

A stylized map of Germany composed of a grid of dots. Some dots are grey, some are red, and some are white, creating a pixelated effect. The map is centered on the page.

Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)

A New Actor in the German Party System

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March 2014

- The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD – Alternative for Germany) is a new party in the conservative/economic liberal spectrum of the German party system. At present it is a broad church encompassing various political currents, including classic ordo-liberals, as well as euro-sceptics, conservatives and right-wingers of different stripes. The AfD has not yet defined its political platform, which is still shaped by periodic flare-ups of different groups positioning themselves within the party or by individual members.
- The AfD's positions are mainly critical of Europe and the European Union. It advocates winding up the euro area, restoration of national currencies or small currency unions and renationalisation of decision-making processes in the EU. When it comes to values it represents conservative positions.
- As things stand at the moment, given its rudimentary political programme, the AfD is not a straightforward right-wing populist party in the traditional sense. The populist tag stems largely from the party's campaigning, in which it poses as the mouthpiece of »the people« and of the »silent majority«.
- With regard to its main topics, the AfD functions as a centre-right protest party. At the last Bundestag election in 2013 it won voters from various political camps. First studies show that although its sympathisers regard themselves as occupying the political centre, they represent very conservative positions on social and integration-policy issues.



Content

- 1. Origins and Development 2**
- 2. AfD Positions 2**
- 3. Structure and Organisation 4**
- 4. How the AfD Comes Across 5**
- 5. Voters and Sympathisers 6**
- 6. Concluding Remarks 6**

1. Origins and Development

The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) was brought into being on 6 February 2013. It is the result of a protest that had been smouldering in particular among conservative economists against the euro-bailout policies of the Christian-Liberal government.¹ It was preceded by the emergence of the »Wahlalternative 2013« (»Election alternative«) in autumn of the previous year, which led directly to the establishment of a party. The *Wahlalternative* was a registered association whose goal was to support *freie Wähler* (»free voters«: associations of persons participating in an election without having the status of a registered political party), oriented towards European policy. The initiative stemmed mainly from former CDU members who were later to form the leadership of the AfD. They included economics professor Bernd Lucke and conservative commentator Alexander Gauland.²

The profile of the subsequent party was already clear, however: the *Wahlalternative* was oriented explicitly against the government's euro-bailout policy and called for the dissolution of the euro area. After the regional elections in Lower Saxony in 2013 the cooperation between the free voters and the leadership of the *Wahlalternative* was terminated because of conflicting views on organisation and strategy.³ Only two weeks later, the Alternative für Deutschland was founded.

At the Bundestag election on 22 September 2013, the AfD just missed out on getting into parliament, achieving 4.7 per cent of second votes, only 0.1 of a percentage point behind the FDP. Its voters came from all political camps, although the AfD's platform is largely liberal on economic policy and characterised by a strong tendency towards conservatism on social policy.⁴

In campaigning for the European elections in May 2014 the AfD is standing on its core issue, criticism of the EU institutions and the euro area. The decision of the Federal

Constitutional Court declaring the 3 per cent threshold at European elections to be invalid certainly benefits smaller parties; however, the AfD would have got in in any case. In national surveys since the Bundestag elections it has consistently polled between 3 and 6 per cent.

2. AfD Positions

Any substantive evaluation of the AfD has to bear in mind that its actual party programme – referred to as an »election programme« – is very concise. At its party congress in March 2014, AfD adopted a European election manifesto that takes up the central elements of its general »election programme« and explains them in more detail.⁵ Since its beginning, the movement's profile has been closely oriented to the European Union and the euro area. Its »founding myth« is based on the government's euro-bailout policy. The AfD is thus a euro-sceptical party sui generis.

The AfD's euro-sceptical positioning has two strands. *Economically*, it lines up against the European Monetary Union. European financial policy has poll position in the election programme.⁶ The party calls for the »orderly winding up of the euro currency area. Germany does not need the euro. The euro harms other countries.« The »Questions and answers« on the party's website are also exclusively concerned with doing away with the common currency.⁷ In response to the financial crisis it calls for the »restoration of national currencies or the creation of smaller and more stable currency unions. The restoration of the Deutschmark must not be a taboo.«⁸ Furthermore, the AfD poses as representative of the interests of the »German tax payer«, who is financing the German government's bailout policy, especially for the indebted countries of southern Europe. Instead, the AfD demands an appropriate »haircut« for these indebted states and campaigns to get banks to take more responsibility.

1. See Alexander Häusler: Die »Alternative für Deutschland« – eine neue rechtspopulistische Partei? Materialien und Deutungen zur vertiefenden Auseinandersetzung [»Alternative for Germany« – a new right-wing populist party? Materials and interpretations for deeper analysis], Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung NRW, Düsseldorf 2013, pp. 32 ff.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 35 f.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

4. See Hendrik Ankenbrand: Christliche Alternative für Deutschland [Christian Alternative for Germany], FAZ Online, 10 March 2014, online at: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/afd-kritisiert-rechte-von-schwulen-und-muslime-12837646.html>, last accessed on 17 March 2014.

5. Mut zu Deutschland. Für ein Europa der Vielfalt. Programm der Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) für die Wahl zum Europäischen Parlament am 25. Mai 2014, Beschluss des Bundesparteitags vom 22. März 2014.

6. Election programme of the Alternative für Deutschland at the Bundestag elections 2013. Party conference resolution of 14 April 2013, p. 1.

7. »Fragen und Antworten« (»Questions and answers«), online at: <https://www.alternativefuer.de/partei/faq/>, last accessed on 17 March 2014.

8. Election programme, p. 1.

The second strand is the political criticism of the EU institutions and their elites. On this point the Alternative für Deutschland calls for a renationalisation of European decision-making structures. It wants »a Europe of sovereign states with a common single market« and »insists on unlimited budgetary rights for national parliaments. We firmly reject a transfer union or even a centralised European state«.⁹ It supplements its scepticism towards »Brussels« and its structures with scepticism about the rationality of political elites. This explains a euro-election campaign under the slogan »I've seen the light« and consists of a website selling the light bulbs banned by the EU. According to the website:

In Brussels overzealous politicians, well-organised lobbies and out-of-touch bureaucrats have bumped off a product tried and tested over 130 years: the light-bulb ... With their ban on lightbulbs unelected bureaucrats are abusing the European Union. Across Europe they issue ridiculous measures that make our lives unnecessarily difficult and more expensive. This is frustrating and creates resentment against the EU.¹⁰

Besides the harsh criticism of the EU and the euro the AfD has positions on the rule of law and democracy, financial policy and taxes, education, energy policy and integration policy. Its positions can be described briefly as follows:

- *Rule of law and democracy:* On this issue the AfD calls for an unspecified restriction of political parties' involvement in state decision-making. Political parties should »participate in the political system, but not dominate it«.¹¹ Furthermore, the AfD demands the introduction of referendums at the national level on the model of Switzerland. The AfD has thus enshrined its anti-establishment stance in its party programme. This »unique selling point« evokes the familiar disposition of protest and populist parties directed against the political class.

- *State finances and taxes:* In the tradition of economic-liberal parties the AfD opposes new taxes and calls for debt reduction.

9. Ibid.

10. »Die Aktion«, online at: <http://www.mir-geht-ein-licht-auf.de/Die-Aktion>, accessed on 17 March 2014.

11. Election programme, p. 1.

- *Provision for old age and families:* According to the AfD the family is the »nucleus of society«. Its position is conservative to the extent that it wants to take children into account when it comes to individual pension entitlements, thereby tying them to family status. They expect this to counteract Germany's lack of children. In its campaigns the party seeks to defend traditional family and role models and calls for a »halt« to the »gender delusion«.¹²

- *Education:* In its education policy the Alternative für Deutschland calls for »national standards oriented towards Germany's best school systems«, although it sees families as primarily responsible for education.¹³ In social media it also demands protection for »traditional education« against »multi-culti indoctrination«.¹⁴

- *Energy policy:* In energy policy, too, the AfD chafes at what it considers the »government's panic-stricken and directionless policy«.¹⁵ They call for an end to government subsidies for renewable energies and prioritise low electricity prices for consumers.

- *Integration policy:* In integration policy the AfD's position is well within the conservative spectrum. It calls for »immigration law reform« aimed at decisively preventing »unregulated immigration into our social security systems«.¹⁶

Prominent AfD member Alexander Gauland created a stir at the height of the 2013 Bundestag election with a foreign policy paper in which he demanded, besides more self-confidence in German foreign policy, a revival of the »counterinsurance policy« with regard to Russia.¹⁷ This episode is a good example of how the AfD's party platform is shaped not only by the adopted programme but also by the interventions of individual members.

12. Marcel Lewandowsky: Populismus in sozialen Netzwerken: Die AfD und pro Deutschland [Populism in social networks: the AfD and pro-Germany], in: Osnabrücker Beiträge zur Sprachtheorie, 86, 2014 (forthcoming).

13. Election programme, p. 3.

14. See Lewandowsky: Populismus in sozialen Netzwerken.

15. Election programme, p. 4.

16. Ibid.

17. See Günther Lachmann: Die AfD will zurück zu Bismarcks Außenpolitik [The AfD wants to resurrect Bismarck's foreign policy], Welt Online, 10. September 2013, online at: <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article119895035/Die-AfD-will-zurueck-zu-Bismarcks-Aussenpolitik.html>, accessed on 17 March 2014.

3. Structure and Organisation

The AfD's national executive consists of three speaker positions that are formally on an equal footing. They are currently held by Konrad Adam, Bernd Lucke and Frauke Petry.¹⁸ Adam is a commentator and journalist formerly of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* und *Die Welt*. Born in 1975, Frauke Petry is a chemistry graduate and entrepreneur and one of the few women at the head of the party. This organisational format is currently under review. In mid-March 2014 it transpired that the post of a single chairperson was to be introduced and his or her rights to appoint officials massively expanded. Furthermore, participation in party conferences, for example, is to be decided by lots, which may be questionable in terms of party law.¹⁹ Yet, Bernd Lucke had to withdraw these proposals at the party congress some weeks later after a heated debate.²⁰ This event shows that AfD is by no means an (informal) one-person-party, but a party with a base of confident militants and a culture of internal debate. Although the economist Lucke, who holds a professorship in economic theory – specialising in economic growth and cycles – at the University of Hamburg, is the AfD's main public voice he has not been the party's only public face. Other figures also have public prominence, including Alexander Gauland, economist Joachim Starbatty and the lawyer and lobbyist Beatrix von Storch. A party spokesman who first became an official representative just before the European elections is former president of the Federation of German Industry Hans-Olaf Henkel. He is a candidate in the European elections, second on the party list after Bernd Lucke. The party has also come up with an organisational novelty in the form of an expert advisory board attached to the national executive, which currently consists of five economics professors and is chaired by Tübingen emeritus professor Joachim Starbatty.

18. »Bundesvorstand« (national executive), online at: <https://www.alternativefuer.de/partei/bundesvorstand/>, last accessed on 17 March 2014.

19. See »Alternative für Deutschland: Parteichef Lucke will Basis entmachten« [Alternative für Deutschland: Party leader Lucke wants to emasculate the party base], SPIEGEL ONLINE, 17 March 2014, online at: <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/afd-machtkonzentration-lucke-will-basis-entmachten-a-958950.html>, last accessed on 17 March 2014.

20. See Jens Schneider, Lucke beklagt »pseudo-revolutionäre« Umgangsformen, [Lucke deploras »pseudo-revolutionary« behaviour] Sueddeutsche.de, 22. March 2014, »<http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/afd-parteitag-lucke-beklagt-pseudo-revolutionaere-umgangsformen-1.1919482>«, accessed on 24 March 2014.

Table 1: Membership figures of selected parties in Germany, 2012/2013

SPD	477,037
CDU	476,347
CSU	147,965
Die Linke (The Left)	63,761
The Greens	59,653
FDP	58,675
Pirate Party	28,950
AfD	17,522
NPD	ca. 6,000
Republicans	ca. 5,800
Citizens' Movement for Germany	ca. 725

Source: Parties represented in the Bundestag: Oskar Niedermayer: *Parteimitglieder in Deutschland: Version 2013. Arbeitshäfte aus dem Otto-Stammer-Zentrum*, No. 20, Berlin 2013; AfD, Piraten, Republikaner, Bürgerbewegung pro Deutschland: *Angaben der Parteien*, online at: <http://www.bpb.de/politik/wahlen/wer-steht-zur-wahl/bundestag-2013/>; NPD: Eckhard Jesse: *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, in: Frank Decker/Viola Neu (eds): *Handbuch der deutschen Parteien*, 2nd edition, Wiesbaden 2013, pp. 335–344.

If one classifies the AfD ideologically on the conservative or right-wing spectrum it has – although at a considerable distance – the largest membership base after the CDU. Alternative für Deutschland has also managed in a short time to build up state-level associations and many district associations in all the German *Länder*. For the 2013 Bundestag elections, in contrast to the other small parties on the right – such as the Republicans and the Citizens' Movement for Germany – they were able to put up a party list in every *Land*.

The AfD has cultivated a profile based on grassroots democracy, which also finds expression in its organisation. It allowed the membership to vote on the 2013 European election manifesto. According to the party's own figures 5,154 of the 17,522 members took part (29.4 per cent).²¹ The members were able to express a view on individual sections of the party programme, in some instances being able to choose between two alternative

21. See »Mitgliederbefragung unterstreicht basisdemokratisches Profil der AfD« [Members' survey underlines the AfD's grassroots profile], 5 March 2014, online at: <https://www.alternativefuer.de/2014/03/05/mitgliederbefragung-unterstreicht-basisdemokratisches-profil-der-afd/>, accessed on 17 March 2014.

formulations. This is in line with a trend among regional parties to test out participatory elements in election campaigns.²² At the same time, it differs from the established parties by offering an organisational alternative.

Because it has been around only for a short time and its character as something of a blank screen on which various policy ideas are projected, at the beginning of 2014 the AfD is still a broad church whose members range across a wide ideological spectrum. Its positions are, as a result, sometimes contradictory. The party is well aware of the potential for conflict. As Alexander Gauland puts it:

It is true that in the AfD people have gathered whose ideas about what is right and proper and what constitutes a healthy society don't find much resonance in public opinion.²³

Not surprisingly the party takes every opportunity to define itself: »We are against extremism of any kind, whether from the left or the right«. ²⁴ The AfD thus faces the typical dilemma of a newly-founded right-of-centre political party: on one hand, it has to rope together various ideological strands in order to obtain electoral success, while on the other hand the coexistence of these tendencies in one organisation harbours enormous potential for conflict and could thus pose the party strategic difficulties in the medium term.

4. How the AfD Comes Across

The still somewhat sparse party and election programmes render only the formally sanctioned image of the AfD. In order to understand the party and the sometimes strongly rejectionist stance it encounters in some parts of the German public and media one has to look at how it comes across. Since the Alternative für Deutschland entered the political stage it has ruffled feathers. Almost

immediately critics stepped up to accuse the AfD of championing causes of the radical right.²⁵ This impression has been underlined by more recent developments: Christian radicals within the party have evidently begun to come to the fore, positioning themselves openly against a liberal policy on Muslims and homosexuals.²⁶ The outcome of this ideological development remains open.

However, the Alternative für Deutschland's strong anti-political party and anti-establishment disposition can be regarded as fundamental to its profile. It poses as the mouthpiece of the citizens, who are assumed to have lost their voice among the other political parties and politicians. One example from the party magazine *AfD Kompakt* is emblematic of this stance:

The demands of the Alternative für Deutschland go right to the hearts of two-thirds of German people. Nevertheless, the established parties continue to ignore people's worries and prefer to punish countries such as Switzerland, which give their people a voice with referendums, with sanctions. This is an intolerable situation for all concerned!²⁷

Like most protest and populist parties the AfD links criticisms of the political class with the demand for referendums. This is an attempt to shift the focus to pure popular sovereignty, which it professes to prefer to the imponderables of representative democracy. In this respect the AfD resembles populists throughout Europe. At a second glance, however, the AfD – besides the lack of open racism in the party programme – differs from right-wing populist parties. While, for example, the long-time chair of the French *Front National*, Jean-Marie Le Pen, emphasised his lowly origins the AfD puts itself across as a party of the social elite and economic experts. Traditional populist parties cosy up to »the little guy«, especially in the media, but the AfD seeks to legitimise itself in terms of its leaders' expertise. It counters »out of touch« politicians with allegedly sober »experts«. By not coming across as shrill or too provocative these »experts« seek to set themselves up as »people's champions« by osmosis. On 21 September 2013 a picture was posted

22. See Marcel Lewandowsky: Landtagswahlkämpfe. Annäherung an eine Kampagnenform [Regional election campaigns. Towards a campaign form], Wiesbaden 2013.

23. Alexander Gauland: Brief an konservative Parteifreunde [Letter to conservative party allies], 29 December 2013, online at: <https://www.alternativefuer.de/2013/12/29/brief-an-konservative-partEIFreunde/>, accessed on 17 March 2014.

24. »AfD stellt sich gegen Extremismus jeder Art« [AfD opposes extremism of any kind], 28 June 2013, online at: <http://www.afdbayern.de/afd-stellt-sich-gegen-extremismus-jeder-art/>, accessed on 17 March 2014.

25. See Häusler: Die »Alternative für Deutschland«, p. 9.

26. See Ankenbrand: Christliche Alternative für Deutschland.

27. »Brisantes Ergebnis: Die absolute Mehrheit der Deutschen wünscht mehr Kontrolle in Sachen Zuwanderung« [Controversial result: an absolute majority of Germans wants more controls over immigration], in: *AfD Kompakt*, 2/2014, p. 4.

on the AfD's Facebook page that portrayed Bernd Lucke as a calm orator, with the caption:

We have to go back to the will of the people. The people have never consented to the euro.²⁸

The fact that the party stands up for »freedom of expression« in both its programme²⁹ and its public persona reflects the party's stance as champion of the »silent majority«. Broadly speaking the AfD has thus tied its colours to the mast of the conspiracy theories that tend to go hand in hand with the struggle on the political right against alleged »political correctness«. ³⁰ It therefore, at least to some extent, functions as a right-wing populist party. Based on its programme it is simply too early to categorise the AfD as »right-wing populist« once and for all, even though, as already mentioned, it has a tendency to appear to distance itself from immigrants and sometimes even from homosexuals, which in the medium term could subsume or even overwhelm its eurosceptic orientation.

5. Voters and Sympathisers

At the 2013 Bundestag elections the AfD recruited its voters from every political camp. Most swing voters had voted for the FDP at the previous Bundestag election; the second-largest group, however, comprised voters from the left, followed by the CDU, abstainers, the SPD and the Greens.³¹ The AfD is, at the same time, more successful among men than among women voters. It has been particularly successful in parts of eastern Germany, not surprisingly given the socio-structural problems and weak party ties there. The AfD cannot be placed unambiguously on the political right, given the original party preferences of its voters, but also because its criticisms of the European Union and the euro area are popular across party lines.³²

28. See Lewandowsky: Populismus in sozialen Netzwerken.

29. See election programme, p. 2.

30. See Häusler: Die Alternative für Deutschland, p. 23.

31. »Analysen Wählerwanderung« [Analyses of voter migration], online at: <https://wahl.tagesschau.de/wahlen/2013-09-22-BT-DE/analyse-wanderung.shtml>, accessed on 17 March 2014; see also Häusler: Die »Alternative für Deutschland«, pp. 44 f.

32. See »Wer hat die Alternative für Deutschland gewählt?« (Who voted for the Alternative für Deutschland?), Euractiv, 23 September 2013, online at: <http://www.euractiv.de/wahlen-und-macht/artikel/wer-hat-die-alternative-fuer-deutschland-gewaehlt-008043>; »AfD scheidete an Ablehnung durch Frauen« (AfD foundered on its rejection by women), FAZ Online, 28 January 2014, online at: <http://www.faz.net/aktuell/>

In the course of the Bundestag election campaign researchers at the University of Amsterdam, Bamberg and the University of the Federal Armed Forces in Hamburg conducted a survey, the »Bundeswahlkompass« (Federal election compass), which also ascertained the attitudes of different party sympathisers.³³ The outcome was that those who sympathise with the AfD place themselves – similar to supporters of the CDU/CSU and the FDP – in the middle of the political spectrum. The differences regarding issues are thus all the more striking. In comparison with those who lean towards other parties AfD sympathisers strongly support the assertion that Islam »is not compatible with the values of the Federal Republic of Germany«. In keeping with this, the assertion that it should be made easier for asylum seekers to obtain the right to stay is rejected most strongly by this group. They also assert more strongly than supporters of other parties that adoption rights should be confined to heterosexual couples. Approval of eurosceptic positions is also relatively strong: around 40 per cent of AfD sympathisers call for the restoration of the German mark; support for the assertion that Germany should leave the European Union is somewhat lower, however, at around 30 per cent.


6. Concluding Remarks

In light of these first findings about its priority issues, organisation and voters, but also its internal conflicts, the Alternative für Deutschland can be categorised as a conservative party in the making. It is populist in its anti-establishment disposition and combines different strands from the liberal and right-wing spectrum. However, it would be premature simply to assign it to the right-wing populist camp. With regard to the AfD's attraction, it seems clear that it has something of the *faute de mieux* about it: because right-wing populist challengers have previously, for various reasons, stood no chance in Germany,³⁴ it is not surprising that the AfD, which has hit the ground running, has become a haven

politik/inland/wahlstatistik-afd-scheiderte-an-der-ablehnung-durch-frauen-12774000.html, both last accessed on 17 March 2014.

33. The questionnaire can be found online at: <http://www.bundeswahlkompass>

34. See Marcel Lewandowsky: Rechtspopulismus als Herausforderung für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland [Right-wing populism as a challenge for the Federal Republic of Germany], in: Christian Krell/Tobias Mörschel (eds): Demokratie in Deutschland 2011. Zustand, Herausforderungen, Perspektiven [Democracy in Germany 2011: State of play, challenges, prospects], Wiesbaden 2012, pp. 389–411.



for various strands of the political right, whether it likes it or not.

For the time being the AfD's future is ensured by the largely unresolved European financial crisis, the fundamentally pro-European stances of the other parties (with the exception of parts of The Left) and, not least, the European Union's continuing democratic deficit. The AfD will not run out of ideas in a hurry. The demise of the 3 per cent threshold for European elections in Germany also favours the AfD, which may thus find itself with a foothold in the European Parliament after the elections.



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