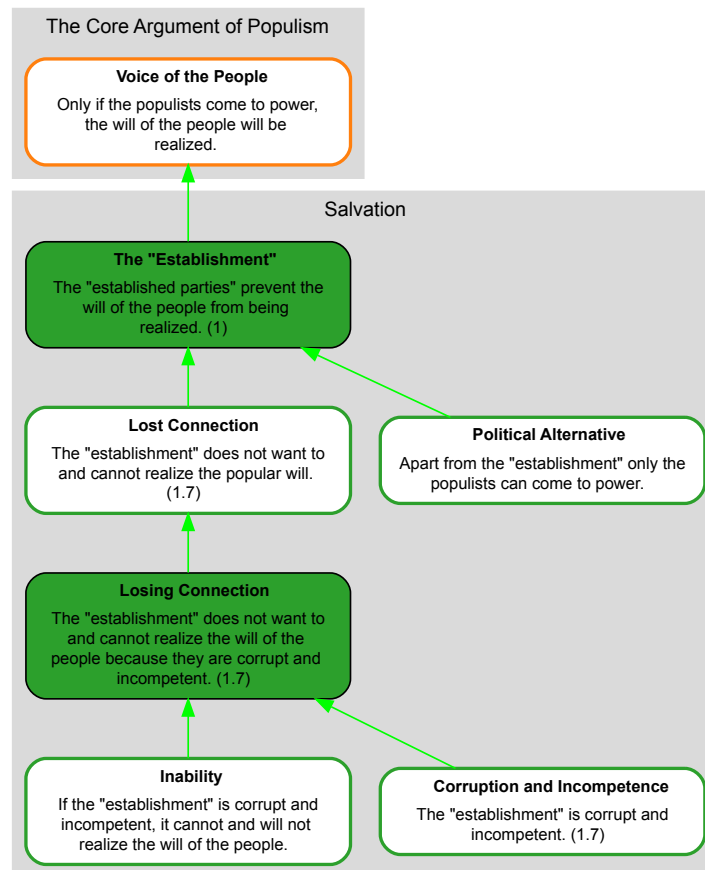


Figure 4: The Salvation Argument on the “Establishment”

4.2 The “Fake News”

Crucial to the AfD’s argumentation is also the alleged role of the traditional media, which is depicted as another “enemy of the people”. The argumentation contains the infamous allegations of “political correctness” and manipulation and “co-ordination” of the traditional media by the state.

The argument can be reconstructed in the following way:

- (1) **["Fake News" and Censorship]:** Freedom of expression will not be subject to any restriction or censorship unless the "fake news" is abolished.
- (2) **[Abolition of the “Fake News”]:** The “fake news” will only be abolished if the populists come to power.
- (3) **[Will of the People and Censorship]:** The will of the people will only be realized if freedom of expression is not subject to any restrictions or censorship.

- (4) **[Voice of the People]:** Only if the populists come to power, the will of the people will be realized.

The following argument supports premise [“Fake News” and Censorship] of the previous argument:

- (1) **["Political Correctness”]:** If the “fake news” prevails, the parties continue to use the instrument of "political correctness" and bring the press in line.
- (2) **[Opinion Formation]:** If the parties continue to use the instrument of "political correctness" and bring the press in line, the freedom of expression will be limited and censored.

- (3) **["Fake News" and Censorship]:** Freedom of expression will not be subject to any restriction or censorship unless the "fake news" is abolished.

The central premise of the argument is [“Fake News” and Censorship]. The manifesto (FE17: 1.7) says: "The omnipotence of the established parties is also cause (...) of the freedom-limiting ‘political correctness’ and the dictate of opinion in all public discourses." Premise [Opinion Formation] picks up another classic topos of populism. In the AfD’s words from the manifesto (FE17: 9.2) it reads: "We reject decisively ‘politically correct’ language requirements because they (...) restrict the freedom of expression." Premise [“Political Correctness”] is merely conceptual. It can be understood as a partial definition of “fake news.” In contrast to the more controversial (if not outright problematic) premise [Opinion Formation], it is only implicitly found in the manifesto. The argumentation is visualized in Figure 5.

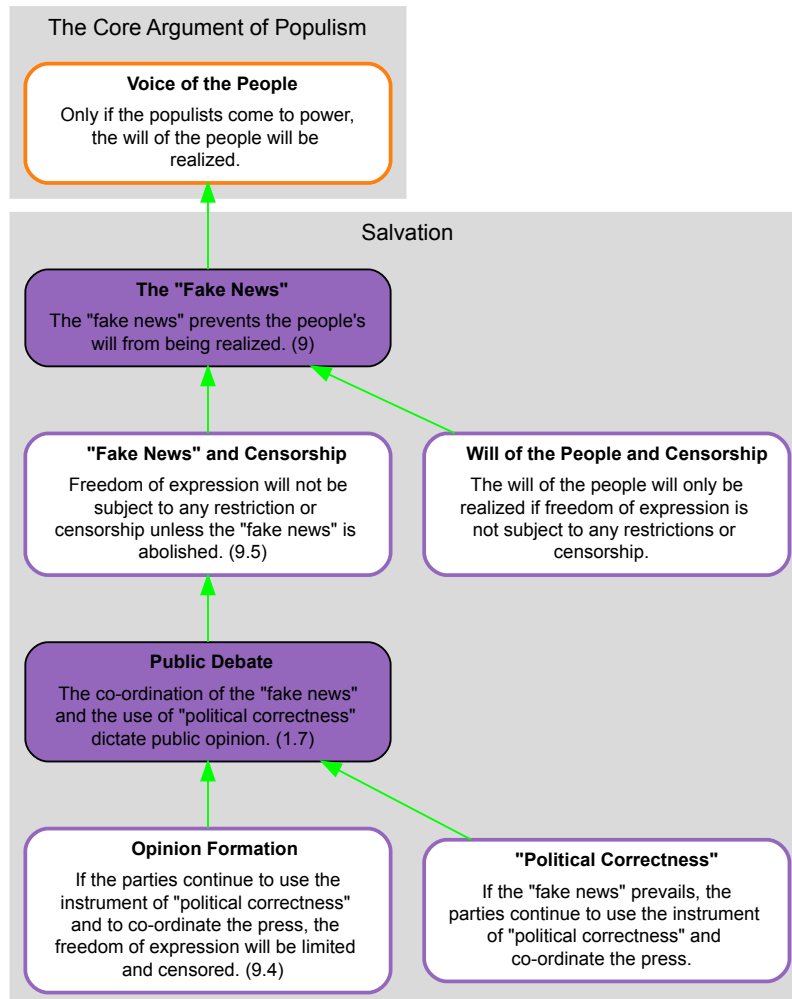


Figure 5: The Salvation Argument on the "Fake News"

In sum, the argument says that the traditional media prevent us from effectively finding solutions to the threats to society that only the AfD has identified due to its ability to recognize "the people's will" and because only the AfD is valiant enough to speak out against the "opinion dictate" ("Meinungsdiktatur") established by the "system." This is why the threats to society are not mentioned in the public and, for this reason, many people are not aware of them.

Based on this assumption can the AfD maintain the plausibility of most other premises in its political programs. This is a crucial argument to make sense of much of its argumentation. It is required to prevent contradictions between the AfD's positions and what other parties, the media, and most citizens in Germany think and say. It makes the

argumentation coherent because it is a *prima facie* good reason to doubt criticism from outside and inside the party.

4.3 The European Union

The last thread in the argumentation supporting premise [Voice of the People] is based on resentments toward the European Union. It was highly relevant to the European elections in 2019, and the AfD – but also many other right-wing populists such as Matteo Salvini’s Lega Nord or Viktor Orbán’s Fidesz – used it to convince people to vote for them.

This argument is very elaborate in the AfD’s manifestos. It can be reconstructed as follows:

- (1) **[No People's Will in EU]:** The will of the people will only be realized if we leave the EU.
- (2) **[Exit from EU]:** Only the populists have the political goal of leaving the EU.

- (3) **[Voice of the People]:** Only if the populists come to power, the will of the people will be realized.

The following argument supports premise [No People's Will in EU] of the previous argument:

- (1) **[No Nationality in EU]:** If we stay within the EU, there is no national statehood.
- (2) **[No Nationality, No Sovereignty]:** Without national statehood, there is no sovereignty of the people.
- (3) **[No Sovereignty, No Democracy]:** Without sovereignty of the people, there is no democracy.
- (4) **[No Democracy, No People's Will]:** The will of the people will only be realized if democracy is restored.

- (5) **[No People's Will in EU]:** The will of the people will only be realized if we leave the EU.

Premise [No Nationality in EU] and [No Nationality, No Sovereignty] invoke the EU as an enemy of the nation state and popular sovereignty. The AfD says (FE17: 1.1): “The treaties of Schengen, Maastricht and Lisbon illegally intervened in the inviolable popular sovereignty. A state that abandons its border control and thus sovereignty over its territory dissolves. It loses its statehood.”

Premise [No Sovereignty, No Democracy] reads in the AfD’s own words: “Only in national states can people’s sovereignty be lived, the mother and the heart of democracy.” Premise [No Democracy, No People’s Will] is implicit in the title of Chapter 1 of the manifesto for the federal election in 2017: “Restoring Democracy in Germany.” The entire

chapter argues for the claim that democracy must be restored in Germany because otherwise society is doomed.

The argumentation can be reconstructed as depicted in Figure 6.

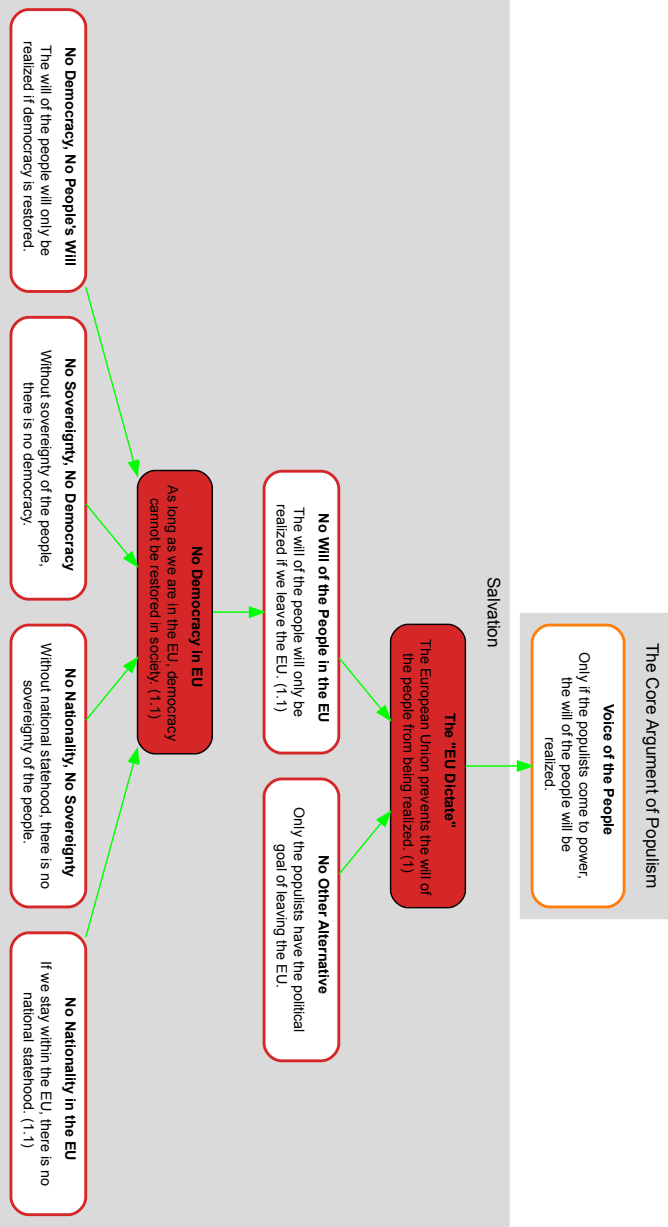


Figure 6: The Salvation Argument on the EU

It is striking how clear the argumentative structure is even on the original texts' surface. In both manifestos and the party platform, the AfD gives

the very same arguments aiming to show that democracy is not possible without popular sovereignty, which in turn is not possible without national statehood, which finally is not possible within the EU. That is why, according to the AfD, Germany (and for that matter any country within the EU) is not a democracy. Due to the “establishment” and “fake news” (who are in cahoots with the “swamp in Brussels”), only the AfD can restore democracy by disbanding the EU or carrying out a “DEXIT.”

5. CONCLUSION

The AfD’s party platform and manifestos do not lack argumentation. Instead, these political programs operate with false or simplistic claims that emotionally appeal to their supporters and at the same time enable stringent argumentation. As a result, it is relatively easy to reconstruct deductively valid arguments where all premises that had to be added are comparatively uncontroversial. In contrast, most explicit premises are verifiably false, misleading, or morally problematic. In the few cases where added premises are more controversial, they implicitly follow from other statements in the AfD’s programs and it can justifiably be assumed that AfD politicians, if confronted with this reconstruction, would accept them. This entails that the argumentation is easily comprehensible and can be reconstructed in a logically valid form without questionable explanations.

In terms of content, it is remarkable that the central theme of “threat by immigration” runs through most of the arguments. It is responsible for problems in the national health system, social injustice, globalization, demographic change, internal security and cultural identity. The EU, the “establishment” and the “Fake News” are the three major obstacles to solving these problems.

The reconstruction allows us to draw a few plausible (even though preliminary) conclusions about the AfD’s argumentative strategy. It seems to consist of three steps. First, the AfD specifically uses emotions such as fear, anger and indignation. These emotions – whether well-founded or not – are addressed in many premises of the argumentation. They bring attention and support by (potential) voters. The fact that many of the premises are verifiably false may (despite what one might think) be ultimately advantageous from the AfD’s point of view, since this facilitates a simple narrative with logically clear arguments. People often seek reasons for their positions rather than adapting them according to the reasons they find. By relying on this, the AfD may also be able to exploit our tribal nature, by which we adhere to the positions of our social group irrespective of their overall plausibility. As a group it may even be rational to adopt false beliefs when it improves its argumentative stance in society by binding it together as a group. A similar effect seems to be

achieved by employing "us versus them"-schemes. Immigration and Islam play a vital role in the debate and populists benefit strongly from antagonizing against immigrants and Muslims. The arguments are designed to exploit people's preexisting opinions – no matter the facts.

In doing so, secondly, the AfD heats up the emotions addressed in the premises. It establishes doomsday scenarios, which rely on prejudices and already existing enemy images. The most detailed and effective way to do this is by means of "us versus them"-schemes (in particular by means of invoking the threat of the "refugee crisis" and "the Islam," but also the enemy from within, i.e., the Greens and left-wingers who are responsible for "fake news," "genderism," "multiculturalism," and the general decay of traditional values).

The imminent doom invoked by this can then be used as justification to, thirdly, present oneself as the only salvation – as the last "Alternative for Germany". While other parties and political agents are portrayed as corrupt, incapable, part of the "EU tyranny", the "fake news," or the "establishment", the AfD can claim to be the "voice of the people" – the only party that can and will save "the people" from this existential threat (which is unacknowledged by everyone else).

In a nutshell, the AfD uses the mobilizing power of fear, anger and indignation to construct a community of "the people," which is threatened by immigrants and Muslims, and can only be saved if the AfD prevails against the "Fake News" and "establishment." The analysis thus suggests a particular interpretation of the AfD's argumentative strategy. Further argumentation theoretically informed research is needed, however, into the argumentative strategies of both other populist and democratic political agents. It would be desirable to compare these findings to alternative reconstructions of the AfD's argumentation to allow stronger conclusions about the strategies employed.

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