Following the long-term rise and recent electoral boost of radical-right populist parties across Europe, the Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD) became the third strongest party in the 2017 general elections for the German Bundestag. This is remarkable for several reasons. First, the postwar political and electoral resurgence of radical right and right-wing populist parties in (Western) Europe started more than three decades ago, when the French Front National celebrated a breakthrough by achieving a whopping 11.2 percent of the vote in the 1984 European elections. Yet, despite some local and regional electoral breakthroughs by radical right parties, in Germany, such parties never really came close to successfully mobilizing voters nationally. Thus, Germany is now, after all, no longer an exception to the new normal of successful—or at least politi-
cally relevant—radical-right, nationalist, and authoritarian populist parties within Europe’s liberal democracies.

Second, for a long time many observers had seen the electoral success of a radical right-wing (populist) party in post Holocaust Germany—the historical home base of Nazi rule—as improbable due to the country’s particular legacy. This legacy seemed to largely discredit and undermine any potential broader appeal of politically organized ethnic nationalism or actors promoting radical-right ideology. No matter if this Sonderweg (special path) claim was valid in the past or not, it no longer holds today. To the contrary, the very transgression of established discursive boundaries—including breaking with civil standards of political discourse, “bad manners,” and taboo-breaking in relation to the legacy of the Nazi crimes—seems now to be an appealing force for mobilization in Germany like elsewhere in Europe rather than negatively affecting electoral performance.

Third, for decades Germany provided the prime European example of failing radical-right populist parties due to organizational problems, lack of professional competence, and infighting. These problems on the supply side of politics made even regional electoral successes short-lived. Despite the fact that the AfD also massively faces internal conflicts, doubts about competence, and constant reshuffling of personnel, such issues do not seem to have hitherto hurt the party at the ballot-box.

Hence, things have changed. Founded just five years ago the AfD now represents, it is argued here, the first radical right-wing (populist) party in the German parliament since the Nazi era. This caesura potentially marks a critical juncture: the beginning of a new, centrifugal and polarized era in German electoral and parliamentary politics, and the transformation of Germany’s postwar political culture at large. Against this backdrop, this contribution addresses three questions: What is the ideology of the AfD as a relevant opposition party in the Bundestag? What explains the AfD’s dramatic electoral rise and support? And what is the party’s behavior and impact in parliament, especially with regard to interparty interactions and Germany’s political culture? In answering these research questions, I situate the AfD’s political ideology, electoral success, and parliamentary politics in the comparative context of the recently accelerated European-wide ascent of—especially rightist, authoritarian-nativist—populist movement-parties. The main argument advanced is that the AfD—some German particularities notwithstanding—has turned into a typical or “normalized,” radical(ized) right-wing populist movement-party that expresses and fosters profound sociocultural discontent, political polarization, and a broader authoritarian-nationalist, politico-cultural “noisy counterrevolution” in and beyond par-
liaments across Europe. The trans-European rise of authoritarian-nativist populist parties harshly critical of societal Europeanization is thereby also part of Europeanization processes of politics.4

The article proceeds in three steps. First, the significant programmatic evolution of the AfD and the respective transformation of a party leadership representing these changes are reconstructed, primarily on the basis of a diachronic comparative party manifesto analysis. Examining party and electoral platforms over four years from the party’s founding to the 2017 electoral campaign, the article identifies significant programmatic shifts and authoritarian-nationalist radicalization processes shaping this young and new party. This analysis of the supply side is followed, second, by a brief analysis of electoral demand—the appeal of the AfD among voters in the 2017 election—in view of survey data, and favorable conditions that may explain the AfD’s rise in a comparative European context. Third, a first analysis of initial sessions of the newly constituted Bundestag follows. It indicates significant transformations of parliamentary politics and political culture in general, in which the AfD as the largest opposition party in the national parliament takes an active role. It points to disruptive populist strategies, centrifugal polarization trends and parliamentary shifts which are, too, reflective of European political developments.

From a Euroskeptic to a European Radical Right-Wing Populist Party? The Political and Programmatic Evolution of the AfD on its Way to National Parliament

To grasp and explain the rise as well as the parliamentary and politico-cultural significance of the AfD in German and European context, it is important to understand its nature and position in the party spectrum, especially in terms of the party’s programmatic outlook and its underlying ideological core. Defining the party and typologically situating it in a particular party family is not just a relevant scholarly endeavor as such. It is also a necessary condition to evaluate the potential scope of the changes in the party system, and in political culture at large, which the electoral success of a certain new party may indicate or foster. Recent party research has hereby paid particular attention to the supply side:5 the active ideological and organizational role of parties as agents of public opinion formation and as intermediaries shaping their own political fate and their voter mobilization capacities.6

Most research on political parties looks at four criteria to classify and typologize parties: their programmatic profile and political ideology; histor-
ical origins; organizational structures and formation; and the structure of its electorate and members, i.e., the demand side. From the perspective of party system research, the AfD can therefore be analyzed, understood, and classified in several ways. I suggest, however, that the ideological core to which a party is attached and that is expressed in shared programmatic goals, platforms, and public statements by party leaders, is still the single most important criterion to assess the character of a party. It also provides the most meaningful way to place a party in a party family and party typology. This applies to the AfD as well, which—like other new parties before—claims to challenge established parties and ideological divisions. The key supply side variable overshadowing others is the ideological core and the evolving programmatic profile, which in the case of the AfD are closely aligned with organizational and leadership changes and with a strong effort to distance the party from its still young historical origins.

With regard to the AfD, many scholars and publicists have hereby observed some continuities, but also a profound ideological and programmatic transformation of the party within the relatively short span of five years. Yet the precise nature and conceptualization of this ideological shift, which I argue has major implications for classifying this party, deserves closer scrutiny. It points to a change from a conservative protest party initially driven by one single issue—opposition to the Eurozone—to an authoritarian-nativist, radical right-wing populist movement-party gradually further radicalizing. This transformation is also reflected in the dramatic turnover rate in the party’s leadership and parallel changes of the party’s organization. After briefly reconstructing its origins, organizational development, and programmatic evolution, the AfD’s platform changes will be evaluated more specifically in order to assess the current political ideology and character of the biggest opposition party in the Bundestag.

The AfD’s Origins, Organizational Development, and Programmatic Evolution

The AfD was initially founded in April 2013 as a self-identified “liberal-conservative” protest party primarily seeking to offer an alternative to policies of the center-right, governing catch-all party Christian Democratic Union (CDU) led by chairwoman and chancellor Angela Merkel. As Frank Decker points out, new parties tend to either emerge from within society or after a split from an existing party. In the AfD’s case, “many of its former and current leading figures used to call the center-right camp (CDU and FDP) their home, albeit failing to ever make it past its ‘second row.’”

The new party’s primary focus, however, was a very specific issue: an economic critique of the common currency of the Euro and an ordoliberal...
protest of Germany’s membership in the Eurozone. As Oskar Niedermayer has shown, even though the new party immediately received 4.7 percent in the 2013 general election (and came close to entering the Bundestag only five months after its official founding), the origins of this party can be traced back to 2010. This is the year when the Merkel government decided to provide large-scale financial support to Greece in the context of the country’s sovereign debt crisis as a “last option” to save the Eurozone and Greece’s membership in it. In opposition to the often declared Alternativlosigkeit (lack of alternatives) toward this policy, economics professor Bernd Lucke initiated a so-called “plenary of economists” opposing Merkel’s policies in support of the Euro—presumably purely based on economic arguments. In response to the 2012 European Stability Mechanism (ESM), the group led by Lucke subsequently formed the loose, nonpartisan alliance Bündnis Bürgerwille (Alliance Citizens’ Will) and then the Wahlalternative 2013 (Electoral Alternative 2013) before founding the AfD as a party in the spring of 2013. It could build on an existing elite network. Lucke was one of nominally three chairpersons, yet the best-known face of the party.

Even though the “citizens’ will” rhetoric sounded populist, the initial leadership by no means pretended to be anti-elite but they styled themselves as part of Germany’s elite: as economic experts with alternative, superior knowledge. Moreover, Lucke and other AfD leaders offered a consistent “official” rejection of extremism and the populism label and presented themselves as a right-wing liberal force. Yet, to be sure, the party assembled a heterogeneous group of citizens displaying popular discontent with government policies. From the beginning it thereby created openings to the nativist right. Since its inception, the AfD was charged with being right-wing populist and promoting Deutsche-Mark nationalism due to its call to leave the Eurozone and reinstitute the D-Mark. Furthermore, as Torsten Oppelland points out, posters against welfare migration already displayed nativist outreach. The party slogan Mut zur Wahrheit (Courage to Tell the Truth) suggested in a populist fashion that the established democratic parties in parliament “would lie to the people.” From the beginning, the AfD has also displayed some organizational features of a movement-party that tries to distance itself from “traditional” party politics in practice and substance. In so doing, it has also been reaching out, albeit initially in a subtle way, to a growing, initially partly diffuse discontent with mainstream politics and policies—a discontent that finds expression in a new type of politically active, engaged and enraged segment of Wutbürger (angry citizens). A year after its founding, the new party had a first series of electoral successes. It entered the European Parliament, winning 7.1 percent of the
vote, and consecutively joined several regional Landtage, thus becoming a relevant parliamentary actor. The rising political force soon no longer primarily focused on the Euro crisis. Meanwhile, following increasing success, the AfD attracted all kinds of new enraged citizens as members and voters.

In light of this success and expansion, a conflict about the future political direction and programmatic orientation broke out at the beginning of 2015. This first inner-party crisis and subsequent infighting ultimately represented a first turning point in the party’s development, leading to a split. At the national party assembly in July of that year, Frauke Petry, one of the three original chairpersons representing the nationalist wing of the party, turned into the AfD’s new face. Until the end of 2017, she then served as speaker alongside economics professor Jörg Meuthen, until the end of 2017 also state chairman in Baden-Württemberg and now leading the party in the European Parliament.

Substantively, the conflict erupted over the party’s relationship to the unfolding migration crisis, Islam and cultural identity—and in particular to the new East German anti-Muslim and nationalist protest movement PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident). PEGIDA successfully mobilized thousands of East German citizens in street protest against refugees, immigrants, “Islamization,” and an alleged Lügenpresse (lying press) supposedly manipulating and fabricating public opinion on these issues. Petry and especially East German party leaders, like the radical right-wing state chairman of Thuringia, Björn Höcke, argued that it is important to address the political discontent of PEGIDA supporters and “civic protest movements” (as stated in the so-called Erfurt Resolution initiated by Höcke, which attacked the Lucke leadership for staying away from the protest movement and for conforming to “established political business”). By contrast, Lucke and his supporters had first criticized PEGIDA’s unmitigated xenophobia and then, in their Weckruf 2015 (Wake-up Call 2015), charged inner-party opponents with integrating radical forces forming an antisystem, nationalist “fundamental opposition.” Defeated in this conflict about leadership and direction, Lucke and his supporters subsequently left the party (and with them around 20 percent of party members). The defeat of the Lucke wing signaled a critical juncture and an interrelated, three-fold development: (1) a significant departure from the party’s origins; (2) a replacement of the initial, dominant party leadership alongside an organizational change from an “economic expert party” to a movement-party against “the corrupt elite;” and, (3) a programmatic and ideological “right-wing nationalist turn” or “radicalization” of the party (to be further examined here).

Following double-digit electoral performances in West and East German Länder elections in 2016 under Petry’s leadership, the party experienced its
second crisis in the prelude to the 2017 Bundestag election. Even though Petry had celebrated electoral successes and managed to build transnational cooperation with other rightist-populist parties in Europe, now it was Petry’s turn to be challenged from a more radical nationalist right. To prevent a further extreme right drift, Petry—replicating the right-wing populist Front National leader Marine Le Pen acting against the most extreme actors in her party—intended to exclude the radical nationalist Höcke from the party. Speaking in front of the party youth organization Junge Alternative in January 2017, the latter had attacked the Holocaust memorial and called for a “180 degree change in national memorial policies.” Petry failed in this attempt, as Höcke experienced vast support from the rank and file and among other key leaders like Alexander Gauland and Meuthen. With her attempt to contain fundamental antisystem opposition, she was ultimately side-lined in the party and its 2017 general electoral campaign.

This second party crisis thus represents another right-wing radicalization. Thomas Oppelland, to be sure, suggests that the two candidates for the 2017 federal election now co-leading the AfD’s Bundestag delegation, Alexander Gauland and Alice Weidel, did not signal another right-wing turn. Oppelland argues that Weidel represents an “economically liberal and pragmatic” wing of the party. Both politicians, however, are known for harsh and radical anti-immigrant statements, agitating fiercely against minorities, and promoting ethnic nationalism, as well as supporting keeping the radical rightist Höcke in the party. As I analyze below, the leadership crisis, change, and radicalization had once again no demonstrable negative electoral repercussions for the AfD.

Alongside the party leadership, goals, and programmatic orientation, the party organization has also been profoundly transformed since its founding. On the one hand, the party has become more organized, though leadership positions are still floating, behind-closed doors compromises dominate the decision-making, and there are questions about transparency and inner-party democracy. On the other hand, the party has also increasingly become a (radical right) movement-party. This is expressed in strengthened outreach towards PEGIDA and other right-wing nationalist milieus, including the so-called “identitarian movement” of young radical nationalists and the nationalist monthly *Compact.*

*The AfD’s Political Ideology on the Road to Parliament: Evaluating Campaign Platforms from 2013 to the 2017 Bundestag Election*

As indicated, identifying the ideological core is the arguably most important task to define the character and nature of a political party. To empirically
assess and conceptualize the ideological core does not only allow one to define the party and situate it in a particular party family. This endeavor is also significant if one wants to evaluate its electoral success and political impact. As sociopolitical actors and intermediaries between state and society, however, parties and their ideology can evolve and transform over time. This is particularly relevant in the case of new parties entering political competition, which often still develop their political ideology and objectives. As we have seen, programmatic and ideological shifts, indicating that the party at large is still in flux, are strikingly evident in the AfD’s first five years and on the road to their electoral success in the 2017 Bundestag election. The initial single-issue, partly euroskeptic outlook and the earlier fragile “fusion of economically liberal and socially conservative/nationalist positions” were soon challenged.

Examining party and electoral platforms over four years from the party’s founding to the 2017 electoral campaign, this sections identifies the specific shifts towards a comprehensive rightist-nativist radicalization, as initially diagnosed by Decker in 2016. The systematic comparison between the early 2013 electoral platform for the Bundestag election and the slightly broader 2014 platform for the European elections, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the 2017 platform for the Bundestag election confirms a specific, partly drastic shift of programmatic objectives. This indicates a profound change in the ideological core, i.e., the political ideology that keeps the party together.

The early platforms are clearly dominated by one issue: Euro policies and the Eurozone monetary union. The topic of the sovereign debt crisis and Germany’s financial transfers to Greece and investments in the Eurozone, to be sure, were also the prevailing subjects of German political debates in the early 2010s and thus of broad popular concern.

The 2013 electoral platform consists hereby of only four pages. It laments the “failure of the Treaty of Maastricht” and declares three main objectives: First and foremost, Germany should leave the Eurozone, which de facto implies that the common currency should be abandoned altogether. Second, the AfD asks to give up any European financial debt and “reliability community.” And third, more diffusely, the AfD demands an institutional shift of governing and decision-making competences from the European level back to the level of the nation state. It remains unclear what this was supposed to specifically entail but the AfD “decidedly rejects a transfer union or even a centralized European state.” The early AfD, however, accepts the “shared cultural heritage of Europe” and supports a common European market: “We support a Europe of sovereign states with
a common market. We want to live together in friendship and as good neighbors.”42 While the Eurozone is viewed as an external threat to Germany’s stability and welfare, the early AfD does not oppose European integration in principle.

Other topics are mentioned but marginal in the short 2013 program. Among the other issues, the “rule of law and democracy” takes the most prominent spot. The party “unconditionally” supports the rule of law and “strengthened democratic civil rights.” It supports debating “unconventional opinions” as long as they are not in violation of the constitution.43 Fiscal and budget policies, secure pensions, family, education, and energy policies are also briefly addressed.44 “Integration policy,” referring to immigrants and immigration, is limited to a short final section. It claims that “Germany needs qualified immigrants interested in integrating into society,” and advocates for an “immigration law according to the Canadian model.”45 Traces of right-wing populism or anti-immigrant rhetoric can be detected because the AfD opposes “disorderly immigration into our welfare system,” while the platform insists that “those who are really politically persecuted should find asylum in Germany. Treating humans with dignity also means that asylum-seekers can work here.”46 Despite the emphasis on the sovereign nation state, neither explicit ethnic nationalism (i.e., giving priority to ethnic nationals, anti-immigrant rhetoric), nor authoritarianism (i.e., supporting unchecked political authority and opposition to constitutional liberal democracy), nor populism (i.e. dividing society into “the good people” and “the corrupt elite”) are ideological features of the program.47 In other words, the key ideological elements of radical right-wing populism are absent.48

Entering party politics as a “single-issue” movement,49 Robert Grimm argues that the initial AfD should be classified as a “partially Eurosceptic party” pursuing an ordoliberal policy critique of the common currency that is ultimately “anti-Euro” but “pro-European.”50 If interpreting the AfD as “pro-European” may be pushing it, the analysis of the platform points to what Paul Taggart and Aleks Szczerbiak classify as a qualified, “soft Euroskepticism” focused on particular institutional aspects and policy areas of the EU (as opposed to “hard Euroskepticism” fully rejecting European integration, as expressed by parties like UKIP).51

The subsequent platform for the 2014 European elections is a considerably expanded document. While its dominant topic remains the same, the platform now reaches out to anti-immigrant views by calling for stricter immigration rules because of “an overtaxing of the welfare budget and the erosion of the welfare state.”52 Until then, the AfD had avoided to attack the
rights of immigrants, asylum-seekers, and religious minorities. The anti-immigrant rhetoric also took prominence in platforms for East and West German Länder elections and began to overshadow the Eurozone issue.

The electoral platform for the 2017 Bundestag election, then, reads drastically different from the first party platform. Sixty-eight pages long, it is divided into fifteen chapters and thus also substantially longer than previous ones. The AfD thereby no longer presents itself as a single-issue party. While unspecific in most policy areas, it provides sufficient material to analyze the current political core ideology of the AfD. In 2017, the core ideological elements of European radical right-wing populist parties, such as the French Front National, the Dutch PVV or the Italian Lega, feature prominently, that is: xenophobic, ethnic nationalism or nativism combined with hardened anti-immigrant (and antirefugee) rhetoric against “the others” (a horizontal dichotomy); political authoritarianism combined with an illiberal opposition to individual rights entitlements; and populism, which can be understood with Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser as a “thin-centered ideology” that claims to express the volonté générale of the “silent majority,” thereby promoting a culturally biased, antipluralistic idea of “the good people” allegedly oppressed by a “corrupt elite” (a vertical dichotomy).

In so far as a single issue dominates most other policy domains, it is now migration. The 2017 platform is, first of all, a program of an anti-immigrant, nativist, and ethnic-nationalist party. Several sections of the platform start with, or are overshadowed by, the migration issue. From chapter 1 onwards, the party attacks the allegedly “illegal” refugee policies of the government. Chapter 4 discusses domestic security, and begins with a call for enforcing “expulsion, deportation and expatriation.” Among other things, the platform claims that “the majority of organized crime is committed by foreigners.” Immigrants and refugees hereby appear mostly as “criminal foreigners.” The following chapter 5 focuses exclusively on migration, asylum, and national borders. The AfD demands that our “borders must be closed immediately” for there to be “no more immigration into the welfare systems.” The party insists that “every immigrant has to adapt to the new home country, not the other way around.” The horizontal dichotomy between “us” (the Germans) and “them” (the others, who allegedly do not belong) is thereby a constitutive feature of the platform, while it is in part unclear who classifies as “foreign” or “immigrant” and who exactly “they” are.

Rejecting the very idea of an immigrant society, the AfD calls for a full ethnic-nationalist return to the German ius sanguinis, the Abstammungsprinzip—the “ancestry” or “blood” principle for acquiring citizenship, which dates...
back to 1913 but was adjusted in the 2000 immigration reform. Ethno-
nationalist codes and innuendo can be detected throughout the platform, in
statements such as: “We want our descendants to inherit a country still rec-
nognizable as our Germany.” Chapter 6 focuses exclusively on “Islam in
conflict with our free and democratic constitutional order.” This is one of
the few sections where we find unambiguously positive references to the
existing system of liberal democracy, namely in contrast “with Islam:” “In
the spread of Islam and the presence of over 5 million Muslims, the AfD
sees a great danger to our state, our society and our value order.” Chapter
8 addresses education policy, yet a key focus is once again on consequences
of “mass immigration,” while the AfD suggest that there should be “no more
special privileges for Muslims at our schools.” Chapter 9 deals with Ger-
man culture and identity and the media. The section strongly advocates
against “multiculturalism,” while chapter 11, dedicated to welfare policy,
wrongly identifies immigrants as a major cause for welfare state regress in
Germany. Finally, even the subject of animal protection, addressed in
chapter 15, is exclusively directed against religious minorities. It is limited to
a call for a ban on Schächten, i.e., animal slaughtering according to Jewish or Islamic rites, rather than addressing
actual problems such as factory farming. Such programmatic statements
are supplemented with provocations against cultural diversity and immigra-
tion by the AfD on social media or by party leaders like deputy chairman
Gauland, who said about the black German national football team star
player Jérôme Boateng that he may be appreciated for his performance on
the field but people would “not want someone like Boateng as a neighbor.”

Second, the 2017 AfD platform features political authoritarianism. The
AfD hereby combines nativist nostalgia and anti-immigrant views with a
law and order rhetoric and the presumed need to “restore” the protection
of the country. The AfD advocates a “cluster of defensive and restrictive
measures to prevent the further destruction of European values governing
the community of enlightened citizens” in response to an allegedly “already
existing cultural struggle between the Occident and Islam as a doctrine of
salvation and bearer of cultural traditions.” The AfD’s political vision
seems to point to a socially cohesive, illiberal order, exhibiting an antiplu-
ralistic understanding of society strictly controlled by authorities. It features
arch-conservative elements, such as antifeminist rhetoric against “gender
research” coupled with the opposition to several social value liberalizations,
and calls for returning to a “classical” family structure. Add to this pro-
grammatic statements before and after the election expressing great admira-
tion for the Putin regime, for which no other electorate expresses stronger
sympathy than AfD voters, while the AfD’s youth organization Young Alternative is in official partnership with the youth organization of Putin’s United Russia.\textsuperscript{72} The praised Russian political system under Putin epitomizes the combination of ethnic nationalism and illiberal authoritarianism while strongly opposing pluralism, freedom of speech, and human, civil, or LGBTQ+ rights. Similarly, AfD leaders admire the authoritarian populist (and ethnonationalist) regime of Viktor Orbán in Hungary. Prominent AfD politician Beatrix von Storch celebrated Orbán’s electoral success in 2018 as “a bad day for the EU, a good one for Europe.”\textsuperscript{73}

Third, the platform employs populism throughout, understood as a “thin-centered ideology” operating with a vertical dichotomy between the “people” cheated by “the corrupt elite.” The latter term is not used explicitly in the program. Yet, generalizing negative statements about the political elite are ubiquitous, such as: “today’s politicians exploit the state.”\textsuperscript{74} Politicians are contrasted to “the people,” which “has to become sovereign again,”\textsuperscript{75} assuming that it has lost its sovereignty vis-à-vis the “elite” and “others.” The will of the people and “people’s sovereignty” are supposed to be restored, alongside the “restoration” of a “lawful state.”\textsuperscript{76} In this spirit, the AfD also advocates constitutional reform along populist lines, such as more direct democracy and referenda according to the “Swiss model.”\textsuperscript{77} Meanwhile, Euroskepticism remains present but it no longer forms a central part of the platform, and the critique of the Eurozone is limited to four pages—though the policy proposal to reinstitute the D-Mark remains consistent.

In sum, the AfD’s electoral platform for the 2017 general election shows the core ideological features of xenophobic nationalism, authoritarianism, and populism that overshadow specific issues or policies, and which are typical for European radical right-wing populist parties. This distinct ideological profile is also anchored in transnational collaborations, embodied in the “Europe of Nations and Freedom” in the European Parliament and beyond. There are, as is common among radical-right and nationalist parties, some specific national ideologemes. In the case of the AfD, this includes the nationalist downplaying of the Holocaust and German atrocities. Deputy leader Gauland claims: “If the French are rightly proud of their emperor and the Britons of Nelson and Churchill, we have the right to be proud of the achievements of the German soldiers in two world wars.”\textsuperscript{78}

While the AfD increasingly represents radical right views, promotes radical-right state-level chairmen like Höcke and has even recruited former neo-Nazis now working for the party,\textsuperscript{79} the party’s 2017 platform also defends civil liberties and constitutional democracy. It, thus, cannot be classified as radical or extreme right without qualifications. Nevertheless, our compara-
tive and diachronic platform analysis, in addition to public statements by a changing leadership regime and the party’s social media feed, confirms and extends Decker’s radicalization thesis to the 2017 Bundestag electoral campaign and beyond: the AfD has transformed from a largely single issue protest party against the Euro, which sought to challenge existing left-right distinctions and could have replaced the FDP in the party system if it had reinforced its moderate-centrist wing, to a typical European radical right-wing populist party displaying an increasingly open flank to the extreme right. Arzheimer’s earlier analysis, according to which the AfD has no nativist objectives and is thus not right-wing populist, is by now obsolete.80

Political Opportunity Structures, Electoral Appeal, and the 2017 Bundestag Vote in European Context: What Drives the Success of the AfD?

Given the history of “centripetal” German democratic party competition, at least on the national level open-ended radicalization processes tended to be punished at the ballot box. This effect even survived the fragmentation and pluralization of the party system since unification. So why was the AfD eventually catapulted into German national parliament as the biggest opposition party—even though it suffered from massive intra-party conflicts and increasingly radicalized?

In search for an explanation of the AfD’s popularity and road to German national parliament, it needs to be remembered that an array of old and new, refashioned radical right or right-wing populist parties already had entered state (Länder) parliaments since the 1980s—in most cases, to be sure, only to dramatically lose electoral support in subsequent elections. In West Germany there were first the Republikaner in Berlin and Baden-Württemberg in the 1980s and 1990s, then the Schill Partei “PRO,” which scored an impressive 19.4 percent in Hamburg in 2001; while in post-unification East Germany different, more extreme right parties, the Deutsche Volksunion (German People’s Union, DVU) and the neo-Nazi party Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschland (National Democratic Party of Germany, NPD), celebrated electoral successes that carried them into various state legislatures from 1998 onwards.81 Thus, radical right successes have been fluctuating—in particular due to disorganized actors, in-fighting, and a lack of effective electoral mobilization and consolidation. But, electoral demand for these parties has been more and more frequently mirrored in turnout since the late 1980s, and especially since German unification. This
points to a long-underestimated pool of potential radical-right voters in Germany who have time and again been successfully mobilized on the level of state elections. Such a pool has already for years resonated in more consistent electoral performances in other European countries, including neighboring Austria, Switzerland, Belgium, France, Poland, and the Netherlands. Both in diachronic national and in comparative European perspective, the national success of a German radical-right populist party therefore does not come out of nowhere. Rather, the AfD’s breakthrough seems to at least temporarily overcome a long-term disequilibrium between demand and (effective) supply on the level of national elections and parliamentary representation. In so doing, it also indicates a German “normalization” catching up with a broad and lasting European trend.82

Social research and survey data point to a set of four explanatory factors engendering the rise of radical right-wing populist parties like the AfD—and of the AfD as a radicalized right-populist party acting in fundamental opposition.83 Insights into voting behavior and attitudes can hereby be linked to transformed politico-cultural opportunity structures and other causes benefiting the AfD. They point, on the one hand, to a long lingering potential on the electoral demand side for deep-seated discontent with contemporary postethnic liberal democracy, including its dominant norms, procedures, and policy-making. On the other hand, they mark a rapidly changing German political landscape, party competition, and political/discursive culture—changes largely in sync with European-wide developments—according to which radicalizations are no longer negatively sanctioned by voters but may reinforce electoral success.

First, support for the AfD can be viewed in context of a far-reaching, “noisy” authoritarian-nativist counterrevolution directed against “liberal,” postmaterial social value change and present-day liberal democracy, a sensed loss of national or cultural identity, and the postethnic cosmopolitanization that has transformed Germany into a pluralistic immigrant society.84 Core voters of the AfD frustrated by mainstream parties accuse the allegedly “corrupt elite” of advancing these processes. Mirroring a transnational trend, AfD supporters put on display long lingering, deep-seated sociocultural conflicts—or a hardened major cleavage—over social values and cultural identity among German and European voters, framed in binary opposition between the “pure people” vs. “the elite/immigrants.”

A majority of AfD voters show strongly nationalist, anti-immigrant and culturally exclusionary attitudes—if not radical-right worldviews—previously not translated into respective electoral turnout. Strikingly, although 55 percent of AfD voters think that the party does not sufficiently distance itself...
from extreme right positions, according to Infratest Dimap exit polls at the 2017 Bundestag election only 14 percent of AfD voters want Germany to be weltoffen, that is: tolerant, cosmopolitan and open-minded country—in opposition to the majority of voters of all other parliamentary parties. In a 2016 representative phone survey of 1,004 respondents conducted by the University of Hamburg, a majority of AfD sympathizers (59 percent) claim that “Jewish influence is big,” as opposed to 16 percent of sympathizers of other relevant parties supporting this claim. Meanwhile, 36 percent of AfD voters long for a “leader [Führer] who governs Germany with a strong hand” (in opposition to 7 percent of supporters of the other parties), and 40 percent of AfD supporters believe that Nazism “also had good sides,” in contrast to 6 percent of supporters of other parties. Anti-immigration is hereby the overwhelming issue mobilizing AfD voters. For 92 percent of AfD voters in the 2017 general election the party “primarily serves the purpose to change Germany’s refugee policies,” and 96 percent support that the party “wants to more strongly restrict the immigration of refugees.”

These data point to a persistent, yet previously not politically represented authoritarian-nationalist potential in society that is now mobilized in a politico-cultural revolt against liberal democracy, globalization, immigrants, and “the elite.” This revolt constitutes the core of the AfD, as it does for similar parties elsewhere in Europe. The core constituency, which forms the party base, also drives the party’s radicalization. A German and postcommunist particularity consists of a significant East-West divide: although the AfD is far from being just an eastern German phenomenon, here it is now the second strongest party with a 21.9 percent share of the general vote (western Germany: 10.7 percent). With 27.0 percent, it is the strongest party in Saxony—ahead of the governing CDU (in a small village like Dörfchemnitz, the party received up to 47.4 percent). This drastic difference points to an ongoing East-West divide among voters and in the party system. In particular, this suggests that there are unmastered authoritarian politico-cultural legacies among segments of the East German electorate who are not at ease with Western, liberal-democratic immigrant society.

Second, the authoritarian cultural revolt is arguably aggravated by structural economic grievances, and relative or subjective social deprivation. While AfD support mostly cuts across social strata and other demographic divisions like age, there is a noticeable gender gap—in 2017, 16 percent of male and 9 percent of female voters opted for the AfD—in addition to relevant social class and educational variables. Only 7 percent of voters holding a university degree voted for the party, as opposed 14-17 percent with the lowest educational degrees. According to Infratest Dimap, 21 percent of
workers and 21 percent of the unemployed support the party at the ballot-box (in the latter group, the AfD is the second strongest party, only 2 percent behind the Social Democrats). Recruited from both mainstream parties and the group of nonvoters, these results may point to factors of socioeconomic, material insecurity affecting lower and lower middle classes in German society and reinforcing politico-cultural discontent. The former is caused by massive, politically produced welfare state regress since the 1990s, stagnating wages, the “precarization” of labor, and overall rapidly growing economic class divisions. For many citizens, the visible transfer of wealth from the poor to the well-to-do and the lack of accessible prosperity accelerates a sense of socioeconomic frustration—of being left behind and cheated. “The cheated masses are dimly aware,” argue Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, that liberal society’s promise of universal justice and equality “remains a lie as long as classes exist.” Material insecurity, relative social deprivation, and economic grievances tend to reinforce existing projections, stereotypes, and reified ideologies in society. Widespread popular resentments may target “the elite,” “the immigrants,” or “the Jews” also as the personified “causes” of what is experienced as an aggravated social malaise. The reified blame for negatively experienced socioeconomic and cultural change against which authoritarian-nativist populists mobilize, and which they identify with “the elite” and “the others,” has arguably been reinforced by catch-all parties’ actual long-term socioeconomic policy shifts. In particular center-left, social democratic parties have electorally suffered from endorsing neoliberal welfare state regress that eroded socioeconomic security in society (and benefitted the economic elite) while promoting more inclusive socio-cultural values and immigration policies. In Germany, this shift is epitomized by the Schröder government (1998-2005), which implemented neoliberal “Hartz IV” reforms alongside overdue immigration reform. The space hereby created points to an emerging new “winning formula” for right-wing populists: combining cultural discontent and previously largely unrepresented authoritarian-nationalist social values with the objective of restoring welfare policies for “the (ethnic) people” largely abandoned by centrist catch-all parties.

This emerging winning formula has been, third, facilitated and emboldened by drastic transformations of the patterns and conditions of the public sphere in an age of social media. The growth of fake news, “uncivil” and “postfactual” discourses through social media in Germany, Europe and around the globe have polarized public perceptions and attitudes in recent years, whereby public debate is more and more shaped by what David Roberts calls “tribal epistemology:” information is evaluated based not on
common standards of evidence but on whether it supports one’s (political) tribe’s values and goals. Public resentments against minorities have hereby also become increasingly “normalized,” and the boundaries of socially accepted public and political discourse, of “what can be said,” have eroded.94 Challenging civil standards and rules of political discourse as well as aggressively displaying “bad manners,” populists have both fueled, and flourished in, self-immunized, radically polarized communicative environments. Breaking rules and taboos has been part of the populists’ attraction. In the German context, this entails the popular wish to break alleged “taboos” in relation to Holocaust memory and the legacy of the Nazi crimes. Radical views and provocations are thus no longer necessarily disadvantageous but often viewed as “courageous” and can work in populists’ favor in a rapidly transforming political culture—changes which were fertilized by long existing politico-cultural milieus and media of the “New Right.”95 Rather than diminishing the AfD’s appeal, the party’s ongoing radicalization has thereby been reinforced by initial electoral successes through which the party became attractive for a large pool of authoritarian-nativist members and voters.

Fourth, the increased demand for and success of the AfD can be partly attributed to specific political developments, including actual party crises and policy failures. In addition to deliberate welfare state regress and failed policies creating a profound housing crisis, Germany has been largely unprepared to meet the heightened, dramatically politicized migration challenge of 2015. Established parties largely failed to find coherent responses tackling problems and societal conflicts, creating a political opening for an anti-immigrant party. Political opportunity structures have hereby been generally more favorable for new parties challenging existing parties. The gradually progressing erosion of party attachment and identification among increasingly volatile parts of European electorates has also helped the AfD’s successful electoral mobilization, which benefits from the fact that a majority of its sympathizers feel frustrated with established parties.96

**European Right-Wing Populists in Parliament: The AfD as a Radical Parliamentary Opposition Party**

Against this backdrop of ideological changes and factors that have helped generate support for a radicalized AfD, we can better measure the party representatives’ behavior in parliament and analyze its causes. This allows us, in turn, to better understand the AfD’s strategic objectives in parlia-
ment and, in particular, the party’s impact on German parliamentary politics and political culture at large—in national as well as comparative transnational perspective.

As indicated, German radical-right parties which had been elected into state legislatures often collapsed in subsequent elections. They were punished by voters for infighting, scandals, and political amateurism in office. In the European context, several radical-right parties joined the German parties’ fate. But, many European counterparts could also hold on to, and have recently been able to expand, their parliamentary representation—despite or because of strong ideological views, often paired with a lack of specific policy competences. Over the years, several successful right-wing populist parties have even joined democratic governments as junior partners (e.g. the FPÖ in Austria or the Lega Nord in Italy), or govern by themselves (e.g., FIDESZ in Hungary or PiS in Poland).

The initially widely shared prediction that institutional mechanisms would exert control and constraint over authoritarian-nationalist populist parties has seen at best mixed support. There has been a dominant expectation among scholars and commentators that these parties would either be “tamed” in their policy positions, or simply fail when challenged to engage in developing serious parliamentary work and specific policy alternatives beyond ideological iterations or populist rhetoric—which would in either case weaken these parties’ political impact and future electoral appeal. This effect has been expected to especially apply when these parties govern and thus have to actively participate in the complexities of policy-making, as this is likely to alienate disillusioned voters attracted by simple or authoritarian solutions unattainable under conditions of liberal democracy. Findings on the political impact of these parties’ parliamentary representation on government policies, party systems, and public discourse, however, yield mixed results. European rightist populist parties’ electoral fortunes following years in public office also vary widely. Some governing parties could consolidate successes while upholding radical ideological positions and having significant direct or indirect effects on policy regimes and public debates, especially on immigration.

In the case of the AfD, based on an analysis of motions and speeches in the first year in the Bundestag, we can detect initial indicators for assessing the party’s strategic orientation and performance as parliamentary actors, as well as its impact on policy-making, parliamentary debate, and political culture. Following three years of parliamentary presence on the regional/state level across the republic and in the European Parliament, the first year of the AfD as an opposition party in the newly constituted Bundestag indicates...
firstly that the AfD tries to partly portray itself as a “normal” parliamentary force. Yet, while it is advancing many motions and proposed bills, the party actually shows little interest in active committee work, the policy-making process, or parliamentary debate on specific issues over optimal policy solutions.99 Neither are there any signs that the diagnosed ideological radicalization towards a distinctly right-wing populist, European anti-immigrant and nativist movement-party is tamed in parliament—even though many proposals seem, superficially, close to mainstream positions and sometimes address “real or apparent common ground with other parties’ positions, to make their proposals look conventional.”100 Virtually all of the AfD MPs’ contributions center around the limited repertoire of four campaign topics—anti-establishment rhetoric, Muslims and refugees (often framed as “Islamic invasion”), cultural/national identity, and Euroskepticism—whereby there seems to be little interest in direct, active policy-making.101

In fact, secondly, the AfD seems primarily interested in utilizing the national parliament as stage for continuous campaigning, antagonistic and aggressive rhetoric directed against immigrants and those not considered “real Germans.” Respective speeches often employ fake facts and “alternative” news fitting the ideological outlook. Remaining in a constant, disruptive protest mode, the party shows contempt for “the establishment,” “the political elite,” and other elected representatives by which the AfD is allegedly victimized. Disrupting regular parliamentary politics and procedures seems both strategy and goal, as the AfD appears to enjoy its role as “pariah party.”102

In so doing, thirdly, debates in parliament indicate that the AfD extends the process of political polarization to parliamentary politics. With its radical provocations, the AfD affects, so it seems, the dynamics of inter-party politics and political communication patterns in the Bundestag as a whole.103 There is a noticeable impact on the interaction among parties (including a drastically increased intensity of ad hominem attacks, verbal aggressions, and screaming). Challenging the very rules and procedures of parliamentary democracy, the party advances thereby both the erosion of civil discourse, i.e., of the boundaries of “what can be said” in parliament, and anti-parliamentarism, i.e., opposition to and contempt for the institution as a central tenet of liberal democracy. This fits to the AfD’s increasingly fundamental opposition and advocacy for radical societal change.

Anna Sauerbrey suggests that the AfD generally follows a “triple strategy” of pretending to be a normal conservative party proposing bills in parliament, provoking controversy, and “self-victimization.”104 In order to act as a serious parliamentary force, AfD representatives want to be seen as
working in relevant committees and introduce or co-sponsor many bills in which they at times employ positions previously adopted by the governing CDU or other parties. All of their proposals fail to pass. Yet, the goal is not getting them passed but proposing legislation, says the AfD’s parliamentary coordinator Bernd Baumann, “so that everybody knows what we stand for, to put our ideas on the top of Germany’s political agenda.”

Moreover, even within this “normality” or “normalization” strategy, which seeks to make the AfD appear as a respectable actor, the party betrays its xenophobic, nationalistic, and authoritarian core. Proposed bills often evoke notions such as “German soil” or “dominant foreign cultures.” The “normalization” strategy is generally accompanied and often overshadowed by the interlinked strategies of provocation and self-victimization: the AfD makes xenophobic/nationalist, authoritarian or populist statements radically challenging civil societal norms and, once criticized, portrays itself as the victim of “political correctness,” subjected to “opinion dictatorship” and infringement upon free speech.

In addition to what Sauerbrey suggests, these strategies—advancing a radical right-wing, fundamentalist opposition and crying foul when being criticized for it—do not only take place outside of the parliament but also very much within its walls. For instance, MP Nicole Höchst recently used the parliamentary stage to lament the “systematic discrimination of men,” the “so-called religion” Islam, and the alleged creation of an “Islamicized federal state Germany in a centrally governed Islamic Europe.” Another significant example is the parliamentary debate on the German-Turkish journalist Deniz Yücel, initiated by the AfD. Yücel, who works for the conservative daily Die Welt, had just been released from a Turkish prison after being arrested by the Erdogan regime for one year without specific charges when the AfD’s parliamentary delegation head Weidel, still often portrayed as “moderate,” claimed on Twitter: “If the media report today that the ‘German journalist’ Yücel was released, this is two fake news in one sentence.” Weidel explains that for her Yücel is neither German nor a journalist, and that this “journalist’ who hates our country...should not have German citizenship.” The statement reveals both an autocratic, illiberal understanding of government ready to deprive citizenship from journalists with whom one disagrees, and apparently a notion of citizenship restricting it to those who are marked as ethnic Germans. Subsequently, the AfD used the parliament to propose a motion urging the German government to publicly condemn and express disapproval of Yücel’s prior work, arguing he was “anti-German.” In the heated parliamentary debate that ensued, senior Green Party MP Cem Özdemir called the AfD’s proposal an attack ...
on press freedom which also demonstrates that some “members of parliament are racist.” The AfD measure was voted down by a large majority of parliamentarians.  

Recent public addresses by parliamentary representatives and AfD leaders confirm the previously diagnosed radicalization process towards fundamentalist, nativist, and authoritarian opposition since the party entered national parliament. These speeches also support the hypothesis that the party primarily seeks to promote an antagonistic system opposition against current liberal democracy, and thereby changes inter-party interactions in parliament by means of constant polarization. Targeting its competitors in parliament to advance the party’s ideology and using parliament as a stage to provoke leaves little space for actual policy debate. At a regional party assembly in Braunschweig, for instance, the AfD’s federal co-chairman Meuthen, like Weidel long perceived as part of the party’s more “moderate” wing and initially critical of antisemitism within the AfD, harshly attacked competing parties. Employing classical ethnonationalistic and antisemitic tropes reminiscent of what Victor Klemperer called *Lingua Tertii Imperii*, Meuthen accused the Green Party of being “crypto-communist decomposers of the fatherland.” Meuthen defamed all parliamentary parties apart from the AfD collectively as a “filthy left-red-green-black-yellow party cartel abolishing Germany.” Calling the AfD “the last evolutionary chance to preserve our homeland,” Meuthen’s opposition no longer seems to exclude revolutionary options, as *Die Welt* comments.

The strategies the AfD has so far employed in parliament—the ideological fundamentalist opposition the AfD displays alongside provocations and self-victimization and the less consistent strategic attempt to appear as a “normal” right-wing conservative actor engaging in parliamentary work, submitting proposals, and participating in committees—are largely reflective of other right-wing populist parties in the national and European context. In this sense, too, the AfD appears now as a “normalized,” Europeanized right-wing populist party that acts similar to, and has apparently learned from, parliamentary actors like the PVV in the Netherlands or the Front National in France. They also primarily use parliaments as a stage for agenda-setting, protest, provocation and self-victimization, and ideological purity rather than constructive involvement in legislative processes. Defying expectations to become more moderate, the AfD—following many European counterparts—has in many ways accelerated its provocations and strategic polarization since it entered parliament—with no noticeable negative effect in terms of popularity or electability, as the AfD continues to do well in polls while stirring controversies.
The direct legislative impact of the AfD is so far negligible. Yet its effects on the way parties communicate and discuss policy may be considerably more significant. The indirect impact on policy-making may also be relevant—as expressed in hardened positions on immigration, integration, and national identity today especially pushed by the CSU and parts of the CDU, and more generally in relation to the conditions of fact-based policy-making. Like elsewhere in Europe, there is a potentially transformative impact on the politico-cultural environment in which politics and public debate operate. The AfD’s constant polarizations and attempts to provoke, challenge, and tear down civil discursive boundaries in the most important political institution of a parliamentary democracy are likely to have long-term effects on democratic political culture in Germany. These effects, to be sure, are yet to be systematically researched and tested again in future studies.

The Alternative for Germany in the Bundestag: A Partially European(ized) Phenomenon

The analyses of the party’s ideological profile, electoral mobilization and voters, and strategies in parliament have demonstrated that the AfD has become the first radical right-wing (populist) party in the German parliament since the Nazi era. For that reason alone, the 2017 elections and nineteenth Bundestag stand out, potentially signifying a new era in Europe that has now also arrived in Germany with full force. The examination of electoral platforms since its founding shows that the AfD has transformed from a single issue, anti-Euro party to a typical radical right-wing populist party elected into parliaments across Europe—with an identifiable hardened ideological core of xenophobic nationalism, authoritarianism, and populism. In the process, views presented in platforms and by leaders, even formerly more moderate ones, radicalized and gained votes by doing so. While Gideon Botsch rightly argues that the AfD is not yet programmatically an antisystem extreme right party, it can be classified as a radical right populist party that displays an increasing openness to overt extreme right and racist views, tropes and agitation. It already points, in the words of Hajo Funke, to “a republic far removed from the standards of rule of law and liberal democracy.”

Although the AfD retains some specific German features in its political ideology, the party expresses and aggressively advances a deep-seated transnational “noisy counterrevolution” that is currently shaking up party systems, parliaments, and political cultures in Europe. The party primarily
articulates a revolt directed against social value change, sociocultural diversity and immigration, “the elite,” and “the others.” In this regard as well the AfD in the Bundestag can be understood as a (partially) European(ized) politico-cultural phenomenon. The party is influenced by transnational models, predecessors, and new crossnational political dynamics in which it now takes part. This entails building trans-European party alliances and ties to illiberal regimes in Russia and Hungary. The trans-European rise of new authoritarian-nativist populist parties like the AfD, which display hard Euroskepticism, is thereby also part of the Europeanization (and globalization) processes of politics taking shape within national political arenas.117 Considering that in many European countries such parties have for years consolidated their success, parliamentary presence, and space in party systems, this represents a “German normalization” of sorts: authoritarian-nativist voters in Germany and in other European societies feel now better democratically represented, although the parties themselves work at destabilizing liberal democracy and its constitutional order.118

This “normalization,” however, is also part of a European process of normalizing resentment against “the elite” and “the others”—immigrants, refugees, Muslims, Jews—in public discourse, whereby such “uncivil” norm transgressions have gained traction and social acceptability with unforeseen consequences for democratic political cultures. In fact, such transgressions help explain part of radical right-wing populist parties’ appeal. Consequently, these parties seem less concerned with appearing sufficiently moderate in order not to limit their electoral appeal, as often in the past. Rather, they tend to deliberately provoke and often radically break with dominant societal norms, values, and the allegedly manufactured “opinion dictatorship” in European liberal democracies.

While mobilizing different fractions of discontent, AfD voters and members largely support the party’s programmatic turn. The radicalization of the party and the seemingly “taboo-breaking” authoritarian transgressions of dominant civil norms by the party leadership show no negative effects on party support (even though more than half of its supporters wish that the party distances itself from the extreme right). This is also in sync with European trends. Data from surveys and voting patterns suggest that in a recently transformed political-communicative environment such polarizing political behavior is rewarded by a considerable share of voters—rather than diminishing a party’s appeal. Initial electoral success and illiberal, right-wing political radicalization seem in fact, intertwined and mutually reinforcing factors of the AfD’s political development into a radical right populist movement-party in parliament; electoral breakthrough attracted a large
group of formerly unrepresented members as well as disillusioned (non)voters to the party, which changed accordingly.

The AfD is thereby both a national actor advancing, and a symptom of, a European-wide and Europeanized centrifugal trend among voters and parties. First and foremost, this trend points to deep-seated conflicts over social values, democracy, and cultural identity among European voters, publicly expressed in a changed environment of political communication. In particular, these conflicts are engendered by widespread discontent among volatile parts of the European electorates longing for a politico-cultural counterrevolution and representing a persistent, yet previously not politically articulated authoritarian-nativist potential in society. Boosted by transnationally proliferating fake news, tribal epistemologies, and the erosion of discursive boundaries on social media across Europe, parties like the AfD benefit from new political opportunities in increasingly destabilized, fragmented, and polarized European party systems. These parties also point to actual transnational European policy crises and failures that have eroded trust in parties and institutions, ranging from increased levels of economic insecurity or terrorism to the partly mismanaged migration challenge. Across Europe, the failures and policy shifts of catch-all parties have added to more favorable conditions for right-wing populists. The combination of policy failures by established or mainstream parties, including deliberate welfare state regress, and a hitherto unrepresented but significant anti-cosmopolitan, antiliberal cultural counterrevolution points to a newly emerging winning formula for these populists: linking culturally exclusive, authoritarian-nationalist social values to the goal of restoring the old (ethnic) welfare state policies largely abandoned by center-left social democratic parties. There are, to be sure, some specific German conditions contributing to the AfD’s strength. For instance, support for the AfD is overall considerably stronger in the eastern German regions. This indicates the continuous relevance of postcommunist, authoritarian legacies and the persistence of an East-West politico-cultural divide also mirrored in the party system and likewise reflected in Eastern Europe.

Rather than being tamed through institutional integration and parliamentary cooperation, the initial analysis presented here indicates that the AfD acts primarily as a radical right, fundamental opposition party in parliament that defies expectations of conventional party behavior. It was shown that the AfD follows the strategic paths of other European radical right parties holding public office. They use parliaments foremost as a stage for anti-establishment protest, continuous campaigning in line with ideological purity, proposing authoritarian measures, and hostile rhetoric against “the elite,” immigrants, or those not considered “real citizens.” Primarily,
the AfD utilizes the parliament to communicate their ideology and protest, giving its supporters, who are frustrated with established parties, the sense that their voice is being heard.

AfD MPs hereby often employ postfactual claims. They also seem to envision a society markedly different from today’s, based on a socially cohesive and illiberal order. Even though the AfD at times tries to behave as a “normal” parliamentary party proposing bills and following procedures, it shows little interest in legislative processes and policy-making debates seeking to resolve complex policy problems. Instead, the party’s MPs frequently display contempt for or bully other parliamentarians, the parliament as a democratic institution, and Germany’s constitutional liberal democracy. Portraying itself as a victim while using verbal aggressions against others, the party’s antagonistic stance and strategy thereby further foster the accelerated process of politico-cultural polarization: they extend it to the parliamentary stage. Considering that at least in the short term the AfD’s ideological self-immunization from facts and policy-making does not seem to undermine the support among its voters, the AfD, like similar populist actors in parliaments across Europe, is unlikely to be tamed by parliamentary institutional mechanisms in the future.

In comparative perspective and for competing democratic parties, this raises the question what institutional or politico-cultural responses would be effective to counter the right-wing populist winning formula, presence, and strategies in parliament. Although further research on impact and effects is needed, the party’s programmatic evolution towards European radical right-wing populism and the electoral support of the AfD’s radicalization make it likely, however, that the party continues to take part in transforming German politics and debate, in and beyond the Bundestag, and German political culture at large.

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Notes

1. Until then, only the postfascist Movimento Sociale Italiano had a steady presence in West European party systems. The radical right had been thoroughly discredited and electorally successful in the aftermath of Nazi and fascist regimes and the political terror with which they reigned in Europe. See Lars Rensman, “The New Politics of Prejudice: Comparative Perspectives on Extreme Right Parties in European Democracies,” *German Politics & Society* 21, no.4 (2003): 93–123.

2. Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey isolate the display of “bad manners” as one of three constitutive, shared features of populist politics, alongside the appeal to “the people” and a crisis/threat discourse. See Benjamin Moffitt and Simon Tormey, “Rethinking Populism: Politics, Mediatisation and Political Style,” *Political Studies*, 62, no.2 (2014): 381–397, here 392–393.


5. On this, see especially Cas Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right* (Manchester, 2003) and Mudde (see note 4).


7. A fifth criterion, emphasized by Paul Lucardie and by Frank Decker, looks at a party’s goals and functions in the political system. It is less commonly accepted. Insofar as this presumed criterion points to generic goals such as seeking public office or mobilizing votes, which tend to apply to all parties and thus hardly serve as distinguishing criteria; insofar as this criterion refers to the party’s relationship to the political system (e.g., anti-system opposition to constitutional democracy), it is part of any analysis and typology of the ideological core (e.g., centrist, moderate, radical, extreme/system opposition). On party typologies see Paul Lucardie, “Zur Typologie der politischen Parteien” in *Handbuch der politischen Parteien*, ed. Frank Decker and Viola Neu (Bonn, 2013), 61–76; Angelo Panebianco, *Political Parties. Organization and Power* (Cambridge, 1988); Richard S. Katz and Peter Mair, “Changing Models of Party Organization and Party Democracy. The Emergence of the Cartel Party,” *Party Politics* 1, no. 1 (1995), 5–28; Frank Decker, “Politische Parteien: Begriff und Typologien,” *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* (bpb), 7 November 2014; available at http://www.bpb.de/politik/grundfragen/parteien-in-deutschland/42045/begriff-und-typologien, accessed 5 August 2018.

8. Parties, as social organizations and political intermediaries, are not static entities but subject to change. Especially new parties often transform considerably and redefine their goals and ideology in their formation years and early years of existence.

9. For excellent first overviews see Thomas Oppelland, “Alternative für Deutschland (AfD),” *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, ed., *Dossier Parteien in Deutschland* (Bonn,
2018), 115–125; Decker (see note 3); Florian Hartleb, *Die Stunde der Populisten* (Schwalbach, 2017); and in European comparative context, Kai Hirschmann, *Der Aufstieg des Nationalpopulismus: Wie westliche Gesellschaften polarisiert werden* (Bonn, 2017), 137–145.


12. Decker (see note 3), 3.


14. Oppelland (see note 9), 116.

15. Decker (see note 3), 2.

16. Oppelland (see note 10), 116; Decker (see note 3), 3.

17. Decker (see note 3), 13.

18. Christoph Kopke and Alexander Lorenz show that the AfD can be seen as the CDU/CSU’s right-wing split-off. However, some parts of the AfD were from the beginning recruited from the so-called New Right (part of the milieu of Alexander Gauland, who is one of the few AfD leaders who were with the party from the beginning and represents continuity) or extreme right fringe parties such as the Bund freier Bürger (BFB). See Christoph Kopke and Alexander Lorenz, “Zwischen konservativem Nationalpopulismus und fundamentaloppositioneller Bewegung: Das aktuelle Profil der AfD in Brandenburg” in *AfD und FPÖ: Antisemitismus, völkischer Nationalismus und Geschlechterbilder*, ed. Stephan Grigat (Baden-Baden, 2017), 79–100, here 80–81.

19. Oppelland (see note 9), 116.


22. Oppelland (see note 9), 116.

23. The *Lügenpresse* (lying press) claim, defaming “the media” and suggesting a media conspiracy, is an antisemitic trope. Even though PEGIDA uses some coded language, culturalist discourse, and speaks of Europeans rather than ethnic German nationalism, neo-Nazis and the organized extreme right are present at these marches. The PEGIDA leadership makes little effort to distance itself from these political forces, and racist hate speech is common during PEGIDA demonstrations. Höcke participated in and supports these marches and ties to PEGIDA. On PEGIDA as a radical right, nativist xenophobic movement see Hajo Funke, *Von Wutburgern und Brandstiftern. AfD, Pegida, Gewaltnetze* (Berlin, 2016). On the history and legacy of the *Abendland* (occident) discourse in Germany since Oswald Spengler and the “Conservative Revolution” of the 1920s, see Volker Weiß, *Die autoritäre Revolte: Die Neue Rechte und der Untergang des Abendlandes* (Stuttgart, 2017), 155–186.

25. Grundungsaufruf “Weckruf 2015;” available at http://www.weckruf2015.de/grundungsaufruf, accessed 12 July 2016. Members of the “wake-up call” overwhelmingly supported the establishment of a new euroskeptic party under Lucke’s leadership; see Decker [see note 3], 9; see also Oppelland [see note 9], 117.

26. The “radicalization of the AfD” in 2015 was first analyzed by Decker [see note 3], 14; see also Oppelland [see note 9], 118.


28. Petry and her supporters left the party after the general election, just as Lucke and his supporters did two years before.

29. Oppelland [see note 9], 119.

30. While Gauland has long been known for radical, “taboo-breaking” claims transgressing the boundaries of civil discourse in Germany [which has not diminished his appeal among the AfD electorate and the party’s rank and file], Weidel is not liberal or pragmatic either. Among many other things, Weidel is known for harsh anti-immigrant statements and led the AfD’s ethnic-nationalist attacks on the German-Turkish journalist Deniz Yücel.

31. The AfD’s partly chaotic organization and leadership, which is reflective of many other and previous radical right parties in Germany and Europe, is also crystallized in the fight over an affiliated party foundation/think tank [in Germany, it is common for every elected party to have such an institution]. The Desiderius Erasmus Foundation was the first and primary candidate, but the conservative intellectual Konrad Adam lasted only four months as chairman before he was voted out of office. Three other organizations and different chairmen compete for the status as the AfD’s affiliate foundation now. See Markus Wehner, Eckart Lohse and Justus Bender, “AfD plant parteinähe Gustav-Stresemann-Stiftung,” Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 19 December 2017.

32. See Kopke and Lorenz [see note 18], p. 94.

33. Since 2015, regional and national ties have evolved to the monthly run by Jürgen Elsässer, which asked its readers to vote for the AfD and is currently the most relevant publication in the German-speaking world promoting and publishing reactionary ideas, including anti-Americanism, nationalism, conspiracy myths, sexism, and racism, as well as unbridled enthusiasm for the Putin regime. See Kopke and Lorenz [see note 18], 81.

34. See Mudde [see note 5].

35. Decker [see note 3], 2.

36. Decker [see note 3], 14. The significant programmatic and ideological evolution of the AfD, reflected in the respective transformation of the party leadership representing is reconstructed primarily on the basis of a diachronic comparative party manifesto analysis. Key statements by party leaders are also taken into account as relevant forms of political expression signifying, if uncontested, the ideological profile of a party, especially in times of changing forms of political communication.


38. AfD Wahlprogramm Bundestagswahl 2013, Parteitagsbeschluss, 14 April 2013.

39. AfD Wahlprogramm Bundestagswahl 2013, 1: “We offer an alternative to the government’s policies and demand an ordered dissolution of the Euro currency zone. Reinstating the D-Mark must not be a taboo.”


41. AfD Wahlprogramm Bundestagswahl 2013, 1.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid., 2.
44. Ibid., 3-4.
45. Ibid., 4.
46. Ibid. Hence, any clear programmatic right-wing populist or radical right direction is missing here.
47. On these features see Mudde [see note 4]; Lars Rensmann [see note 4], 124–126.
50. Ibid., 266.
52. AfD Programm Europawahl 2014, 15.
53. See Niedermayer [see note 13], 195.
55. On these conceptualizations see Rensmann [see note 4], 124–126. On populism, see Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Populism: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford, 2017), 1–20. Under Petry’s leadership, the AfD also fostered a European-wide cooperation with these other far-right or radical-right populist parties in early 2017. Radical-right populist parties have recently also reinforced their crossnational organizational and political ties in the European Parliament and beyond. The political group “Europe of Nations and Freedom” in the EP, launched in 2015, prominently includes the AfD, Geert Wilders’ single-member party Partij voor de Vrijheid (PVV) from the Netherlands, the Front National (FN) from France, the Lega Nord from Italy and the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) and Vlaams Belang (VB) from Belgium. Several of these actors also expressed support for U.S. President Donald Trump whose success they explicitly see as a model. See Simon Shuster, “Europe’s far right leaders unite at dawn of the Trump era,” Time; available at, http://time.com/4643051/donald-trump-european-union-koblenz/, accessed 5 April 2018.
56. AfD Wahlprogramm Bundestagswahl 2017 [see note 54], 7.
57. Ibid., 21.
58. Ibid., 22.
59. Ibid., 26.
60. Ibid., 29.
61. Ibid., 29.
62. Ibid., 25. The Lega Nord, one of the AfD’s partners in the political group “Europe of Nations and Freedom” in the EP, is more explicit in its racist, ethnonationalist claims. For instance, Attilo Fontana, the Lega’s elected president of the Lombardy region, recently said: “We need to decide whether or not our ethnic group, our white race, our society should continue to exist or be wiped out.” Quoted in Roger Cohen, “Risotto from Sri Lanka is Just as Good,” The New York Times, 6 April 2018.; available at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/06/opinion/italy-immigration.html, accessed 6 April 2018.
63. AfD Wahlprogramm Bundestagswahl 2017 [see note 54], 30.
64. Ibid., 31. The selective defense of liberalism, civil rights, and also women’s rights in relation to Muslim immigration contradicts the AfD’s otherwise ambiguous relationship to liberalism and civil rights. Against gender equality and gay rights, the AfD posits the...
“classical family” as “role model” and an “institution supportive of the state” because “only the family can produce the state’s people as a carrier of sovereignty.” (40) This “selective liberalism” as part of an “existential cultural struggle” follows the model of Geert Wilders’ one-man party PVV, which on the one hand views Islam as a threat to Dutch liberalism and liberties, and on the other hand nostalgically promotes a return to the Netherlands of 1850. See Koen Vossen, The Power of Populism: Geert Wilders and the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands (London, 2016); and Chris Klomp, “Pechtold: Minder aandacht besteden aan circusklanten zoals Baudet,” Algemeen Dagblad, 30 December 2017; available at https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/pechtold-minder-aandacht-besteden-aan-circusklanten-zaols-baudet–a3e17f99/, accessed 12 April 2018.

65. AfD Wahlprogramm Bundestagswahl 2017 [see note 54], 39.
66. Ibid., 49.
67. Ibid., 66. Some empirical animal research even suggests that Schächtung is a more humane way of animal slaughtering but the AfD platform does not discuss such factual findings.
69. AfD Wahlprogramm Bundestagswahl 2017 [see note 54], 25.
70. Ibid., 42.
71. Ibid., 35. On the AfD’s antifeminist gender politics, see Juliane Lang, “Feindbild Feminismus: Familien- und Geschlechterpolitik in der AfD” in Grigat (See note 18), 61–78.
74. AfD Wahlprogramm Bundestagswahl 2017 [see note 54], 8.
75. Ibid., 7.
76. Ibid., 7.
77. Ibid., 9.
80. See Arzheimer (see note 11), 546.
81. Only in 1967, fifty years ago in the old Bundesrepublik, the NPD gained 4.3 percent and once came close to entering the national parliament but felt short of doing so thanks to the exceptionally high 5 percent threshold in German electoral law designed to do exactly that: keep extremist parties out of the Bundestag.
83. Hereby we assume with Rooduijn, van der Brug and de Lange that populist discontent is both cause and consequence of the rise of populist parties, which are also agents fueling discontent by exposing their supporters to populist messages. Electoral demand should not be viewed as the explanatory causal mechanism but rather as part of an interactive dynamic between demand, supply, and politico-cultural opportunity structures in relation to party competition and political communication. See Matthijs Rooduijn, Wouter van der Brug, and Sarah L. de Lange, “Expressing or fueling discontent? The relationship between populist voting and political discontent,” *Electoral Studies* 43, no.3 (2016), 32–40.
92. See note 87.
97. See Rensmann (see note 82), 88–92.
101. To be sure, the AfD pressures the government on its signature issues, most importantly “national identity” and calls to restrict migration, to which especially the Christian Social Union (CSU) seems to be responsive.

103. As Gauland programmatically declares: “if you want to have war in parliament, you can have war.”

104. Sauerbrey (see note 100).

105. Quoted in ibid.

106. Quoted in ibid.

107. Ibid.


110. Quoted in Guy Chazan, “AfD turns up the heat in Germany’s Bundestag,” *Financial Times*, 3 April 2018; available at https://www.ft.com/content/5a9d5fc0-2d17-11e8-9b4b-bc4bf08f381, accessed 3 April 2018.


112. Quoted in Matthias Kamann, “Die undurchschaubare Agedna der neuen AfD-Chefin,” *Die Welt*, 8 April 2018; available at https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article175271196/Dana-Guth-Undurchschaubare-Agenda-von-Niedersachsens-AfD-Chefin.html, accessed 8 April 2018. Along these lines of extreme right rhetoric, a political Ash Wednesdat (*Politischer Aschermittwoch*) speech by André Poggenburg, who served as state chairman of Saxony-Anhalt since 2016, defamed Turkish-German citizens as “camel drivers” who should “go off to where they belong; far, far away beyond the Bosphorus to their mud huts and polygamy.” The racist speech evoked nation-wide public criticism, but Poggenburg received only mild warnings and a limited formal censure from the AfD’s national party headquarters, although he was subsequently forced to resign as chair of the twenty-two- member AfD party group in the Landtag following inner-party power quarrels. Quoted in “German Turks plan to sue far-right AfD for ‘camel driver’ slur,” *Reuters*, 15 February 2018 available at https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-afd-german-turks-plan-to-sue-far-right-afd-for-camel-driver-slur-idUSKCN1FZ2GH, accessed 15 February 2018.


114. Recent surveys since the AfD entered parliament see the party gaining support and at over 15 percent; See https://www.wahlrecht.de/umfragen/, accessed 13 May, 2018.


116. See Funke (see note 23), 73. The party is thus less ideologically “thin-centered” and less flexible on issues than Alexander Hauser observed two years ago. See Alexander Hauser, “Die AfD—eine rechtspopulistische „Bewegungspartei?“ in *Neue soziale Bewegung von rechts? Zukunftssängste, Abstieg der Mitte, Ressentiments*, ed. Alexander Hauser and Fabian Virchow (Hamburg, 2016), 42–51.

The AfD expresses and mobilizes some particular German radical right ideological features and issues, such as relativizing Nazism and German crimes during the Holocaust or downplaying the crimes of the Wehrmacht, in order to exculpate tainted German nationalism and rehabilitate German national identity. Notwithstanding some occasional pro-Israel rhetoric, “secondary antisemitism” and conspiracy myths, which are often antisemitic in nature, are also especially present in the party and among its voters. Meuthen’s notion that groups are working to “decompose” the “fatherland” is in itself an antisemitic trope originating in, and tied to, the specific history of German nationalism and antisemitism. On this issue, see also Grimm and Kahmann (see note 24), and Samuel Salzborn in this issue.