

# Pressure to Party?

---

Anna-Sophie Heinze

2023-02-03T12:37:53

Much has changed – and been written – since the ‘Alternative für Deutschland’ (AfD) was founded ten years ago by some rather neoliberal economists and former conservative party members. Today, hardly anyone talks about its early Eurosceptic profile, as it was soon replaced by nativist, authoritarian positions, making the party a typical member of the [\(populist\) radical right](#) party family. This shift to the far right was accompanied by a massive change in the party’s executive committee and membership base in 2015. Today, none of the first party spokespersons is a member of the party anymore.

## Ideological shift to the far right, intra-party conflict, but relatively strong organisation

Unlike previous far-right parties in Germany (e.g., the DVU, NPD or the Republicans), the AfD succeeded in building a [relatively strong organisation](#) and not focusing on a single issue. It quickly recruited members in all 16 federal states and was the first far-right party to enter all state parliaments, the German Bundestag and the European Parliament. At the same time, it positioned itself on all central issues, albeit sometimes late, as with pensions, or contradictorily, as with the [COVID pandemic](#). Furthermore, the AfD uses [climate change sceptic frames](#) and acts as a counterpart to environmental activists such as Fridays for Future or, most recently, the ‘Last Generation’. By mobilising against the [construction of wind turbines](#), the AfD boosts its electoral support (just like the Greens do by promoting it).

Despite its increasing radicalisation, the AfD failed to contain its trench warfare between (only relatively) moderate and (significantly more) radical members, which had accompanied the party from the beginning. In 2019, the danger of being observed by the *Verfassungsschutz* (Office for the Protection of the Constitution) came closer; since 2021, the AfD has been considered a ‘suspected case’ for anti-constitutional aspirations. Jörg Meuthen, one of the last rather ‘moderate’ members of the party executive, resigned as party leader in January 2022, leaving the AfD without a good word. Anyone who is still a member of the party today agrees to take a seat next to radical to extremist voices.

With its far-right profile, the AfD has established a relatively stable, but not steadily growing voter base. Thereby, its electoral strongholds solidified in the [eastern German states](#), while the party struggled in western Germany. In the 2021 federal election, the AfD lost votes and its status as the strongest opposition party; in May 2022, it even missed re-entering a state parliament for the first time (in Schleswig-Holstein). However, given its relatively stable voter base, the party is unlikely to disappear in the near future. 50 % of AfD supporters would rather abstain than vote for another party; only 23 % cite the CDU/CSU as their [second preference](#).

Many voters with [strong populist attitudes](#) have found a new home in the AfD and will therefore hardly be ‘won back’ by, for example, a simple repositioning towards stricter immigration laws. More generally, accommodative strategies [do not pay off](#) for mainstream parties – they even tend to increase support for the radical right.

## Impact on party competition and parliamentary work

Although the other parties have so far excluded the AfD almost without exception, it has influenced the German party system and parliamentary work. In general, polarisation has increased and coalition formation has become more difficult. In some (mainly eastern German) states, only a few coalition options guaranteed a parliamentary majority while excluding the AfD. The election of Thomas Kemmerich as Thuringia’s Prime Minister in 2020 with support from the FDP, CDU and AfD was a breach of taboo in this respect, but has remained unique so far. At the federal level, the AfD is still relatively strictly excluded, for example, it does not provide a Bundestag vice-president (at the subnational level, however, various parties have already voted for some AfD candidates and motions).

In parliament, the AfD clearly stands out from all other parties. For instance, it makes extensive use of [less complex instruments](#) (e.g., minor interpellations) to keep the authorities permanently busy and to obtain information, some of which is not public for data protection reasons (e.g., number and origin of refugees, details on sexual minorities or political organisations against right-wing extremism). Furthermore, the AfD uses targeted provocations in parliamentary debates to attract public attention (for which it needs the corresponding reactions of the other parties and the media). As a result, more [calls to order](#) have been issued since the AfD entered parliaments (mainly to the AfD, but also to other parties when they become unobjective or insulting).

The increasing polarisation can also be observed with regard to the parties’ positions. For example, the AfD’s [migration policies](#) in parliamentary debates differ significantly from those of the other parties. Moreover, the AfD is the only party that uses anti-establishment as well as [radical right stances](#). During the pandemic, it was the only one that cooperated with the ‘[Querdenken](#)’ movement and acted as its parliamentary mouthpiece. These developments can also influence general party competition beyond the parliamentary arena, but this has not happened on a large scale so far.

## Mainstreaming and normalisation of the AfD

Compared to other international far-right actors, the AfD’s positions and frames still appear relatively marginalised. Even the CDU, which is ideologically and electorally closest to the AfD, has not yet shifted significantly to the right. Although it advocated much more traditional socio-political demands in [2017](#) than in 2013, it moved again in a more progressive direction in its [2021](#) election manifesto. After the election defeat, Friedrich Merz (who himself spoke of “social tourism” of Ukrainian refugees, among other things) took over the CDU chairmanship and is currently redefining the

party's course. In this context, he announced the establishment of a *cordon sanitaire* against the AfD, in which any cooperation, especially in the eastern German states, would be punished.

It will therefore be decisive how the CDU will actually deal with violations of these guidelines by individual members or even entire parliamentary groups. Most prominently, Hans-Georg Maaßen (CDU) repeatedly attracted attention with nativist and racist remarks and is currently facing a possible expulsion from the party (which could be difficult due to the high legal hurdles). Although he (or the ['Union of Values'](#) under his leadership) does not reflect the majority of the CDU, such an adoption contributes to the gradual [mainstreaming and normalisation](#) of far-right positions and thus threatens liberal democracy. However, exclusion is also crumbling at the party level: only a few days ago, the Thuringian CDU parliamentary group [passed a law](#) with the AfD and FDP. It will be crucial whether – and if so, how – the federal CDU will tame its (mainly eastern German) state associations not to cooperate with the AfD.

It almost goes without saying that the media also play a central role in the mainstreaming and normalisation of the far right. We know from other countries, such as the Netherlands, that [media practitioners](#) contribute to this process when they gradually become more accommodative (instead of enhancing a strict demarcation). Compared to other far-right parties, the AfD is still not a completely 'normal' guest in TV duels, interviews, etc. Although media actors – and parties – boycott joint TV duels less often today than in the [early years](#), interviews with AfD actors are still highly controversial. For reasons of attention economy, the media report heavily on the AfD and partly also adopt its frames. With its provocative statements, the AfD knows how to use this and shape the media discourse. At the same time, studies underline that the AfD is predominantly portrayed negatively in the media, both at the [regional level](#) and in the [online sphere](#).

Overall, on the AfD's 10th birthday, there is little to suggest that the party will disappear again so quickly. It has established a relatively stable organisation and electorate, with its eastern German strongholds becoming increasingly entrenched. Strategically, the party is now facing the question of whether it can mobilise nationwide with its far-right course or whether it will drift into becoming a 'Lega Ost'. In addition, some legal questions remain unresolved, such as whether the AfD's 'Desiderius Erasmus Foundation' can be deprived of state funding. The AfD's influence is sometimes overestimated, especially when compared to other (populist) far-right parties in Europe. However, its future (indirect) impact depends largely on the behaviour of the other [parties, media actors and civil society](#). Although they have been relatively united in excluding the AfD so far, the *cordon sanitaire* is already breaking down in some places. That alone could be reason for the AfD to celebrate.

