

Too green, too fast, too dear. The AfD is gaining popularity in Germany

Kamil Frymark

The popularity of the Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, AfD) is growing, as confirmed by its second place in the latest opinion polls, putting it on a par with Chancellor Olaf Scholz's SPD, and that is raising great concern in Germany. The factors which have contributed to the AfD's success include the public dissatisfaction with the incumbent government and the overlapping consequences of the Ukraine war and the inflation, climate and migration crises. The SPD-Green-FDP government coalition has presented different, often inconsistent approaches to these challenges. This has been coupled with Scholz's deliberate passiveness as he shuns disputes inside the coalition in an attempt to improve his popularity ratings. This strategy has been successful up to a certain point, but is currently failing, and as a result the Chancellor is being blamed for the situation in the coalition. The AfD is benefitting from this, while also capitalising on the fears most Germans share about the pace of the changes being implemented as part of the government's climate policy. The party is also an advocate for voters who oppose the excessive influx of migrants to Germany and further support for Ukraine. Residents of the eastern federal states are particularly sensitive to these issues, where the AfD leads the polls with over 30%, and is viewed as a 'catch-all' or mass party, and not merely a fringe movement. This is particularly important given the upcoming elections to the parliaments of Saxony, Brandenburg and Thuringia scheduled for autumn 2024, which will be the final electoral test before the Bundestag elections in 2025.

20% of Germans eligible for voting have declared they would be ready to support the AfD in the federal elections. Approval ratings for the party have been rising for over a year. According to polls, its current support level is 20% (it was 10.3% in the 2021 federal elections), so it is catching up with the incumbent Chancellor's party, and according to some surveys it is even ahead of it for the first time in history. The AfD has been present in the Bundestag since 2017, and these are its highest ratings since October 2018, when support for it hit 18%. At that time, the AfD gained popularity as a consequence of the dispute over migration policy between the Christian Democrat parties which then governed the country, Chancellor Angela Merkel's CDU and the CSU.¹

¹ K. Frymark, A. Kwiatkowska, 'Serious clash between CDU and CSU on migration policy. European implications', OSW, 20 June 2018, osw.waw.pl.



The current increase in support for the AfD is also a consequence of disputes within the government coalition and a manifestation of some voters' desire to protest against the government's policy during the migration & climate crises and its approach to helping Ukraine. Another very important factor is the conviction shared by most Germans that the CDU does not offer a real alternative to the SPD-Green-FDP coalition. Only 22% of respondents believe that the Christian Democrats would have coped better in the circumstances, while 25% think that they would have done worse. 48% of Germans do not see any difference between the rule of the current coalition and that of a possible cabinet involving the CDU (from a poll by Forschungsgruppe Wahlen for ZDF television on 26 May).

Germans, including those who support the incumbent government, think very poorly of Chancellor Scholz's cabinet. As many as 79% of respondents have a bad opinion about the cabinet's work

” **The coalition's public perception is adversely affected by internal disputes, often initiated by the FDP because this party believes that the government is primarily implementing the political agenda of the Greens.**

(an Infratest dimap survey for ARD on 1 June) even though the energy crisis resulting from Russia's moves has been resolved, around 1 million refugees from Ukraine have been received and taken care of, and an uncontrolled surge in inflation has been prevented (it was 6.1% y/y in May this year, after peaking at 8.8% y/y last November). The introduction of aid packages to mitigate the effects of high energy prices and changes in the social protection system, such as raising the minimum wage to €12 per hour and the basic allowance to €502 euros, has also helped to some extent. As a result of these measures, disappointment with the coalition was not manifested during the winter period of austerity, when people had to economise on electricity and heat, but it resurged above all due to the mistakes the government coalition made later. In addition, most Germans (84%) are demanding that Scholz should take more decisive measures to speed up the resolution of disputes within the coalition. Scholz promised this when he was running for chancellorship as the SPD's candidate, and his failure to fulfil this promise is seen as his weakness. This opinion is also shared by 85% of the SPD's supporters.

Halfway through the government's term: the coalition is weak

One of the coalition's structural problems affecting its performance ratings is that it is made up of three parties which differ substantially in terms of their ideology and political agendas, and thus appeal to different electorates. It is more difficult to manage such a heterogeneous coalition than was the case with previous cabinets. At the same time, some of the parliamentary parties have been rejuvenated and radicalised. As many as 49 out of 206 SPD's deputies originate from its youth wing Jusos, and 22 out of 118 members of the Greens' parliamentary group were younger than 30 at the time of their election. This leads to extreme demands being formulated (for example regarding climate and migration policies) and makes the coalition partners less flexible in their mutual negotiations. On top of this, the Greens need to cope with falling support (currently running at around 15%, compared to 23% a year ago), poor results in other local elections (including in Berlin and Bremen) and heated policy debates within the party. The Green Party's leadership has been trying to hush up the dispute between various groups inside its parliamentary group, but the scale of the disharmony is becoming ever more evident,² and these disputes will only escalate as the next elections approach.

² In policy debates, the Greens have always sought to strike a balance between the two groups: the realists (*Realos*) and the radicals (*Fundis*). The deep conflict between these camps has existed since the beginning of the party's operation. The realists are more inclined to compromise, seeking coalitions with other parties at the *Bundesländer* level, even at the price of withdrawing some of their demands. The radicals have adopted a totally opposite approach, as credibility in the eyes of the electorate and sticking to their own ideals has been the most important thing for them.

The coalition's public perception is adversely affected by these internal disputes. These are often initiated by the FDP because this party (and its voters) believes that the government is primarily implementing the political agenda of the Greens. The FDP opposes the ideological approach to climate policy which, in their opinion, the Greens have adopted. The best example of this conflict was the FDP's demand to allow exceptions to the ban on registering new cars with internal combustion engines in the European Union after 2035.³ The internal conflict between the coalition partners has thus moved to the EU level, undermining the government's cohesion while at the same time improving the FDP's poll ratings. This has further convinced the party's representatives that challenging the Greens' agenda is beneficial for it and is a good method for strengthening its own position. This applies not only to climate policy, but also to the other coalition members' fiscal and migration policies.

The electorate who are disillusioned by the ruling coalition is largely being taken over by the AfD. According to a Forsa poll, 32% of respondents who currently

» **Climate policy, which most Germans believe to be the most serious challenge in the coming years, is the focal point of the AfD's criticism of the government coalition.**

support the AfD voted for other parties in 2021. A further 14% is made up of those who have not voted so far, while 54% are regular supporters of this party.⁴ The largest group among the electorate taken over from other parties are those who used to support the coalition parties: the SPD (16%), the FDP (15%) and the Greens (2%), 33% in total. A further 24% are former Christian Democrat voters who are now ready to vote for the AfD. The AfD's increasing popularity is the greatest long-term challenge for the CDU. When Friedrich Merz, the leader of the Christian Democrats, sought to be elected as the party's chairman in 2018, he promised that he would be able to win over a significant part of those voters who were disappointed with Angela Merkel's policies. The Christian Democrats have had some success, as the CDU is currently leading the opinion polls, and its support at the federal level has stabilised at around 30%. However, the CDU's eastern structures are increasingly critical of the party's excessively close cooperation with the coalition (the Christian Democrats have supported 108 out of 188 of the government's legislative initiatives)⁵ and their leniency towards the Greens, who are seen in the east as the CDU's main political opponents.

No alternative

Climate policy, which most Germans believe to be the most serious challenge of the coming years, is the focal point of the AfD's criticism of the ruling coalition. A plurality of the AfD's supporters (47%, according to an ARD DeutschlandTrend survey conducted this June) have revealed that they support this grouping precisely because of the way the government is conducting its climate and energy policies. This is linked to the AfD's profile, as it is the only parliamentary party which denies that human activity is contributing to climate change. In addition, the party is skilfully exploiting the public's growing scepticism about the manner and pace at which climate reforms are being implemented in Germany. This is particularly evident in the case of some of the incumbent government's flagship projects, such as the ban on the registration of cars with internal combustion engines in the EU and the installation of gas and oil boilers in new buildings. Many citizens take this personally as the state's direct interference in two 'pillars' of extreme importance for German society: the car and the house. According to a Forsa survey, a substantial minority of Germans (26%) favour a ban on the registration

³ The Liberals insisted that it should still be possible to register new cars with selected types of internal combustion engines in the EU after 2035. For more information, see M. Kędziński, 'Niemcy wobec przyszłości samochodów spalinowych – wewnątrzpolityczny kontekst zmiany', OSW, 17 March 2023, osw.waw.pl.

⁴ M. Güllner, 'Das Comeback der AfD', *The Pioneer*, 2 June 2023, thepioneer.de.

⁵ M. Bröcker, G. Repinski, 'Die Ost-CDU und das AfD-Problem', *The Pioneer*, 7 June 2023, thepioneer.de.

of cars with combustion engines in the EU. This solution has the greatest support among the Greens' voters (65%), while only 4% of the AfD supporters approve of it. A similar disproportion can be seen regarding other climate policy issues.

The AfD's main objection to the government coalition's climate policy is that no alternatives have been presented. The party argues that this resembles the measures Chancellor Merkel adopted during the eurozone crisis, for example when the government maintained that Germany had no other choice but to help Greece. Furthermore, the AfD points out that the solutions adopted by the SPD-Green-FDP coalition comprise only prohibitions, which has a negative impact on the possible search for new technologies, and that the timeframe for implementing the reforms is too tight. The AfD's other major accusations regarding the coalition's climate policy concern the very high costs of the transformation and the excessive burden on citizens' household budgets, especially given the current inflation levels. This aspect has been criticised by 67% of Germans (ARD DeutschlandTrend).

Migration crisis 2.0

The AfD is also gaining popularity due to growing public discontent at the government's migration policy. The demand to curb migration is the AfD's most important political project, and it has repeatedly boosted the party's ratings. Moreover, voters believe that AfD politicians are most competent on precisely this issue. This is particularly important in view of the new version of the migration crisis which has been observed in Germany for several months: not only have over one million refugees from Ukraine been received, but above all, shelter has been offered to people arriving from other places. In 2022, 244,000 asylum applications were submitted in Germany, 47% more than the previous year. The situation worsened in the following months as a further 80,978 applications were registered between January and April 2023; this means an 80% increase year on year. The most frequent asylum seekers are Syrians (22,702; +73.5% y/y), Afghans (15,980; +89.9%) and Turks, in whose case the number of applications is increasing at the fastest rate (10,267; +279.7%).⁶

The overlapping of different groups of refugees has changed the dynamics of the migration crisis. This is particularly notice-

» The demand to curb migration is the AfD's most important political project, and it has repeatedly contributed to boosting the party's ratings.

able in the reactions from the local governments that are in charge of providing essential care to asylum seekers. For example, local politicians complain about the shortage of places for newcomers, financial constraints, and difficulties in integrating the newcomers effectively. The appeals from local government officials include representatives of the Green Party, traditionally the most open to accepting new immigrants, which shows how serious the problem is.⁷ The problems with housing refugees also affect public sentiment, and the AfD is capitalising on this. The majority of Germans (54%, according to an ARD DeutschlandTrend poll conducted this May) believe that immigrants coming to Germany generate more costs than profits, and 52% of respondents would like to limit their influx (33% of respondents would like to maintain it at the current level). What is also important, 77% of respondents claim that politicians do not pay enough attention to the problems caused by the settlement of foreigners in Germany.

⁶ *Aktuelle Zahlen*, Bundesamt Für Migration und Flüchtlinge, April 2023, bamf.de.

⁷ J. Hermann, '«Wir schaffen das nicht»: Ein grüner Landrat ruft in der Asylkrise um Hilfe', Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 2 February 2023, nzz.ch.

Russia first

The public fatigue at the consequences of the war and the gradual decline in support for military aid to Ukraine are also playing to the AfD's advantage. The party represents voters with anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian views, whereas all the other parties in the Bundestag want to continue supporting Ukraine.⁸ 43% of poll respondents are of the opinion that German weapon supplies to Kyiv are at the right level, and 84% support offering shelter to those fleeing the war (the abovementioned ARD DeutschlandTrend poll from May this year). However, 37% of respondents believe that the military support is excessive, and only 14% would like to see it expanded. Surveys show a clear downward trend in this support. In addition, 64% of Germans oppose the possible transfer of German warplanes to Ukraine. The greatest resistance is seen among supporters of the AfD (90%), although negative opinions on this issue are also expressed by supporters of the CDU/CSU (59%), the SPD (56%) and the FDP (54%). At the same time, 55% of respondents claim that the German government is making too little diplomatic effort to end the war.

AfD politicians are very active in supporting and initiating various 'pro-peace' demands, including appeals and demonstrations against

» **Since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, AfD politicians have repeatedly presented themselves as defenders of Russia.**

sending aid to Ukraine. At the turn of 2023, this party co-organised protest marches (mainly in eastern Germany) against the government's policy. Even though fewer people than expected joined the demonstrations, at times up to ten thousand people participated in the protests. The AfD's moves have been received extremely well among Russian-speaking Germans, many of whom vote for this party.⁹ Furthermore, since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine, AfD politicians have repeatedly presented themselves as defenders of Moscow, for example by criticising the German government in Russian propaganda broadcasts, organising tours of the occupied territories and participating in receptions at the Russian embassy. Their moves also include fuelling anti-Ukrainian (as well as anti-American and anti-Polish) sentiments in social media, as well as attempts to influence a large group of readers through the *COMPACT* magazine, which is linked to the AfD and is closely monitored by German counterintelligence.

The anti-establishment party

However, disappointment at the government's policy in these areas and the desire to manifest opposition to it, as declared by 67% of the AfD's supporters, are not the only reasons for this party's popularity. Its anti-establishment approach is also an important factor. Such sentiments are becoming increasingly widespread partly due to the questions raised about the state of the public media in Germany, including the dissonance between the narrative presented in the mass media and the opinion shared by a significant part of society whose voice is not represented in newspapers and TV.¹⁰

In addition, some German columnists have made the point that the participants in the debate are branded as right-wing extremists if they present views other than those prevalent in Berlin (implicitly, the left-inclined circles of the coalition and a significant part of the media).¹¹ Furthermore, some AfD

⁸ *Die Linke* is an exception, but due to internal conflicts within the party and low public support, it is not treated as a serious competitor to the AfD.

⁹ K. Frymark, *Prorosyjskie demonstracje w Niemczech*, OSW, 21 April 2022, youtube.com. See also N. Friedrichs, J. Graf, *Integration gelungen? Lebenswelten und gesellschaftliche Teilhabe von (Spät)Aussiedlerinnen und (Spät)Aussiedlern*, Bundesamt Für Migration und Flüchtlinge, SVRStudie 2022–1, bamf.de.

¹⁰ In this context, it is worth quoting Wolfgang Schmidt, the Head of the Chancellery, who has voiced his concern about the state of the German media and the tendency for some journalists to oversimplify their coverage. See 'Das Late-Night-Memo für die Hauptstadt', Berlin.Table #69, 5 June 2023, table.media/berlin.

¹¹ R. Haubrich, 'Ausgewogene Berichterstattung? 92 Prozent der ARD-Volontäre wählen grün-rot-rot', *Die Welt*, 3 November 2020, welt.de.

supporters suggest that the public debate and the issues politicians focus on are out of touch with the real problems most citizens face; one example is the linguistic dispute over the use of feminatives in the German language.¹²

The East as bastion of the party's support

These arguments concerning political agendas and identity resonate especially strongly with voters in the eastern federal states, where support for the AfD is hitting 32% (compared to 23% for the CDU, 16% for the SPD, 6% for the Greens), while in the western federal states it is only 13% (as against 30% for the CDU, 19% for the SPD, and 16% for the Greens).¹³ The AfD's popularity in eastern Germany has been repeatedly confirmed in regional elections, and the AfD is the strongest opposition party in all of the eastern *Bundesländer*.

The AfD's popularity in the east of the country has both structural and political underpinnings. One of the reasons for its successes is that voters are not so attached to specific parties as the electorates in the West. Social status, belonging to a professional group or family traditions do not influence people's voting choices so much in this part of the country. In addition, its residents are readier to shift their electoral support; in this way they can hold the political parties accountable for fulfilling the promises they made during the campaign.

On top of that, the AfD is treated in eastern Germany not only as a protest party (and is thus in a way replacing *Die Linke*) but above all as a catch-all party¹⁴

” The AfD may win the elections in three eastern federal states, and the results they achieve there will strengthen them before the elections to the Bundestag in autumn 2025.

that represents the interests of a broad group of voters to the greatest extent. At the same time, the leaders of the AfD have skilfully capitalised on voters' disappointment with the operation of both the incumbent and previous federal governments, and present the current state of affairs as an aftermath of the transformation after 1989. In the still heated debate on the consequences of German reunification, the AfD positions itself as the only party that is sensitive to the problems of those people who have been disappointed by the changes that have taken place since then. It also skilfully uses linguistic calques from the GDR era, such as 'ecological dictatorship' (*Ökodiktatur*), the 'heating Stasi' (*Heizungs-Stasi*) and 'planned heating economy' (*Wärmeplanwirtschaft*).¹⁵ This is intended to show a resemblance between the current government's officials and the party apparatchiks of the former East German political system. The AfD has already used this strategy, and it proved successful in the previous elections to the *Landtage* in the east of the country.¹⁶

The AfD's strong position in the eastern federal states is also based on its structure, which is consolidated around regional leaders and the lower intensity of ideological divisions and personal disputes than in western Germany. Björn Höcke, who is closely watched by counterintelligence, is the chairman of the AfD party structures in Thuringia and the undisputed leader of the party in the eastern part of the country. However, his influence goes beyond the AfD's local structures. Since the party's

¹² E. Gujer, 'Ein bärtiges Wesen in der Frauen-Sauna: In Gender-Fragen scheint es keine Grenzen mehr zu geben', *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 2 June 2023, nzz.ch.

¹³ 'AfD ist in Ostdeutschland deutlich die stärkste Kraft', *Handelsblatt*, 7 June 2023, handelsblatt.com.

¹⁴ A catch-all party (*Volkspartei*) is a party representing a wide range of views and divided into factions, with a large electorate originating from different social strata.

¹⁵ 'Alice Weidel: Umfaller-FDP liefert die Bürger an Heizungs-Stasi und Wärmeplanwirtschaft aus', *AfD – Fraktion im Bundestag*, 31 May 2023, afdbundestag.de.

¹⁶ K. Frymark, 'Alternatywa dla wschodnich Niemiec. Saksonia i Brandenburgia przed wyborami landowymi', *Komentarze OSW*, no. 307, 28 August 2019, osw.waw.pl.

new leadership was elected last June, a significant number of activists have come to treat him as the leader of the AfD's federal presidium. The fact that candidates who did not receive his support lost the race for membership of the presidium is further proof of Höcke's strength. In addition he has pushed through a proposal to amend the AfD's statute which allows it to be governed by one chairman in the future, instead of two people holding this position simultaneously as before.¹⁷

The AfD's electoral prospects

The risk factors for the AfD include personal conflicts and disputes over its political agenda, which have so far repeatedly stood in the way of it achieving greater electoral success. The AfD's result in the elections will therefore largely depend on how it resolves or quashes the conflicts during the campaign. In addition, if the AfD radicalises further, German counterintelligence will increase its pressure on the party; they are already using selected surveillance measures against both the AfD and its youth wing (*Junge Alternative*).

However, the electoral calendar works in favour of the AfD. This party is not a frontrunner in this year's most important local elections, in Hesse and Bavaria (both votes are scheduled for 8 October this year). Nevertheless, it has significantly improved its ratings since the previous elections in these federal states, and that will probably translate into a good result in the autumn elections in these Christian Democrat strongholds (both federal states have been governed by the CDU and CSU for many years). In turn, the AfD may benefit from playing the anti-European card in the elections to the European Parliament in 2024, especially given the fact that a growing percentage of Germans claim that the EU is bringing more and more losses to Germany. 27% of respondents share this opinion (+12 p.p. since July 2020).¹⁸ However, the elections in the three eastern federal states where the AfD may win will be the most important, and the result achieved there will strengthen the party before the elections to the Bundestag in autumn 2025.

The elections to the *Landtage* of Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia scheduled for 2024 will be the last tests for the political parties before the Bundestag elections in 2025. The AfD is leading in the polls in all three federal states, with 23% support in Brandenburg (tied with the CDU) and 28% each in Saxony (where the CDU has 25%) and Thuringia (where *Die Linke* is second with 22%). However, the AfD's possible victory in these federal states will not guarantee it will form a government. The other parties will seek a formal or informal coalition against the AfD, as is currently the case in Thuringia, where the CDU cooperates with the post-communist *Die Linke*. Although this tactic has so far excluded the AfD from power, it has come at a major political cost for the parties which choose this course of action,¹⁹ as they are forced to look for the lowest common denominator in their political agendas; in practice this has disappointed their voters to an ever greater degree, and consequently translated into falling support for the government and the growing popularity of the AfD.

¹⁷ *Idem*, 'Nowe władze AfD: w kierunku regionalnej partii protestu', OSW, 27 June 2022, osw.waw.pl.

¹⁸ At the same time, surveys show that 38% of respondents would like Germany to take more unilateral action in Europe, and 14% would like to see it leave the EU. See 'ARD-DeutschlandTREND Juni Extra 2023', June 2023, infratest-dimap.de.

¹⁹ Saxony-Anhalt is an exception. The very popular and experienced CDU leader Reiner Haseloff won the 2021 election in this federal state, and attracted over 16,000 voters who had previously voted for the AfD to the Christian Democrats.