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An Epidemic of Skepticism: Examining Right-Wing Populist Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis in Germany

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An Epidemic of Skepticism:
Examining Right-Wing Populist Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis in Germany

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Political Science

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of far-right populist groups in the framing of global health crises. To understand the impact far-right populism has had on the response to health crises, I will be analyzing the case of the *Alternativ für Deutschland* (AfD), or Alternative for Germany, and their response to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. I evaluate three distinct time periods in the AfD's history and determine how the AfD has framed and reframed its crisis narrative in response to the coronavirus compared to previous crises, such as the refugee crisis of 2015. I hypothesize that new crises will lead far-right opposition parties to reframe the prevailing narrative in order to maintain a compelling presence in the public narrative. I also hypothesize that by reframing its crisis response, the opposition party will be more likely to have an impact on electoral success. By using the process tracing method, I find that there is some support for these assumptions, but more research is necessary to determine the effects of right-wing populism on response to health crises.

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An Epidemic of Skepticism: Examining Right-Wing Populist Responses to the COVID-19 Crisis in Germany

Introduction

This thesis is about the role of far-right populist groups in the framing of global health crises. The rise of right-wing populism (RWP) in recent years—and its links to the politics of globalization, migration, identity—has received much intellectual attention. These politics now intersect a monumental global health crisis, the coronavirus pandemic. The political tactics of far-right groups, and the prominence of ‘othering’ and ‘scapegoating’ in the framing of globalization, migration, and identity may be well-established. But these tactics now intersect a global *health* crisis. How can the introduction of a global health crisis shift the framing tactics of far-right populist groups? Why would these groups shift framing tactics to pursue their political objectives? We need to know more complete answers to these questions than presently exists. That is my purpose in this thesis. I use the case of Germany to show how and why the coronavirus health crisis led the German far-right to adjust its political messaging.

I examine the leading German RWP group the *Alternativ für Deutschland*, or Alternative for Germany (AfD) to show how this political party reframed its messaging to respond to the coronavirus pandemic. My evaluation covers three timeframes:

- The initial success of the AfD starting in 2013 and culminating in the 2017 federal election
- The AfD’s thinking at the onset of the pandemic in early 2020,
- The AfD’s reaction to the pandemic after the initial surge, and first lockdown, up to the present, and going forward

To further illustrate and substantiate my claims, I use brief comparisons with the United States when appropriate.

The first part of my thesis presents the conceptual and methodological bases of my analysis. I begin with an assessment of more general studies on RWP movements and discuss how such movements matter in the context of modern Germany and the global coronavirus pandemic. Next, I explain why I use the case of the AfD since its emergence in 2013 as the foundation of my research. Then, I outline the methodological approach that I take to demonstrate the empirical relevance of my overall argument in part two of this thesis. In Part Two, I present evidence from three distinct periods of the AfD's existence in the German political system: (1) from the party's emergence in 2013 to the beginning of 2020, (2) from the start of the coronavirus pandemic in March of 2020 to the end of the first wave of COVID-19 restrictions in May of 2020, and (3) from the end of the first wave of the pandemic in 2020 up to the German federal elections in September of 2021. In so doing, I show how the information collected in these substantive sections fits into the methodological framework of my thesis and provides possible avenues of future research. Finally, I summarize my research and findings in the concluding remarks.

Background

The phenomenon of right-wing populism is not a new concept, but it is currently at the forefront of politics in several nations, including one of the world's most powerful countries: Germany. Since 2017, the German government has been party to the rise of a far-right populist group that has shaken up national politics and radicalized a large bloc of voters for the first time since the end of World War II. In order to understand the current trends of RWP in Germany, it is imperative to understand the political structure and unique history of the country.

Structurally, Germany has a parliamentary federal government system with proportional representation. Due to the parliamentary nature of the German federal government, many parties can emerge as contenders in national elections (O’Neil et al. 2018). To gain representation in the *Bundestag* – the lower house – parties must obtain at least five percent of the vote to have any formal representation in government. Only a handful of parties exceed this five percent threshold, which leads to contentious coalition building for the party with a plurality of seats.

In addition to the structural composition of the government, it is crucial to acknowledge Germany’s relationship with RWP. The history of RWP is deeply embedded in Germany. The history of right-wing populism in Germany is very distinct in that it played a large role in the rise of National Socialism – *Nazism* – and the genocide of European Jews during the Second World War. This macabre national history has helped keep right-wing populist groups from gaining a foothold in national politics until very recently. But it is not just the feelings of shame and guilt among Germans that have kept RWP groups out of the political mainstream. One important mechanism put in place after the fall of the Third Reich was the *Grundgesetz*, basic law, which has broadly outlawed any symbolism, rhetoric, and propaganda that can be linked to Nazism (Stegbauer 2007). These two factors combined pushed any potential RWP contenders to the margins and prevented a RWP party from reaching the five percent vote threshold. That is, until 2017, when the once small AfD was able to substantially exceed the five percent threshold to gain seats in Parliament (Lees 2018). The AfD has been characterized as “Anti-immigrant and Euro-sceptical,” with other conventionally right-wing views on sociopolitical issues (Kozlowski 2019, 96). The success of the AfD in 2017 was largely due to the immigration and refugee crisis of 2015, where Germany took in “about one-million migrants, most fleeing the Syrian conflict” (Gerson 2018). The AfD has been perpetuating a narrative of xenophobia, Euroscepticism, and

government mistrust since they first emerged on the German political scene. However, the introduction of a new global crisis – a pandemic – has shifted this RWP narrative. Why is that so? How has the German far-right responded to the global COVID-19 pandemic? And how do different types of crises impact their framing/reframing of the narratives they are pushing?

Literature Review

The conversation surrounding the presence of RWP has dramatically changed in recent years, but just how much? In attempting to understand this shift in the status quo of global politics, I will begin by analyzing literature that highlights the general studies of RWP movements, followed by an in-depth look at the case of RWP in Germany and, for comparative purposes, the United States, since each are experiencing a rise of RWP. Each country has been party to an increase in RWP in recent years, and the existing literature will lay the foundation for my analysis into just *how* significant this change has been. I will also analyze the broader literature on each country, attempting to see where the similarities and influencing factors lie. These two cases of RWP have been on prominent display over the last decade, and with their notoriety has come an increasing amount of research on the phenomenon of Right-wing Populism.

To begin, I examine literature that focuses on RWP groups and movements more broadly, particularly with regards to socioeconomic threats, globalization, and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. One concern is the relationship between patterns of support for RWP and financial status. Ferrari (2021), for example, clearly and concisely shows how income (as well as perception of threat) might impact an individual's likelihood to support RWP parties. His research highlights key relationships. Ferrari argues that "as families' economic conditions decline, feelings of resentment at the status quo, and perceptions that immigrants represent an

economic and cultural threat to the country increase” (Ferrari 2021, 275). He further posits that “the effect of family-level economic conditions may disappear when one controls for emotions and perceptions” (Ferrari 2021, 275). Rather than solely discussing the economic aspect of possible RWP voting, he ties all of the conditions together – socioeconomic threat perceptions and family economic status – and proposes that there is a causal mechanism that influences RWP voting from threat perception to economic status, to eventual voting (Ferrari 2021, 275).

Ferrari discusses the influential factors of “economic conditions, such as stagnation, unemployment, import shock linked to globalization, and perception of economic deprivation” on people’s support for populist leaders and groups (2015, 275). What makes his research significant is the linkage between the normal economic concerns, sociocultural threats, and a family’s own economic conditions (Ferrari 2021). He ties this perceived crisis, whether personal or economic, to the scapegoating of other groups as the cause of this crisis (i.e. migrants), and how those two factors drive an individual to support RWP, which gets right at the heart of my research (Ferrari 2021).

An important note to add is that “the key to understand the role of individual – or household – level economic conditions on populist support is through its effect on resentment and threat perception. . . [and] the perceptions of sociocultural and economic threat and resentful affect are not equally distributed across income groups” (Ferrari 2021, 278). Thus, this article and its findings on familial economic status and support for RWP groups is another critical piece of the puzzle to add in order to understand as many of the influencing factors as possible.

Shifting gears slightly, Dani Rodrik’s research, “Why Does Globalization Fuel Populism? Economics, Culture, and the Rise of Right-Wing Populism” (2020) focuses on the relationship between globalization and the growth of RWP. Rodrik preliminarily gives his conclusions that

voters' attitudes about globalization were statistically significant, stating that "Trump voters disliked trade agreements and immigration; they were also against bank regulation" (2020, 5). Additionally, Rodrik observes two types of voters in this research: Trump voters in general, and "switchers", or those who switched to Trump in 2016 after voting for Obama in 2012 (2020, 3). Through his empirical analysis, Rodrik find that "globalization shocks can feed into support for populism directly. . . as well as indirectly," and through causal pathways (2020, 8). Though this article specifically uses the US as a case study to observe the influence globalization has on RWP support, it is presumed that this phenomenon can be witnessed in other countries among RWP supporters, since the general characteristics and perceptions of threat are not bound by national borders. Rodrik notes how little attention financial globalization has been given in relation to RWP influence, though he cites that Funke et al. (2016) had produced important findings on financial crises and RWP support, saying "[Funke et al. 2016] find that financial crises increase the vote share of far-right parties (but not far-left parties) by around 4 percentage points on average. . . and that the results are statistically stronger for the post World War II period" (2020, 15). Rodrik finds overall that "globalization shocks play on cultural and identity divisions in society, both activating and magnifying them," and the conventional wisdom that populists perceive the 'other' as a threat is just as evident here as in other literature (2020, 18). But what happens when you combine sociocultural differences and perceived threats of globalization with a global pandemic?

The Case of Germany

I now turn to the cases of RWP in Germany and, for comparison, the U.S. more specifically. It is clear that the debate about RWP has grown in the last decade, with much focus on the introduction of the AfD, to German politics and on the party's subsequent success in the

2017 Bundestag (parliament) elections. In the case of the United States, the increase in RWP has been tied heavily to the election of President Donald Trump in 2016. Scholars like Charles Lees (2018) and Hanna Schwander & Philip Manow (2017) have paid particular attention to the rise of the AfD and the shift in electorate support towards this controversial RWP group. Others, like Thomas Greven (2016) and Ruth Wodak & Michał Krzyżanowski (2017) have contributed significantly to the literature using comparative case studies of RWP in the US compared to Europe as a whole, though the AfD is included in the broader comparative research. While there is a significant amount of literature that has been written over the course of Trump's presidency and the years since the AfD was first introduced into the German political scene, the literature included here is among the most substantial and paints a clear picture of how these Right-wing Populist groups and actors came to power. There seems to be a number of common themes connected to the rise of each RWP actor across the literature, and the in-group/out-group narrative, particularly as it relates to immigrants and refugees, is at the core of it all. As Greven writes, "Populism's central and permanent narrative is the juxtaposition of a (corrupt) >>political class<< >> elite, << or >>establishment, << and >>the people,<<" adding that the "second antagonism of >>us versus them<< to this constellation as well as a specific style of political communication" (2016, 1).

Wodak & Krzyżanowski (2017) further confirm Greven's characterization of RWP actors using specialized types of communication and divisive rhetoric, giving President Trump's presence on social media and messaging strategy as an example (474). Across the literature there seems to be a consensus as to how RWP is defined and observed within the context of Western Europe and the United States. In Germany's case, a key event to look to, according to many scholars, is the Eurozone crisis of **2012** and the success of RWP groups in other European

countries, such as the United Kingdom's UKIP and Austria's FPÖ (Greven 2016; Schwander & Manow 2017). There is an undeniably long and visible history of RWP in Germany, so much so that laws banning certain types of RWP groups have for years made it nearly impossible for major RWP groups to gain power in Germany (Greven 2016). However, the recent emergence and growth of the AfD shows a clear increase in support for RWP despite this unique history in one of Europe's largest and most influential countries. The recent *Bundestagswahl* (federal parliamentary election) that occurred in September 2021 will give a further indication as to the strength of the AfD and RWP in Germany and measure just how many Germans have been persuaded by the idea of RWP in the current political climate. As for the United States, there is a different history of RWP, much less obviously visible than the rise of Nazism in Germany. However, for the purpose of this research, I will focus on the literature as it relates to the recent surge in RWP.

In all the literature examined so far, there seems to be a general consensus that globally, RWP has risen in the past few years, but what have the influential factors been and why specifically in Germany? As Greven (2016) mentions, “for a long time after World War II, many observers thought Germany to be almost immune to successful Right-wing extremism and populism”, but with the influx in refugees and immigrants over the last three decades, this “brought xenophobic sentiments to the fore, especially in East Germany” (5). Lees also points to the AfD's success in former East Germany compared to former Western German states as an indicator of where this shift towards RWP is largely coming from (2018, 301). Like Greven (2016), Lees pays close attention to the migrant crisis, how the AfD tailored their messaging in response to Chancellor Merkel's actions, and the dramatic shift in voting behavior towards the prominent RWP group between their initial foray onto the scene in 2013 and the federal elections

in 2017 (2018). The actions taken by the AfD following the Eurozone and migrant crises can be similarly seen in the United States, although with Donald Trump at the helm rather than the AfD.

According to Daniel Béland's article on "Right-Wing Populism and the Politics of Insecurity: How President Trump Frames Migrants as Collective Threats", the USA has faced its own challenges pertaining to migrants, whether these migrants are refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war, or families crossing the Southern border of the United States fleeing violence in Central America (2020, 163). Béland discusses how RWP intersects with the "politics of insecurity", or "the ways in which political actors frame and reframe perceived threats while offering potential responses to these threats" (2020, 164). The framing of threat by both the AfD and contemporary US Republicans has revolved around the issue of migration and xenophobia.

One point, however, that has been addressed less is the success of the AfD in Germany in areas that have had, according to Schwander and Manow, "a 'tradition of radical right voting'", adding that with this tradition of right wing voting in specific areas of previous RWP success, that there is "a specific political culture on which the AfD has been able to draw once the broader political and social context allowed for the creation of a right-wing populist party in Germany" (2017, 1). This differs slightly from the assumptions that Germany could never possibly fall back under the control of a RWP group after the Second World War. By acknowledging that this political culture had existed prior to 2013 and helped catalyze the growth of the AfD, it paints a picture of silent dissent.

The influence of RWP in Germany is, throughout much of the literature, confined to the pre- and post- World War II era and the rise of the AfD in 2013, as many RWP groups have been kept out of politics in the period in between by German Basic Law or *Grundgesetz* (Wise 1998). This note from Schwander & Manow (2017) leads to more questions about the influences that

existed in these high RWP areas in between the end of World War II and the eurozone and migrant crisis of the early 2010s. Adding weight to this question of RWP influence between the fall of the USSR and the rise of RWP groups in the contemporary West, Wodak & Krzyzanowski discuss more broadly the implications of the “increase in migration within Europe”, coupled with immigration and major “social and political transformation – in Central and Eastern Europe” that gave these groups the ammunition they needed to develop and mobilize their bases of supporters (2017, 472-73).

Crisis Framing

In fact, the intersection of RWP and major global events is crucial when attempting to understand the cause-and-effect patterns of right-wing populist support, party growth, and overall influence. The literature discussed covers a wide array of topics that more narrowly look at the relationships between RWP and crises on a multitude of levels, from economic to health. This literature review will help paint a better, more complete picture of how factors, such as global health crises and globalization influence (or hinder) RWP, and vice versa.

An important example of the intersection of RWP and major global events is David Art’s article, “The AfD and the End of Containment in Germany?” (2018). Art seeks to explain the major electoral success of the AfD in Germany’s 2017 federal election and what the major implications will be for the country and Europe more broadly (2018). Art begins by addressing two of the crises that indisputably led to the rise of the AfD in the early 2010s: backlash to Angela Merkel’s “rescue of the Eurozone during the sovereign debt crisis”, and her “decision to allow a million refugees into Germany” (2018, 77).

Art further highlights Germany's success with containing the "radical right" after the fall of the Third Reich, where "other states in Europe have normalized the radical right since it re-emerged", emphasizing the gravity of the emergence and success of the AfD (2018, 77). After the end of Nazism in Germany, the threat of a re-emergence loomed over the country, hence why this idea of containing the spread of RWP was present. However, as time went on and as other perceived threats were introduced, that changed the narrative. One position that Art (2018) takes with regard to the consequences of Merkel's actions is that her handling of the two major crises "allowed the radical right to flourish in spite of the continuation of containment", later adding that she made those decisions "because the radical right was, at the time she took them, of little political consequence" (77). How his position is unique when compared to other scholars is that Art perceived Merkel's decision making as a calculated risk where Germany could handle the international crises "without producing a powerful and sustainable nativist movement in the process" (2018, 77). While this is speculative as to how the chancellor weighed the risks and reward of her actions, it seems a plausible assumption.

Throughout his article, Art emphasizes how crises impacted the rise of the AfD by creating political space for the scapegoating of refugees and other minorities in support of RWP oppositional claims. These points are further illustrated in the literature on the AfD, especially in the work of Berbuir, Lewandowsky, and Siri (2015).

In their 2015 article, "The AfD and its Sympathizers: Finally a Right-Wing Populist Movement in Germany?", Berbuir, Lewandowsky, and Siri raise similar, albeit earlier, questions to Art (2018). These authors discuss the very early years of the AfD and how they initially emerged as a coordinated group (2015). They begin by talking about Bernd Lucke, an economist, and the eventual leader of the party, and how he, along with other critics, "began to attack the

European monetary union” (2015, 154-155). Berbuir et al. add that “right from the beginning, they linked their scepticism towards the Euro with a fundamental critique on the political elites and parties in Germany and the EU” (2015, 154-155). The authors take a nuanced approach to the AfD’s origins, mentioning factors tied to a larger narrative of Euroscepticism. One helpful addition to the broader discussion that these scholars make is how populist parties have typically had a hard time gaining success, using the example of the “short-term rise of the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) in the 1960s”, where other populist parties subsequently had difficulties reaching the five percent vote threshold to enter parliament (Berbuir et al. 2015, 158). This group of scholars focus on *why* some RWP parties have been successful at the Länder (state) level but not at the federal level (2018, 158).

The authors discuss German attitudes on xenophobia and authoritarianism, which has certainly proven to exist in Germany, as reflected in the success and rhetoric of the AfD (Berbuir et al. 2015, 159). They also mention the frequent lack of party organizational structure and Germany’s Nazi past as reasons for RWP failure to gain foothold prior to the AfD (Berbuir et al. 2015, 160). Though their research was early in the life of the AfD, the inquiries that they were making have largely been answered by the recent successes of the AfD. But as is evident throughout much of the literature on this topic, the AfD is a traditional RWP beast, and their use of fear tactics and ‘othering’ of immigrants and minorities during periods of crisis look to be one of, if not the most, significant reason for their success.

Furthermore, the AfD has used additional tactics, such as the shaming of feminism and “nontraditional” family structures (i.e., same-sex marriage) as a way to pin the perceived failures of Germany and the EU on other marginalized groups (Berbuir et al. 2015, 164-167). According to the authors, rather than directly tying their messaging to (rightfully) taboo Nazi rhetoric, they

“[refer] to the supposed incompatibility of different cultures” with German life and success (Berbair et al. 2015, 167). It is a shift in the language and likely “coding” their rhetoric, so it is more palatable to the public (generally) (Berbair et al. 2015, 167). The authors also include helpful research on which groups at the early stages of AfD success were more likely to support the AfD and other government policies (Berbair et al. 2015).

Pandemic Populism

The framing of the Covid-19 crisis by RWP groups shows significant interest in recent literature. Although there are several RWP factions in the US and Germany, there is a clear intersection of the messaging used by each group. As it is still an ongoing issue, there is much more room for research on the topic of narrative framing, but the recent research has shown the evident shift in framing to appeal and attract supporters.

The question is, *how* RWP groups shifted their crisis framing to be effective? As discussed previously, the AfD party has gained power through its Euroscepticism and anti-immigration platform, deriving support from many Germans in the aftermath of the financial and refugee crises of the early 2010s. The AfD had been gaining power in recent years. But with the Coronavirus pandemic it found itself in competition for control of the RWP narrative with a number of other groups, ranging from liberty-oriented individuals to neo-fascists. Ulrike Vieten (2020) provides an early evaluation of the impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on the rhetoric and rise of RWP groups.

Not only does Vieten’s research tackle the issue of Covid-19 and RWP, but it also details government response to (or lack thereof) the pandemic and protests to public health measures in both Germany and the US (Vieten 2020). Vieten begins by addressing the disproportionate

numbers of Black and Asian citizens who have died as a result of this pandemic, especially in the US, tying that to the “systematic failures of the *White* House, ignoring foremost the structural vulnerability of its working-class, non-white citizens” (2020, 2). This emphasizes how the failure of the US government to respond promptly and effectively was most detrimental to minority communities who are largely ignored, or made pariahs, by those RWP leaders in power. This lives up to the RWP characteristic of showing a general lack of regard for anyone different from the RWP group in question and/or casting them off as threats to justify their lack of concern.

Vieten discusses the success that Germany saw under Chancellor Merkel in containing the spread of the virus, but also exposing the confusion and frustration among citizens in the Länder, with non-uniform mask and lockdown restrictions and requirements due to the federal structure of the German government, which we also see in the US (2020, 2). She also mentions the implications of the far-right “[blurring] boundaries between fact-knowledge and fiction-speculation,” leading to increased difficulty controlling the spread of the virus (Vieten 2020, 2). Not only that, Vieten also dives into the mobilization of these “anti-hygienic protests” movements in Germany, which were largely started by a group called *Querdenken* (essentially, the German equivalent of Qanon), and continued for months throughout the Länder in 2020 (2020, 2-3). Vieten combines the conventional definition of populism with this global health crisis, creating a new concept of “pandemic populism” (2020, 4).

As Loveday Morris of the *Washington Post* writes, the AfD has shifted its focus in this crisis towards government overreach with Coronavirus restrictions (2021). While under non-pandemic circumstances it is known for its xenophobia, nationalism, and general denouncement of the European Union, the AfD sensed the opposition to Coronavirus lockdowns and restrictions and latched on to that issue. Initially, the AfD supported the Covid restrictions and government

intervention in the crisis, but “after initially voicing support for coronavirus measures as the pandemic ravaged Europe, it has now put at the center of its campaign fighting what it describes as overbearing rules,” possibly shifting their tone based on the need to remain relevant in the public eye and maintaining support with their base (Morris 2021).

Only a few days after the lockdown in Germany had begun, AfD Deputy Federal Spokesman, Stephan Brandner, stated in a press release that “For the good of the country, we at the AfD are postponing political arguments in this hitherto unique crisis,” further adding “we are confident that in the future, too, sensible decisions instead of politics of exclusion will remain in the foreground for the benefit of the population!” (self-translated, AfD 2020).

The sentiments of putting politics aside did not last long, and according to Jakub Wondreys and Cas Mudde, the AfD quickly turned against government policies, supporting anti-lockdown protests to let supporters know that their position was no longer in agreement with the initial COVID-19 restrictions (2020, 6). As is normal with most populist groups, the AfD attempts to separate German society into two groups pitted against each other: “‘the pure people’ and ‘the corrupt elite,’” and how they craft their language is reflective of this defining characteristic of populism (Wondreys & Mudde 2020, 2). This quick shift in their language and argument “that freedom of speech was ‘the clearest victim of Corona’” is a clear example of the AfD attempting to pit their supporters and other civilians who dislike the lockdown measures against the government (Wondreys & Mudde 2020, 4).

This shift in language and crisis framing was seen across many European RWP groups during the early stages of the pandemic, with the first peak in cases being an unofficial break off point for these groups (Wondreys & Mudde 2020, 3). That is to say, the aftermath of the first wave was when the RWP parties in Europe shifted away from the messaging that the pandemic

was serious (which was the message of most governments) and began to use the crises frames for political opportunism. It is important to add that language, in the case of the pandemic, “is not just about what they [the party] believe but is also oriented toward how their followers understand and interpret the social world” (Monteil et al. 2020, 749). RWP groups must consider how to best craft their language so that they can frame how their supporters or angry citizens feel about the actions of the government during COVID-19.

Additionally, the AfD solidified their position against the government COVID-19 restrictions by publishing information that downplayed the threat of Coronavirus, saying in one leaflet that “Approximately 80% of people infected with SARS-CoV-2 show no or, if at all, mild symptoms of the disease. On the other hand, almost all people suffer from the bizarre corona measures” (AfD 2020). In the same leaflet, the party adds that “These numbers correspond more to a flu than to an infection that threatens the vast majority of the population,” following the same tactic that many other RWP groups used of minimizing the severity of the pandemic by saying the virus is no worse than the flu (AfD 2020). In doing this, the AfD meticulously used this diminishing language to invoke the public to question the governments lockdown restrictions, doing exactly what McCaffrie (2009) mentioned: “[exploiting] crises for political gain” and hoping the public would turn against the government and run to their side (287).

The minimization of the virus is not their only tactic, though. The AfD and other groups incorporate other key RWP issues, like immigration, euroscepticism, and family values, to the crisis. The AfD reiterates their pre-pandemic positions of nationalism, xenophobia, and traditional family issues but in the context of the mounting global crisis. For example, RWP groups like the AfD use their Eurosceptic platform to “[combine] nativism and populism and

[accuse] the EU of misusing the pandemic to undermine national sovereignty and push through supranational measures” (Wondreys & Mudde 2020, 5).

This Eurosceptic rhetoric is visible in many of the AfD’s press releases over the course of the pandemic, as well as in other party documents (AfD 2020). In one press release put forward by Chairman of the AfD Alexander Gauland, Gauland criticizes the German government for their inconsistencies in waiting for the EU to take action prior to the pandemic and now taking direct action without waiting for the EU (AfD 2020). Gauland adds “nobody is saying anymore that we have to wait for European solutions. The current crisis shows us with alarming clarity that only a strong, capable, democratic nation-state can be a reliable entity” (self-translated, AfD 2020). It is clearly language that challenges German civilians to both ponder the actions of their government and question the relevance and necessity of the EU.

Another way the AfD has shifted their normal rhetoric to fit the context of the pandemic is through attacking the government for not closing the borders to asylum seekers and immigrants prior to the crisis and suddenly closing the borders during COVID-19. As Stephan Brandner states in his March 19, 2020 press release, “for almost five years, it has been said that borders cannot be protected . . . as we can see, this was simply a lie. The borders can be protected if you only want to” (self-translated, AfD). The AfD uses its normal anti-immigrant rhetoric as a weapon to, once again, show inconsistencies in the actions of the government. This goes to show that the AfD did not wait for the crisis to subside before reasserting their normal claims about immigration and Euroscepticism. More recently, one way that they have been using their family values platform is by attacking vaccine and mask mandates, specifically calling it “Corona Child Torture” (self-translated) in one statement put out by AfD Chairwoman Alice Weidel (AfD 2021). It is evident that not much has changed in the party’s usual rhetoric, they

simply adapted to the new circumstances of the pandemic and found a new avenue on which to attack.

To add more weight to this, Morris says that “the party is trying to capitalize on Germany’s ecosystem of Covid-skeptics and infuse it with the far-right framing of the crisis” (2021). But how has the timing of the crisis worked for the AfD and its success? Alexander Ruser and Amanda Machin (2020) discuss the AfD’s response to Covid-19 in their *Green European Journal* article, along with other European RWP groups, and assert that this crisis is similar to a ‘rally around the flag’ event in times of war, which has made it hard for RWP groups to “find and assert a strong message” (2020). Ruser and Machin emphasize the AfD’s use of the government overreach narrative to try and “harness discontent and speak for the people against what is construed as hostile government policy”, thereby gaining support from those that oppose lockdown measures and restrictions (2020).

However, there is strong evidence that most Germans have supported the government’s actions during the pandemic. According to Pew Research Center, 88% of survey respondents in Germany said that they believed the government was handling the pandemic well (2020, 5). Though the AfD is by no means the only RWP group trying to reframe the issue in Germany, Ruser and Machin argue that the AfD does not have much to cling to with its reframing of the broader issues of the group in the context of the pandemic, saying “while the stringent travel restrictions and strict border controls fit within the far-right discourse, the enactment of such policies has deprived the AfD of a distinctive position” (2020).

Along a similar vein, the AfD has claimed to support traditional family structures and the quintessential (white) German family, and AfD leader Alice Weidel’s criticism of vaccines for children and “discrimination” against the unvaccinated also ties into their broader platform of

“family values” (Morris 2021). But without concrete policies and with internal party divisions, having a concrete position that successfully challenges the government is proving to be increasingly difficult for the AfD in Covid-19 times.

The differing factions of right-wing German society make reframing the Covid-19 crisis even more challenging for the AfD. In addition to the AfD, we have seen the emergence of other RWP movements in Germany since the start of the pandemic, with Querdenken, or “lateral thinking” being one prominent one. According to Emily Schultheis of *Slate*, the Querdenken movement has spread misinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic and “oppose the government’s anti-coronavirus measures,” similar to the AfD (2021). However, it is not just made up of opponents to the coronavirus regulations, but has captured the support of the right-wing fringes, with “new agey anti-vaxxer moms [marching] alongside neo-Nazis and extreme-right activists” at the larger Querdenker protests in the summer (Schultheis 2021). Schultheis adds that at these anti-lockdown/restriction protests, “believers in holistic medicine turned out just as enthusiastically as supporters of QAnon,” which was similarly seen at the Capitol Insurrection in Washington D.C. on January 6th (2021). The one thing that brings all of these groups together, according to Schultheis, is their belief in conspiracy theories (2021). While some supporters of the Querdenker movement might not have started as conspiracy theorists, those who have stuck with it have slowly morphed into believers of right-wing conspiracies (Silberberger; Schultheis 2021). And while the AfD might have formally distanced the party itself from the major conspiracy theorist groups, many members of the party still “question the reality of the global health crisis” and play into the idea that the pandemic is a hoax by attending these demonstrations, linking all these RWP groups more closely together, whether they like it or not (Ruser & Machin 2020).

It is virtually impossible to separate the groups from each other when the messaging and beliefs are so similar, often running parallel to each other. For instance, Schultheis mentions how heavily tied the rhetoric of the AfD is to the conspiracy theorists they claim to distance themselves from (2021). She states that “anyone who has heard AfD politicians or supporters blame the Hungarian American philanthropist George Soros for the refugee crisis or insist a ‘global elite’ is pulling the strings in national politics will recognize the idea that Bill Gates is behind the Coronavirus, or the vaccines are intended to control us as in the same vein” (Schultheis 2021). The language of crises is well documented throughout the literature. However, the rhetoric of RWP throughout the pandemic takes on a slightly different tone and is very heterogenous (Wondreys & Mudde 2020). Not all RWP actors took the same approach to the pandemic, and there are a number of factors that each party must weigh in order to determine how they will approach the rhetoric they use. To begin to understand how RWP groups like the AfD have shifted their language throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, we first must understand the tactics at their disposal in times of crisis.

According to Brendan McCaffrie (2009), opposition leaders face more challenges in crafting language that challenges the government in crises since “opposition leaders . . . typically have lesser resources, fewer political weapons and limited responsibility for the real crisis response” (287). This is where the opposition parties must determine how to craft their rhetoric effectively so that they might “exploit crises for political gain” (McCaffrie 2009, 287).

Another factor that parties must be conscious of when crafting rhetoric is that crises force those in politics “to weave persuasive narratives about what is happening and what is at stake, why it is happening, how they have acted in the lead-up to the present crisis and how they propose we should deal with and learn from the crisis moving forward” (Hart & Tindall 2009,

22). In order to persuade the public and dominate the narrative of the crisis, groups must engage in ‘framing contests’ or “battles between competing definitions of the situation” with the government and other political actors (Hart & Tindall 2009, 23).

While scholars present differing types of framing contests, Hart and Tindall lay out four framing efforts that any political actor must consider when deciding how to approach talking about the crisis strategically (2009). These four framing efforts include “1) the nature and severity of a crisis, 2) its causes, 3) the responsibility for its occurrence or escalation, and 4) its policy implications” (Hart & Tindall 2009, 23). Additionally, Hart and Tindall (2009) highlight three specific crisis frames, each perceiving the crisis as either a part of “business-as-usual”, a threat, or an opportunity (24). In the case of the USA during Coronavirus, the Trump administration used the first frame: the COVID-19 crisis was nothing to worry about and just a normal part of life. However, this was a unique perspective, and as Wondreys and Mudde (2020) noted, Trump was the exception, not the norm (2-3). In the case of the AfD in Germany, this RWP group used the third frame given by Hart and Tindall (2009) to influence their language: the pandemic was an opportunity for them to sow doubt in Merkel’s government and increase their political chances in the 2021 elections. This can be clearly seen from the press release statements given by AfD leadership from the start of the pandemic up to the present.

This has deep rooted similarities with the American response to the Coronavirus, where Southern and other Republican states attempted to reframe the crisis as a hoax, going from flat out denial to antivaccine and anti-mask sentiment (Hotez 2021). The unfortunate reality of the US case, however, is that the narrative reframing worked, at least in states with more Republican leadership and close ties to Trump, leading to a second wave of the virus and thousands more dead (Hotez 2021). Hotez (2021) focuses on the antiscience threat posed by the pandemic, and

how RWP groups in the US have contributed to the spread of the virus, specifically noting the rhetoric of the Republican party.

By looking at the propaganda used by the Republican party in red states, Hotez details the disastrous implications of going against science, saying “facilitating the spread of COVID-19 is an expanded and globalizing antiscience movement that began modestly under a health freedom banner adopted by the Republican Tea Party in Texas” (2021). The use of liberty and freedom as a defense, alongside conspiracy theories, has placed the American Republican Party and the AfD in a similar category, although the Republican party has arguably seen more success than the AfD. Both US and German RWP groups have also utilized violence as a tactic in the effort to fight back against perceived government overreach, with the insurrection of the United States Capitol in January of 2021 and the earlier attempt of the German *Reichsbürger* (another far-right group) to storm the Reichstag building in Berlin in the summer of 2020, along with other instances of deadly RWP violence (Schultheis 2021). Despite these connections between the AfD and the Querdenker/QAnon groups in German society and their attempts to reframe the narrative around the Covid-19 crisis, the evidence from the Pew Research Center (2020) shows that their efforts are not working, at least not as well as they hoped.

Clearly, this topic deals with serious sociopolitical issues that can be seen across many RWP groups and parties in a number of Western democracies. However, the issue is ongoing and ever evolving, changing with the tides of other political movements and major social and environmental events, particularly the Coronavirus pandemic. The literature points to several substantial crises that influence the power and visibility of RWP groups and leaders in both the USA and Germany and what we know is certain to develop in the coming months and years with more opportunities for these groups to seek office and power in their respective countries.

Throughout the pandemic, the AfD has remained consistent with its messaging, incorporating old talking points and language into the pandemic context. The AfD has had to focus on an electoral future, as the September 2021 Federal Election in Germany was looming on the horizon from the very start of the crisis. This internal focus on electoral success is important to note, since it can play into how the party reframes the crisis.

It is clear that in the initial stages of sudden crises, like the pandemic, RWP groups tend to have less success in framing due to these “rally around the flag” events, and even less so when they are fractured as a group. Since the AfD and RWP groups do not have any formal control in Germany and have been left out of coalition building, the disjointed efforts to reframe the crisis and shift old issues (i.e., immigration, xenophobia, antisemitism, etc.) into this new context can falter. This is not to say that there will not be future success with the AfD in terms of crisis framing, but in this context, the sudden onset and lack of political authority is likely to have hindered its ability to successfully build enough support to challenge Merkel’s Coronavirus restrictions and any restrictions put forward by the new chancellor, Olaf Scholz.

Methodology

Conceptual Definitions

Given their complexities, it is critical that I elaborate on the terms, methods, and processes of this research. I explain the framing and reframing contests employed by the AfD from their initial foray into politics in the aftermath of the Eurozone crisis and Greek bailouts, to the emergence of the coronavirus crisis. What constitutes a crisis? And why is the framing of a crisis or event so important to this study? A ***crisis*** can take many forms, but in this case, it will be defined as a surprising event or phenomenon that a group of people “perceives [as] an urgent

threat to core values or life-sustaining functions, which must be dealt with under conditions of uncertainty” (Boin & Hart 2007, 42; Rosenthal, Boin, & Comfort 2001.)

Crises also have an element of time sensitivity, meaning that if it is not handled in a timely fashion, it will only get worse. Crises can range from environmental, to sociopolitical, to economic and beyond. In this case, the initial crises that provide the backdrop for how the AfD frames their messaging are of a sociopolitical and socioeconomic nature. The COVID-19 crisis is the most important crisis to this research, however, because it is the catalyst for the AfD and other RWP actors to reframe or alter their existing narratives to fit within the context of a global health crisis. It is also important to note that the terms ‘Coronavirus’ and ‘COVID-19’ will be used interchangeably to describe the ongoing global pandemic throughout this thesis.

The next term that must be defined is *populism*. The word populism has been discussed extensively throughout the introduction and literature review of this thesis, but what is meant when we say something, or someone is ‘populist’ in the context of this research? Many scholars have noted the vague nature of the definition of populism, but it can be broadly understood as the division of society into the ‘ordinary,’ regular people, and the ‘elite,’ or those in the ruling class who are othered by the populist political group (Bos et al. 2020; Mudde 2004). Bos et al. add that “populist rhetoric frames issues as reflecting irreconcilable differences in norms, identities and interests while exaggerating intra-group homogeneity and intergroup differences” (2020, 3). Additionally, Artur Kozłowski (2019) posits that western populist includes the “taking advantage of opportunities and slogans” in order to draw in potential supporters who feel the same way about whatever crisis is at the fore at a given time (87). Clearly, it is not simply an “us” vs. “them” argument in this case, but a narrative-capturing event for the major group perpetuating

the populist, anti-elite sentiments in which they can take control of the counternarrative and gain more political support.

The AfD has firmly cemented themselves as a populist group within this definition. In their manifesto published on the party's website, the AfD states that "we share a firm conviction that citizens have the right to true political alternatives, not only those presented by the political class" (AfD 2017, 5). This explicitly states that, in the eyes of the party, there is a political ruling class and an ordinary citizen class, clearly fitting the definition of populist. However, this case does not just deal with populism as a whole. Rather, it specifically highlights the right-wing aspect of populism.

Before the terms of 'right-wing' and 'populism' can be combined, it is important to know what is meant by the term 'right-wing'. Conventionally, right-wing simply means to the conservative side of the ideological and political spectrum. Nevertheless, there must be some nuance to right-wing in this case since the actors exhibit a unique set of values, ideals, and rhetoric. Right-wing, in this case study, can be defined as ideologically conservative, anti-establishment, ethno-nationalistic, and free-market capitalist in nature (Wodak & Krzyzanowski 2017, 475). If we combine the 'right-wing' and 'populist' definitions, RWP is defined as an ideologically conservative, anti-establishment, ethno-nationalistic, free-market capitalist group who perceives themselves to be the ordinary people at odds with the 'elite' ruling class and seeks to take advantage of any opportunities to control the narrative from those in the ruling class (Bos et al. 2020; Mudde 2004; Kozlowski 2019; Wodak & Krzyzanowski 2017).

Let me turn now to the issue of *framing* and reframing. Toni G.L.A. van der Meer (2018) clearly explains framing as the way individuals or groups can give meaning, "emphasis, and

exclusion” to specific issues (958; Gamson & Modigliani 1989; Gitlin 1980). Van der Meer gives significant weight to Entman’s (1993) definition of framing, which states that

“To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in the communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (van der Meer 2018, 959).

The framing of crises can be the selected aspects of a perceived crisis that are communicated in the media or to the public directly to promote the framing group’s perception, interpretation, and recommendations for what can be done to mitigate or solve whatever crisis they are focused on. As an extension of this, *reframing* can be seen as the restructuring or reevaluation of the original frame and its emphases to fit a new crisis or event.

The final issue the matter of *success*. There are multiple ways to determine and understand the meaning of success in the context of this study. For instance, the success of framing or success in electoral politics are two related but independent concepts that need to be developed individually. However, these definitions remain subjective, as success is abstract and personalized for each evaluating individual or group. Framing success can be conceptually defined as the adoption or acceptance of the frames defined by the populist group by a large portion of society. However, the main way to measure this success is through the polling of citizens, electoral support, and salience of messaging and framing in the media. If the frames are supported by large segments of the population, success will most likely be reflected in how people vote, thereby determining the amount of political power and control the group has in the government. This means that electoral success can be defined as the increase or maintenance of the number of seats held at the national and state levels by the populist group in question.

Conversely, a party or group has not been electorally successful if they lose seats or representation in the national and state level legislative bodies.

Methods

Now that the conceptual definitions have been established, the specific methodology must be discussed. As mentioned in the evaluation of the literature, process tracing will be the chief way this issue of RWP framing in times of crisis can be understood and evaluated. But before we can understand process tracing, it is helpful to establish some ways to measure the success of the methods detailed below. That is why I propose two hypotheses to be examined to carry out the *smoking gun* test, which will be explained in the following section. The hypotheses for this smoking gun test are as follows:

- H_1 : If a new crisis occurs, a (Far-right) opposition party tends to reframe its prevailing narrative to maintain relevance or a compelling presence in the public narrative.
- H_2 : By reframing its narrative in response to the new crisis, the opposition party will be more likely to have an impact on electoral success.

When looking at the case of the AfD in Germany and how its right-wing populism has influenced the narrative framing and reframing debate, looking to the past and how it has influenced the present is imperative. In this instance, understanding how the rise of the AfD and its framing of crises in the past, such as the refugee crisis under Chancellor Merkel, have influenced the framing of the current COVID-19 crisis is critical. One way to effectively research this phenomenon is through process tracing. Process tracing is one method commonly associated with case studies and qualitative research in the field of political science. There are a number of scholars who lead the way in process tracing research, and they clearly lay out all of

the ways in which this method can be used effectively. Here, I will detail the process tracing methods and discuss why it is important, particularly related to this case study of the German RWP response to COVID-19, and what this method intends to accomplish. This method will be applied to the case at hand in the analysis section of this research.

To understand how process tracing works, we must first understand what process tracing actually *is*. According to David Collier, a leading scholar in this area, process tracing is “the systematic examination of diagnostic evidence selected and analyzed in light of research questions and hypotheses posed by the investigator” (2011, 823). In other words, it is a method to analyze events through a temporal step-by-step process, enabling the researcher to look at multiple potential independent and intervening variables and evaluate whether those variables led to specific outcomes or phenomena in the process being observed.

Sharon Crasnow, another significant process tracing scholar, elaborates on the process of process tracing as a way to “[test] various hypotheses against the events as they occurred through a case study of that event,” adding that it can be a “way of providing evidence for or against these competing hypotheses” (2017, 7). Another scholar, James Mahoney, corroborates these definitions and explanations given by Collier and Crasnow, saying that “process tracing can be used as a method for evaluating hypotheses about the causes of a specific outcome in a particular case” (2012, 571).

One area of disagreement among scholars is related to the emphasis or use of narrative building when using process tracing. While Crasnow (2017) pays significant attention to the issue of crafting narratives to effectively utilize process tracing methods, Mahoney (2012) does not mention the use of narratives in his research, and Collier (2011) only briefly mentions the concept. Where Mahoney (2012) and Collier (2011) mostly discuss the varying types of tests

related to process tracing and how each test can affirm causal inference, Crasnow (2017) spends much of her article emphasizing the importance of narratives and why they are necessary for understanding causal frameworks and mechanisms. Crasnow writes that narratives “are core to process tracing” in two major ways: through “1) consideration of alternative hypotheses and 2) the relationship between evidence and explanation” (2017,7). The process tracing method should not just be one without the other, i.e., the use of tests without narratives and vice versa. Rather, it should use any relevant mixture of methods discussed by the authors, using the tests highlighted by Mahoney (2012) and Collier (2011) when needed, and framing the case study through a narrative. I illustrate that throughout my research, incorporating these mixed methods as needed.

While disagreements exist regarding the methods of process tracing, one point that is evident throughout all of the literature is what process tracing intends to accomplish. Collier addresses four main ways that process tracing can be helpful in research. By: “(a) Identifying novel political and social phenomena and systematically describing them; (b) evaluating prior explanatory hypotheses, discovering new hypotheses, and assessing these new causal claims; (c) gaining insight into causal mechanisms; and (d) providing an alternative means. . . of addressing challenging problems such as reciprocal causation, spuriousness, and selection bias” (Collier 2011, 824). Process tracing must follow a sequence of events over time, observing changes and outcomes involving any number of variables, leading to the possible results of supporting or rejecting hypotheses, finding alternative explanations, and finding evidence of causation between variables, as pointed out by Collier (2011). Process tracing can also help researchers identify counternarratives and reasons for occurrences that may have been overlooked during the initial phases of research.

As discussed previously, scholars have devised specific tests for process tracing that are related to causal inference. More specifically, four tests have been devised. Collier (2011) focuses on each test in-depth, and Mahoney (2012) focuses on two tests. These four tests, according to Collier (2011) have been adopted from previous research completed by Bennett (2010) and Van Evera (1997), and center around whether “passing the test is *necessary* and/or *sufficient* for accepting the inference” (Collier 2011, 825). These four tests are the “*straw-in-the-wind, hoop, smoking-gun, and doubly decisive*” tests (Collier 2011, 825). Each test is progressively more stringent than the last, ranging from *slightly* strengthening/weakening rival hypotheses to entirely eliminating or *substantially* strengthening them (Collier 2011, 825). The use of the smoking gun test and how it applies to this research will be elaborated on below. Using one of these tests can add weight to the existing hypothesis, reject it, provide plausible alternatives, or do a combination of the three.

The principles of the process tracing method are vital for the type of research I am conducting in this thesis. Process tracing is a clear and helpful method (with multiple internal methodology options, such as utilizing the tests described above) that enables my case study research of RWP in Germany to have impactful and informative outcomes. While quantitative data is readily available in certain areas of political science research, it is more challenging to acquire through a case study, hence why this method is crucial for this research.

As it pertains to the case study of the AfD in Germany and how the Coronavirus pandemic has been framed and reframed, I will follow the guidelines established in the literature, beginning with the initial rise of the AfD and their first major electoral success in 2017 (Weisskircher 2020, 614). As suggested by Crasnow (2017), I will detail the rise of the AfD through a narrative, discussing each of the events leading up to the present. I will also focus on

all of the relevant points and events in the years leading up to the ongoing global pandemic and identify possible causal relationships along the way. I will formulate hypotheses related to the AfD's framing and reframing of the pandemic and observe *how* and *why* these changes occurred, analyzing all possible influences over the changes we have seen in the party. When necessary, I will evaluate the hypotheses and counternarratives using the tests reviewed by Collier (2011), evaluating the strengths of both primary and rival hypotheses.

For the purpose of this research, the *smoking gun* test within the process tracing method will be used to measure the causation of the shift in narrative framing by the AfD and ultimately, their success in doing so. The smoking gun test, according to Mahoney, is used to determine whether the cause (X) "is *necessary* for the outcome," or Y (2012, 581). Furthermore, in smoking gun tests, if X is necessary for Y , causal mechanisms (M) can be identified, which the researcher then analyzes in an $X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y$ scenario. Mahoney writes that the basic background of this type of test is that "although we may not know whether X is necessary for Y , we may know (or be able to establish) that M is necessary for Y . We can then explore whether X is necessary for M " (2012, 581). This process of causation from X to M to Y act as links in a chain of "necessary conditions," and "how an initial cause was essential to put the overall sequence in motion, culminating in the outcome" (Mahoney 2012, 581-82). As INTRAC (2017) details in its step-by-step brief on process tracing, the researcher does not *have* to rigidly follow a process of causality but might choose to do so in order to see how the cause X can lead to M which can lead to Y (2017). However, I find it necessary for this research to follow this step-by-step process in order to determine where the changes occur and document how I end up at my final result.

In the step-by-step process from INTERAC, they identify a sequence of five different steps (2017). Step one is used to "**identify the change** (or changes) that are of interest," while

step two seeks “to establish the evidence with confirms that the change has happened, and to what degree” (INTERAC 2017). Step three is used “to **document the process** that may have led to that change,” followed by step four, which aims “to **establish** alternative causal explanations” (INTERAC 2017). The final step, step five, is “to assess the evidence for each hypothesis” (INTERAC 2017). This step-by-step process helps to clarify the scholarship on process tracing from Mahoney (2012), Collier (2011), and Crasnow (2017).

To examine the validity of my first hypothesis, I posit that *X*, or the initial cause, is the COVID-19 global health crisis. I also posit that *M*, or the causal mechanism, is the lack of salience and viability in the public sphere with the party’s use of old narrative frames. This leads me to posit that *Y*, or the result, is that the AfD’s decision to shift their narrative framing. It will also be important to analyze later *why* the health crisis witnessed in this case caused a shift in messaging and framing compared to other types of crises, such as the refugee crisis of 2015 or the eurozone crisis of the late 2000s to early 2010s.

Part I: Initial Success

2013 – February 2020

To understand the political shift, crisis narrative framing, and contemporary success of the AfD and RWP in Germany, we must first address the formation of the AfD and the 2017 German Federal elections, where the AfD received 12.6 percent of the national vote, making them the third most powerful political party in Germany at the time (Dilling 2018). The AfD rose to prominence in a time of crisis and has perpetuated their xenophobic, Eurosceptic narrative from the start. In 2010, Germany began its economic bailout of Greece, who had been entangled in a financial crisis since around the time of the 2007-2008 global recession (Yglesias 2015). This crisis in Greece was due to several factors, including Greece having a smaller market and

the control of the European Central Bank (ECB) over the Euro (Yglesias 2015). There are many criticisms among scholars regarding the European Union's economic policy, but one critique of note is that the Eurozone's "economies are too big and disparate" (Yglesias 2015).

Whether one subscribes to this assumption, the Greek economy was not equipped to deal with the great recession and banking crisis of that time due to "structural flaws in the Eurozone's architecture" (Yglesias 2015). In 2010 at the height of the crisis in Greece, the German government entered the picture. While the EU promised to bail out the Greek economy before it could default on its debts, the German government was the largest provider of loans to bailout Greece, covering about one quarter, or roughly 22 billion euros, of the EU's more than 80-billion-euro promise (CFR 2018).

The Eurozone debt crisis sewed discord in European, and more specifically German, community, with many calling out the actions as going against the "no bailout clause" of the Maastricht treaty (Conrad 2020). The Eurozone crisis spurred the Eurosceptic sentiment that can be seen in the AfD and German far-right today. As defined by Arzheimer (2015), "Euroscepticism broadly refers to a negative stance towards European integration," (537). But this crisis was just the first of two that led to the growth of RWP and the AfD. The second crisis that opened the door even wider for the AfD was the refugee crisis of 2015-2016, where then-Chancellor Merkel allowed the German borders to remain open to the influx of refugees fleeing violent conflict and persecution in the Middle East (Conrad 2020). At the time of the refugee crisis, the AfD was a fully formed party, though they had yet to achieve success in national elections to gain seats in the Bundestag. The AfD was first established in 2013 as a mostly Eurosceptic party who "campaigns for a dissolution of the Eurozone and a radical refiguration of German foreign policy" (Arzheimer 2015, 535).

The party's primary reason for advocating for the dissolution of the Eurozone is because they do not believe that national sovereignty can be truly achieved until the nation has control over its own economy and currency. As Arzheimer notes, the AfD's positions on the eurozone come from the handling of the eurozone debt crisis, and the party advocated early on in its existence "that Germany should not guarantee any foreign sovereign debt, that all members of the Eurozone should be free to reintroduce national currencies or to join new currency unions, and that any further transfer of German sovereignty should be subject to a referendum" (2015, 541). It is also of significance to note that "Amongst the 15 most frequent concepts in the AfD manifesto are 'member states', 'Eurozone', 'ECB', and 'institutions'" (Arzheimer 2015, 543).

Arzheimer goes on to distinguish 'Hard' vs. 'Soft' Euroscepticism, of which most scholars concur the AfD falls under the 'soft' Eurosceptic viewpoint (2015, 537; Berning 2017).

This means that the party "is opposed to the currency union in its present form, to current and future bailouts, and more generally to a federal European state" (Arzheimer 2015, 546).

Arzheimer also writes that 'soft' Euroscepticism "rejects the current state of European politics as well as the trajectory towards an 'ever closer union'" (2015, 537; Szczerbiak & Taggart 2008, 1:7-8). It is not at this point, however, opposed to the European Union's existence as a whole, at least according to Arzheimer (2015) and Berning (2017). In the "Europe and the Euro" section of the party's manifesto, the AfD writes:

"We oppose the idea to transform the European Union into a centralised federal state. We are in favour of returning the European Union to an economic union based on shared interests, and consisting of sovereign, but loosely connected nation states. . . We reject the idea of a United States of Europe. . . [and] We believe in a sovereign Germany, which guarantees the freedom and security of its citizens, promotes economic welfare, and contributes to a peaceful and prosperous Europe. Should we not succeed with our ideas of a fundamental reform within the present framework of the European Union, we shall seek

Germany's exit, or a democratic dissolution of the EU, followed by the founding of a new European economic union.”¹

The Chief argument here is for a more state-centric approach focused on self-determination and trade, with an emphasis on rejecting any further move towards centralization. I tend to agree with the arguments of Arzheimer and Berning, in that the party is in favor of the dissolution of a unified Eurozone but does not fully reject the existence of the EU in its entirety. Essentially, the party aspires to go back to the original economic roots of the EU that were established after the Second World War. Nevertheless, the focus on self-determination and a rejection of widespread EU policies was and is still very much pronounced in the party as it exists today.

As discussed previously, no RWP groups had been able to gain a foothold in German politics since the end of the Second World War. The provisions of the German Basic Law, or *Grundgesetz*, prevented most RWP groups, like the neo-Nazi NPD, from ever making it into the mainstream and criminalized any behavior or symbolism reflective of the country's Nazi past (Arzheimer 2015). The AfD has successfully evaded restrictions or silencing by the *Grundgesetz*, though not for lack of governmental efforts. This is mostly due to the appeal of the AfD to a large number of doctors, lawyers, and other upper-echelon professionals who were very careful to steer the narrative away from explicit “traditional German right-wing extremism” (Arzheimer & Berning 2019). This is part of what makes the rise of the AfD such a unique event.

The Eurozone crisis provided the pretext for the creation of the AfD, but the refugee crisis is the factor that increased its chances of success. The xenophobic and Islamophobic

¹ AfD, 15

sentiment is what gave the party salience in so many parts of German society and increased its political viability in the lead up to the 2017 federal election. There was also an internal party split prior to the onset of the refugee crisis that allowed the party to radicalize more quickly and adopt a harsher, more Islamophobic stance (Arzheimer & Berning 2019). This internal division over the support of PEGIDA, or Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident (self-translated), a staunch anti-Islam movement, is what saw the party oust its former leader who opposed the dramatic shift to the right and adoption of PEGIDA-oriented policies (Berning 2017).

The 2017 federal election was the ultimate test of success for the AfD after its narrow loss in 2013. To directly lay out their policies and platforms, thereby framing their side of the debate, the AfD published a party manifesto in the leadup to the 2017 election. In this manifesto, which has been translated into English by the party itself, the AfD uses meticulously crafted language to reach those in Germany who feel misrepresented or upset by the mainstream government. The manifesto covers policy platforms ranging from the obvious “Europe and the Euro” and “Immigration, Integration, and Asylum,” to “German Energy Policy” and conservation efforts (AfD 2017). Each part of the manifesto ties into the initial positions that the party took at its inception and throughout the refugee crisis. The AfD emphasizes their dissatisfaction with European society, the failure of the Euro, and the failure of the German government during the Greek economic crisis (AfD 2017). This manifesto is also where the party lays out all other social policies, most of which are in-line with typical conservative views. These include pro-life, transphobic, free-market, and pro-military policies.

However, the detailed policies on the practice of Islam and immigration of people from Muslim-majority countries are the most jarring parts of the manifesto. In an effort to increase the

population while combatting immigration on all levels, the AfD argues that instead of allowing mass immigration, the country should “attain a higher birth rate by the native population,” further stating that if domestic birthrates do not rise and immigration continues, problems like “lower pensions, an increased tax burden. . . and a decreased economic output” will be the result, using the fear of economic fallout to sway potential voters in their direction (AfD 2017, 41).

The AfD did not just publish this messaging in their manifesto, though. To gain more attention, the party put multiple ethnocentric campaign signs throughout Germany, which can be seen below. In the first poster, Figure 1, you can clearly see a white, pregnant woman smiling on the ground with the quote: “New Germans? We will make them ourselves” above her (self-translated). This is followed by the typical AfD phrase “Trau dich, Deutschland” below the woman, next to the AfD logo (Figure 1). This loosely translates to “dare you” or “Go for it, Germany,” encouraging potential white, native German voters to have their own children and advocate for ending immigration (Figure 1).

Multiple figures in the media have noticed the similarities between the ethnocentric message conveyed in Figure 1 and the eugenicist messages propagated by the Nazi party in 1930s Germany. Sarah Wildman of Vox specifically discusses this poster in relation to the Lebensborn policies of the Third Reich, stating that this image is “eerily reminiscent of Nazi-era propaganda encouraging German women to produce German children for the Fatherland” (2017). The Lebensborn or “Fount of Life” program was created by the Nazis to “[encourage] the birth of children deemed ‘racially valuable’ in order to increase Germany’s ‘Aryan’ population” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2020). This is closely in-line with the advocated policies mentioned above regarding the need for German families to create their own children instead of allowing immigrants to populate the country.

Figure 1 (credit: DW/AfD)



While the specific section discussed above does not directly address Muslim Germans or immigrants, it is a clearly coded message veiled in racism, islamophobia, and xenophobia. However, another section, titled “Islam does not belong to Germany” certainly does explicitly address the prejudices of the party (AfD 2017). In this section and in multiple subsequent sections, the AfD states that “[Islam’s] expansion and the ever-increasing number of Muslims in the country are viewed by the AfD as a danger to our state, our society, and our values” (AfD 2017, 48). It is this type of messaging that finds its way into the rest of the AfD’s policies, creating a compelling narrative for those who seek to find a reason and a scapegoat for the problems facing Germany. In another campaign poster displayed by the AfD in 2017 seen in

Figure 2, the AfD adds German dietary habits to their reasoning for why Islam is not compatible with Germany.

In Figure 2, the campaign poster displays a piglet underneath the words translated to “Islam? That is not compatible with our eating,” since Germans typically produce and eat a substantial amount of pork, while practicing Muslims tend to observe a halal diet free of pork. Additionally, on another campaign sign (Figure 3), the AfD continues to push this narrative of Islam being incompatible with German life by depicting three women in dirndls, the traditional clothing of Bavaria, drinking wine with the words “Birkas? I prefer Burgundy more.” This refers to the large production and consumption of alcohol among the German population, of which most Muslims do not partake due to religious law.

This is how the initial issue framing for the AfD was effective, drawing in more supporters from different walks of life and getting them to believe that Muslims and other immigrant groups were and are still to blame for all of Germany’s problems. This will all come back to the fore during the Coronavirus pandemic.

During this period prior to the 2017 federal elections, there were also many controversial speeches given by AfD leaders, and their presence on social media was one way to easily disseminate the speeches and other party messages to supporters (Arzheimer 2015). While there are an innumerable number of speeches and messages given by AfD leadership, some of the most notable include anti-Semitic and, unsurprisingly, anti-immigrant quotes from major party leaders. One example of this comes from Beatrix von Storch, a deputy leader of the party, who once said that “People who won’t accept STOP at our borders are attackers. . . and we have to defend ourselves against attackers,” alluding to the use of force and violence against any asylum seekers attempting to enter Germany (Breitenbach & Hallam, DW).

Figure 2 (credit: AfD)



Figure 3 (credit: AfD)



Despite the intense and often hostile rhetoric from the AfD, the party was able to gain support across the country with their framing of the crises facing Germany. And in 2017, they were finally able to do the unthinkable and exceed the five percent threshold to enter the Bundestag.

In September of 2017, the AfD made history as the first far-right populist party to enter the German parliament since the fall of Nazism in 1945. They exceeded expectations and captured a whopping 12.6 percent of the vote, making them the third largest party in parliament. According to Carl Berning, "The AfD did extremely well in eastern Germany, especially in Saxony where it won 27% of the votes and outpolled the CDU," which shows that their crisis framing was most effective in the states formerly occupied by the Soviet Union (2017, 18). The reason for the groundswell of support in former East German states was largely due to the economy of those states, though Weisskircher (2020) emphasizes the need to look at the broad context of history for the success of the AfD in the East. While the economy of the former

eastern states is part of the reason for the overwhelming success of the AfD, the “long term perspective points to the importance of economics, migration, and representation, linked to social disintegration and feelings of a lack of recognition” (Weisskircher 2020, 620). This divide in the electorate will remain important and be a key factor in the continued success of the AfD at the state level in the buildup to the 2021 federal election.

From late 2017 to the first two months of 2020, the AfD continued to experience electoral and sociopolitical victories. In a poll conducted in September 2018, the German news broadcast, Tagesschau, found that “If there were federal elections on Sunday, the [CSU/CDU] would have reached its worst value since the Germany trend existed. . . [and] The AfD would be the second strongest party for the first time and would have its best value so far” (self-translated, Tagesschau 2018). This interestingly came just on the heels of another poll from the same month that found “that 79 percent of Germans believe right-wing extremism is a danger to democracy” (Schütz 2018). So why the sustained success? According to an interview Schütz (2018) conducted with political scientist Werner Weidenfeld of Ludwigs Maximilian Universität in Munich, “the party appeals to a variety of sectors. . . [and] the AfD's success reflects people's longing for simple solutions to complex issues.” This sentiment is one way to rationalize the party's substantial victories in the state elections in Thuringia, Brandenburg, and Saxony in the Fall of 2019.

In September and October of 2019, the AfD swept to second place in the three state parliamentary elections, marking the first time since the fall of Nazism that a RWP party had experienced such landmark success in state elections. This success was also monumental for the AfD because the party won nearly 28% of the vote in Saxony and roughly 24% in Brandenburg, which was “a significant increase on state elections five years ago, with the party almost tripling

its share in Saxony and doubling it in Brandenburg” (McKenzie 2019). The AfD also drastically increased its vote share in Thuringa, winning approximately 24% of the vote and over doubling its previous vote totals (Connolly 2019). The electoral results in Thuringa created a months-long coalition building debate, and the end result was anything but anticipated.

In a shocking upset in February of 2020, just one month before the whole country would shut down, the coalition building efforts in Thuringa were turned upside down. According to Elizabeth Schumacher of DW, “the ruling coalition saw its candidate for state premier lose by a single vote to the pro-business Free Democrats (FDP), who had barely cleared the 5% support hurdle to join the regional parliament” (2020). This effort to oust the ruling coalition was due to a sudden change in support of the AfD, who had voted for an independent candidate in the first two rounds of voting for the regional president but then suddenly changed their vote in the final round to support the FDP candidate, Thomas Kemmerich (Schumacher 2020). This was not only disastrous for the former ruling coalition but was “the first time a German state premier was able to take office with the help of the nationalist party,” yet another monumental first for the AfD (Schumacher 2020). The “Thuringa debacle,” as it was called by Sam Denney and Constanze Stelzenmüller of the Brookings Institution, led to nationwide outrage and protests up and down Germany and eventually the resignation of Angela Merkel’s apparent successor (Denney & Stelzenmüller 2020). These events illuminated that the AfD wielded much more power than people gave them credit for, but would this power last?

The AfD was able to successfully merge these two major crises into an overarching narrative of real threat to Germans because they took advantage of an opening in the dialogue and control of the narrative when the eurozone debt crisis was happening, gathering information and support of the highly educated leaders to try and appeal to the broader German public. While

it clearly did not initially appeal to most German voters, over time, support grew as the party was able to apply that initial Eurosceptic view to a tangible crisis that, in their mind, threatened Germany: the refugee crisis of 2015.

The connecting of the initial eurozone crisis to the refugee crisis is, in my view, one of the most effective strategies used by the AfD. The threats to the German economy always revolved around the Eurosceptic viewpoint, specifically focusing on the wellbeing of German citizens, and turning away from the supranational EU body towards self-determination. This platform gradually shifted over the early years of the party's existence and Euroscepticism provided a good jumping off point for the party to start targeting immigration issues and the outpouring of refugees from Syria.

The focus on German nationalism and self-determination can easily transition from the purely economic realm to the sociopolitical realm. It is unsurprising that the AfD adopted this xenophobic sociopolitical stance and shifted its framing in this way. The inward populist focus of the party clearly seeks to maintain German sovereignty, with the view that Germany must continue to look and be as it has been. In short, outsiders should not be allowed into the country because they pose a threat to culture, politics, and the economy. In many ways, the AfD tied the refugee crisis not just to Merkel, but to a broader idea of openness to the rest of the world.

Having shown how the AfD's early framing of the crises helped propel the party into the Bundestag, I look at ways that framing shifted in light of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

Part II: The First Wave Hits Germany

March – May 2020

The first known cases of COVID-19 in Germany were reported in late January of 2020 (Anderson 2020). These first cases were identified in a suburb of Munich, a city in the southern

state of Bavaria and the third-largest city in the country, at a car manufacturing plant with company ties to China. However, the cluster of infected patients from this first outbreak was small and did not spread from those at the manufacturing plant to the wider community, with all those infected returning to health in a short period of time, preventing the pandemic from spreading across Europe much earlier. The first consequential wave of the pandemic began in early March of 2020, where by March 10th, all sixteen of the Länder had reported positive cases (Bosen & Thureau 2021). These more widespread outbreaks led to the first nationwide lockdown of the pandemic, which lasted from March 22nd to May 4th, 2020 (Bosen & Thureau 2020).

I use the first lockdown period from March to May to demonstrate how the AfD's early framing in response to the crisis differs from its later and longer-lasting response to the pandemic. There is a marked shift in tone that can be seen from the party at the start of the first wave. In a number of press releases issued by the AfD, the party initially established positions on the COVID-19 crisis that focused primarily on economic issues. I will break down some of the earliest press releases from the onset of COVID-19 in the sections below.

Just days before the nationwide lockdown began, the AfD and its deputy leader, Stephan Brandner issued a statement, saying that the AfD would be part of the cooperative discussions in the Bundestag despite any contrary comments made by opposition parties (Brandner; AfD 2020). Brandner further adds that "For the good of the country, we at the AfD are putting political disputes on hold in this hitherto unique crisis – and it is about the citizens of the country. Everyone should pull together: promises must be kept that the AfD will be involved in all important discussions at the federal level" (self-translated, AfD 2020). While there are clearly hostile remarks made towards the government about the AfD's perceived exclusion from crisis discussions, the party makes an effort to rally their supporters behind their efforts to support the

actions of the government and put politics aside for the sake of the nation. This is a departure from conventional AfD rhetoric seen prior to the pandemic.

But it could also be seen as the party *buying themselves time* to come up with a way to reframe the narrative. It is evident from this press release that the shift in their framing of the crisis stems from being thrown into a new crisis with no warning or preparation, and a crisis that they have never seen the likes of in the history of their party. While party leaders maintained their criticism of the government during the early days of the pandemic, the AfD also shifts its focus to sectors that had often been pushed to the side in favor of more radical, alarmist rhetoric during the eurozone and refugee crises. For example, the focus on economic interests and protection of German industries becomes a focal point for the AfD during the first wave of COVID-19. Though many of the statements made by the party during the first few weeks maintained the party's Eurosceptic and nationalistic points of view, we see less prevalent mentions of the refugee crisis and blatantly xenophobic rhetoric, although those xenophobic positions never fully depart from the party's overall narrative. For instance, deputy AfD spokeswoman Beatrix von Storch, normally a commentator on issues of migration and social policies, lashes out at the European Central Bank's proposed aid program, saying that "We were lured into the euro with the promise that Germany would never have to be held responsible for the debts of other EU countries. With the corona bonds, this promise would be obsolete" (von Storch; AfD 2020).

In another statement, deputy AfD spokeswoman Alice Weidel adapts the party's usual anti-immigrant talking points and targets the continued admission of asylum seekers, using the pandemic as a new justification for keeping people out, saying that allowing migrants in "would contribute to a further overload, especially in the medical field" (Weidel; AfD 2020). About these

statements of AfD leaders were drowned out by the actions of the government and the seemingly disjointed coordination by the RWP group to find its footing and latch on to a crisis narrative, much as it had done during the eurozone and refugee crises.

Nevertheless, there is much more attention paid to the economic conditions of the small businesses, agriculture, and restaurant industries, often suggesting policies that the government should implement to help said industries or criticizing the government for not implementing the policies suggested by the AfD. In one press releases, spokesman Tino Chrupalla and Alice Weidel present different economic plans to cope with the coronavirus crisis, using the following infographic as one way to share their plan with the broader German electorate:

Figure 4 (Credit: AfD)



In this “5-Point-Plan for the Corona-Crisis,” as seen in Figure 4 above, Chrupalla and Weidel lay out the party’s proposed economic plan, saying that they would (1) provide affected families with a “protective shield” and continued payment of wages to support those at home with children; (2) “Livelihood security for the self-employed, freelancers, small and medium-sized

businesses and craftsmen,” including “non-repayable state emergency aid” and tax exemption; (3) provide a bailout for the tourism industry in Germany; (4) increase the speed of internet for all Germans at no extra cost due to most working from home; and (5) making sure the food supply is secure and prevent potential food shortages (self-translated, AfD 2020). In the end, many similar policies were adopted by the federal government, but without any mention of the AfD.

Despite this new framing effort by the AfD, the party was drowned out by the federal government’s success, with Merkel and her government’s approval rating soaring to roughly seventy-two percent in mid-April, roughly halfway through the first lockdown (Kinkartz 2020). The massive federal and EU relief packages, subsidizing of domestic laborers no longer able to work, and a scientific approach to the pandemic from Merkel, a scientist by trade, contributed to the increase in government favorability during this first wave (Stelzenmüller 2020). There are multiple compelling arguments made explaining why we see this skyrocketing support for Merkel’s government and the trivialization of the AfD. One such critique comes from NPRs Simon Schütz, who highlights a discussion he had with AfD Bundestag member Uwe Witt. Schütz says that from his discussion with Witt, the party believes “the government stole the AfD’s thunder” (2020). Elaborating further, Schütz writes that the German government actually adopted some of the policies most salient within the AfD at the national level, quoting Witt that “the main topics of the AfD – such as greater stress on German national interests, closed European external borders, support of local small and medium-sized industry – were temporarily realized by the government during the Corona pandemic. . . that is why opposition parties always have polling losses in a crisis” (Witt; Schütz 2020).

So, not only was Merkel's government adopting policies that were widely accepted by many Germans during this wave, but her government was also taking on the positions so long promoted by the AfD and *framing them in a more favorable and less extreme light*. By coopting the positions of the AfD and framing them in a way that would not remind most German citizens of nationalistic, xenophobic rhetoric, the government was able to do essentially what the AfD did in 2015: frame the crisis to make average citizens recognize the impending threat looming on the horizon. Coupling these new developments within the ruling coalition with the shifting opinions and failure of the AfD to quickly adapt certainly played a role in the RWP party's ability to successfully frame and control the crisis narrative here.

The press releases from the AfD at the beginning also stated that the government was not doing *enough* to quell the crisis, further confusing the party's existing narrative of too much government infringement on citizen's civil rights. One result was a new position that seemingly contradicted previous statements. For instance, in a March 11th press release from AfD spokesman Jörg Meuthen, the party clearly advocates for greater government intervention in the public health sector. Meuthen explains that a "corona crisis cabinet" is needed and that "Economic interests must never be at the expense of public health. . . [and] the state has a duty here, not only towards the citizens, but also towards the doctors in private practice and the staff of hospitals" (self-translated, AfD 2020).

As I discussed earlier, though this statement is critical of the government prior to the lockdown, it is a stark departure from the usual RWP position against government interference in issues of civilian life and advocates for more widely acceptable policies. Which the government eventually implemented and used as a popularity boost. The early stage of the COVID-19 crisis was a time of great struggle for the AfD to determine how they could successfully capture the

narrative and regain attention and popularity. The problem is, without being able to actively implement the measures they have always desired and having seen those measures coopted by the government, the AfD is left grasping at straws in an attempt to maintain their controversial, conversation-dominating presence in German politics and society.

Another challenge facing the AfD during this first phase of the pandemic is the nature of the crisis itself. As “expert on the AfD’s communication and rhetorical tactics,” Johannes Hillje says to Foreign Policy’s Emily Schultheis, “This crisis is not like the other crises that the AfD has benefited from, the euro crisis and the refugee crisis” (Hillje; Schultheis 2020). Since the AfD is used to framing its narratives based on external, or outside-of-Germany, threats, this pandemic has forced the party to reevaluate its entire approach to narrative framing, perhaps jeopardizing the consistency of its platform and narrative in the process (Schultheis 2020).

Hillje further raises the implications of this new threat on the party’s populist approach, saying that this crisis “[is] a virus, and it’s spreading from within. The default populist narrative – us versus them, insiders versus outsiders – doesn’t work anymore” (Schultheis 2020). Such early criticisms aimed at the effectiveness of the AfD’s reframing efforts may be significant but how does that change once the party realizes that its approach is problematic in this first wave? In the next section, I focus on the AfD’s responses to the pandemic in the aftermath of the first wave, where the party reverts to its previously successful extremist narrative with a few new tactics to try and reclaim control of the narrative.

Part III: The Long Haul of COVID

June 2020 – September 2021

In responding to the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic, the AfD faced challenges to its narrative framing practices like it had never faced before. As defined in the methodology section, a ‘crisis,’ in this case, is a surprising event or phenomenon that a group of people “perceives [as] an urgent threat to core values or life-sustaining functions, which must be dealt with under conditions of uncertainty” (Boin & Hart 2007, 42; Rosenthal, Boin & Comfort 2001).

It is critical that a firm foundation of this pandemic crisis formation is established so that similar phenomena can be observed and evaluated adequately in the future. As Phillip Lipsky (2020) highlights in his article, “Covid-19 and the Politics of Crisis,” there has been less attention paid to the politics of crises throughout international political research. Lipsky (2020) notes that crises have typically been studied as either economic or security crises, with research on either type of crises being ignored or understudied. We often see crises triggered by declarations of war or economic collapse, but pandemics have seen little political research (Lipsky 2020, E103). Lipsky provides an important set of criteria that are closely in-line with the crisis definition provided in the methodology section: that crises have “The defining features of threat, time pressure, and uncertainty” (2020, E103).

The COVID crisis presented an unexpected threat, with significant uncertainty and unknowns, and the pressure of timely action to prevent the crisis from escalating, thus satisfying the three-criterion laid out by Lipsky (2020). These factors contribute to the responses of the government and/or factions in society. What I seek to illuminate in this section is just how effective the AfD was in responding to the crisis and how the party factored the problem of the pandemic to try and gain control over the narrative after the first wave ended, which would also

increase their political prospects. Factors, in this case, are those “exogenous and endogenous to politics,” or what plays into a party’s response to a given crisis (Lipsky 2020, E107).

To compensate for their disjointed early-COVID messaging, the AfD took an alternate route once the first wave of the pandemic and first lockdown ended. From the subsequent waves of the coronavirus pandemic to late 2021, the AfD positioned itself as the anti-lockdown and ‘return to normalcy’ party. This is where we begin to see the convergence of the AfD with other RWP actors and groups, like the Querdenker movement and other conspiracy-oriented factions (Schultheis 2021). Since the COVID-19 crisis was the result of an exogenous event that no government or individual had control over, the crafting of a coherent narrative from the start was challenging, especially for a non-coalition party like the AfD. The end of the first wave gave the party the opportunity to regroup and reassess how to tackle possible future waves of the pandemic, which is what led to the consolidated AfD message of being anti-lockdown, anti-restriction, and anti-compulsory vaccination, aligning itself with a segment of society who wanted to return to normal and end the perceived oppression by the federal government. This competing narrative and response to COVID after the first wave was a way in which the AfD carefully factored the crisis and its perceived threat, time pressure, and uncertainty to establish a position that could help it rise from the ashes after its failure to consolidate and craft a coherent message during the initial wave.

Numerous scholars and journalists note the failures and marginalization of the AfD during the first wave, but go on to highlight this post-lockdown, pervasive messaging used by the party. For instance, in a *New York Times* article, Katrin Bennhold writes of the AfD’s new and improved tactics in May of 2020, just after the end of the first lockdown (2020). Bennhold (2020) discusses the anti-coronavirus restriction demonstrations that popped up across Germany

after the lockdown restrictions were lifted, noting that the AfD was the key force mobilizing this new movement. She adds that the party “[saw] the protests as a first step toward moving back into the national conversation, using them to position their message for the months ahead, when Germany must confront job losses and a battered economy” (Bennhold 2020). It is important to emphasize that the AfD “rarely organize the protests,” rather, they use the discontent they are seeing to fuel their messaging and position, in turn fueling more fervent dissent towards the governments Covid-measures (Bennhold 2020).

In multiple press releases throughout August and September of 2020, AfD leadership openly supported the demonstrations and even gave implicit support to the far-right groups that attempted to storm the Reichstag, the home of the German Government, at the end of August 2020. In response to government calls for a security fence or ditch to be erected around the Reichstag after the attempted storming, Stephan Brandner stated that “we don’t need a fence and thus not only symbolically an even stronger demarcation between politicians and citizens, but much more acceptance, and this requires more political diversity, the strengthening of direct democracy through, for example, referendums and greater transparency in government action” (self-translated, AfD 2020). There was even more explicit support from the AfD for anti-COVID measure protests in the days preceding the attempted storming of the Reichstag.

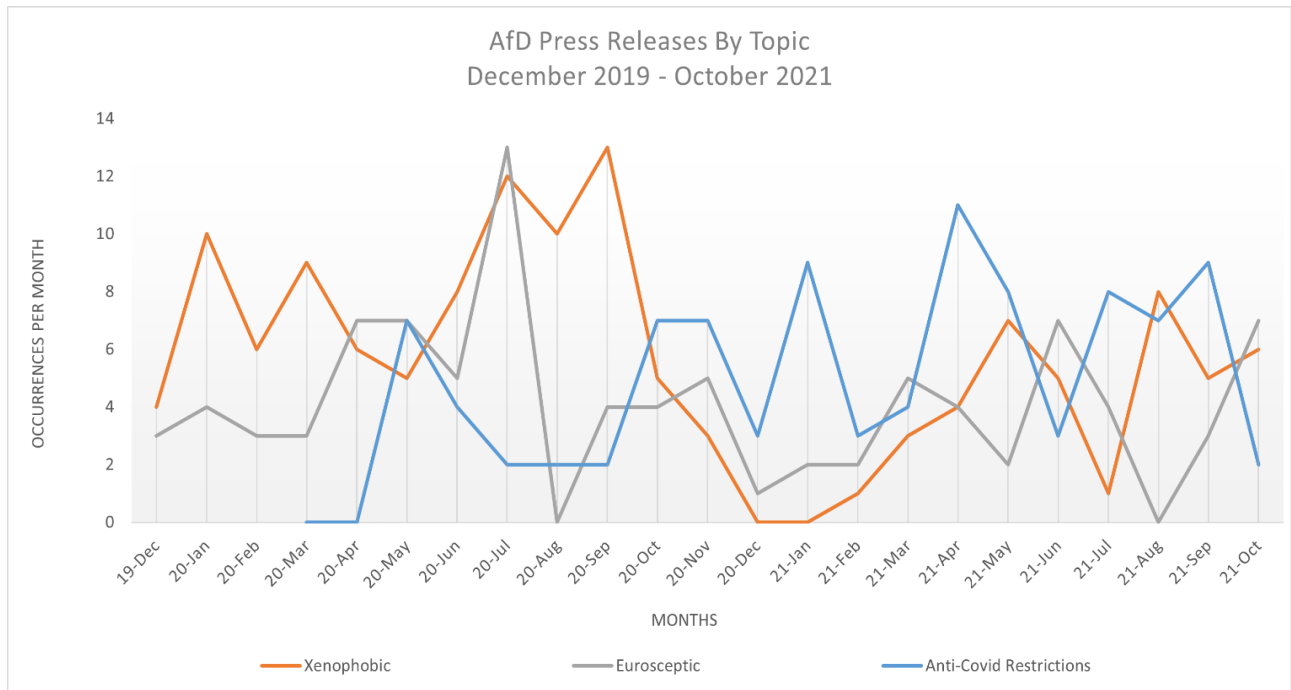
In one press release, Tino Chrupalla stated that the Berlin administrative court’s decision to allow the anti-COVID policy demonstration to take place was “a victory for freedom over an anti-democratic, ideology-driven policy of prohibition and paternalism by the established parties” (self-translated, AfD 2020). The party’s approach to the protests and demonstrations was multifaceted, with messaging focused on the economic impacts of COVID-19 measures, impacts on the livelihood of children, and restrictions on civil rights and liberties. Each approach caters

to a different part of society and their base, so this new front of messaging has greater potential to draw in new supporters, or at least remind German voters that one party was determined to combat the lockdown measures.

One factor that is potentially significant in this discussion of narrative framing and the capture of the mainstream message is the so-called “prevention paradox,” a theory termed by renowned epidemiologist Geoffrey Rose (1981), which he defines as “a measure that brings large benefits to the community offers little to each participating individual” (Rose 1981; University of Minnesota). Bennhold (2020) also cites this prevention paradox and its plausible weaponization by the AfD to target those growing tired of the restrictions. She writes that “Because Germany has been relatively successful in containing the disease” up to this point in May 2020, “it is becoming harder to persuade people that the pandemic still presents a real danger, and easier for conspiracy theorists and populists to spin narratives of deceit” (Bennhold 2020).

This is precisely how the AfD shifted their messaging after the end of the first lockdown. A new window of opportunity opened for the party to redevelop their strategy, which led to the crafting of a cohesive platform steadfastly opposed to further coronavirus measures due to the costs borne by individuals, ignoring the benefits to society collectively. While the use of the “prevention paradox” might not have been intentional, it certainly helps paint a picture of the shift and the perception by the party that lockdowns and restrictions do more harm than good.

Figure 5



However, it is during this time in mid-2020 that we see the AfD begin to reframe their old messaging tactics through the lens of the pandemic. Between July and September 2020, we see a large spike in mentions of the party’s traditional xenophobic and Islamophobic messaging in the AfD’s press releases (Figure 5). This is accompanied by a brief spike in Eurosceptic mentions in the press releases, showing that they have not gotten of their old tactics entirely. Rather, they have altered those tactics to fit within the context of the new pandemic crisis, though some of their rhetoric remains unchanged.

For example, Tino Chrupalla states in July 2020 that “Even if many deportations were cancelled during the Corona pandemic, we must not return to normal now. First, the cancelled deportations must be made up for quickly, then the number of regular deportations must be increased drastically” (self-translated, AfD 2020). The rhetoric is the same as it always has been, but the AfD is now able to blame the lack of deportations on the pandemic *and* the government in an attempt to remind supporters that there is still an internal issue of migration to be concerned

about. Stephan Brandner also frames some of his statements to focus on the ramifications of refugee acceptance in the context of COVID, stating that “Germany is at the beginning of a huge economic crisis, many people fear for their existence, there are thousands of crimes committed by migrants throughout Germany, the population structure is collapsing and Angela Merkel wants to bring even more refugees into Germany” (self-translated, AfD 2020).

Not all AfD politicians shifted their statements to include the impacts of the refugee crisis on the coronavirus pandemic struggles in Germany, but those who did emphasized the perceived imminent threat that migration or admission of refugees posed to the German socioeconomic status quo in the time of new struggles. However, it is difficult to measure definitively the public support or opinion of the AfD during this time. One reason is that public polling for the election had the AfD stagnant. The party polled nine and eleven percent between the start of the pandemic and the 2021 election (Schultheis 2021).

Still, the second wave of COVID-19 prompted more fiery anti-lockdown responses from AfD leadership after October 2020 (Figure 5). Through the number of press releases focused on anti-COVID restrictions and ebbed and flowed over the course of the next year, these spikes seen in Figure 5 indicate that the coinciding of press releases and anti-restriction sentiments with new Coronavirus measures. In October 2020, a second wave began and so too did new restrictions across the country. And with these new measures came fiery statements from the AfD about the dangers of COVID restrictions to personal freedoms, business, and liberty, similar to the rhetoric used by Republican politicians and activists in the United States.

In an October 28, 2020 press release, Jörg Meuthen rebuked the forthcoming tightening of restrictions by saying “Another lockdown will be a knockdown for numerous companies and employees. Merkel’s first lockdown in the spring has already cost around a million jobs and

forced hundreds of thousands of workers into short-time work” (self-translated, AfD 2020). This anti-restriction rhetoric is a direct appeal to those who have faced changes in their work situation during the pandemic, although Meuthen does not acknowledge the government plans in place to help those most financially affected by the pandemic. According to Sebastian Seibt of France24, Germany introduced a massive stimulus package for citizens in June of 2020, with 130 billion euros spent on “[softening] the blow – of the coming recession,” with an additional three hundred euros per child being given to families in need, or to those in need of “extending short-term work contracts” (Seibt 2020). This is one factor that can potentially account for loss of favorability for the AfD, which will be elaborated on further in the analysis section.

As noted above, the AfD also approached this second lockdown as an encroachment on the civil liberties and personal freedoms of German citizens. On November 16, 2020, the day that new COVID measures were introduced by Chancellor Merkel, Stephan Brandner released a statement vehemently criticizing any new restrictions that would be put in place by the Government (AfD 2020). Brandner lambasts Merkel and her cabinet, saying “Merkel and her quasi-dictatorial epidemic cabinet are completely out of control and make decisions as if fundamental rights had never existed in Germany. . . increasingly deep interventions in the private lives of citizens are unacceptable” (self-translated, AfD 2020). It is at this time that anti-coronavirus measure demonstrations, or ‘hygiene demonstrations,’ begin to resurge, and the AfD is more explicit in their support for such protests this time around. Brandner once again criticizes the actions of the Government and police who dispersed a crowd of “anti-hygiene” protesters (AfD 2020). In this case of demonstrations, Brandner attacks the actions of police, writing that “it is incomprehensible why the many families, women and pensioners who stood up for their opinions without violence are now being treated as extremists by the federal government,” later

claiming that the actions were hypocritical since force was not used during the Black Lives Matter protests in the preceding summer (self-translated, AfD 2020).

It is also during this second wave and institution of restrictions that the COVID vaccine was given the green light by health experts. While it took longer for the vaccine to become widely available in Germany, the AfD was ready to criticize the proposed vaccine mandates and restrictions on the unvaccinated *if and when* the government decided to institute them. In truth, the government erred by initiating a slow and low-energy rollout of the vaccine, mostly due to bureaucratic red tape and the nature of the federal system. This error opened a potential window for the AfD to capture the narrative and criticize the slow rollout. Yet that did not occur.

Let me explain by, first, taking a closer look at Germany's initial vaccine rollout plan. From the start, the German government planned on using the AstraZeneca vaccine developed in Britain (DW 2021). In the federal health ministry, or *Bundesministerium für Gesundheit*, packet of regulations that went into effect on the 10th of March 2021, the government laid out the three priority levels for vaccination and how they would be distributed (BfG 2021). The top-tier of “highest priority” individuals included: people over the age of eighty, in residential facilities or their aides, who vaccinate or test patients regularly, who care for older individuals, who work in medical facilities with high risk of exposure, and those who are severely immunosuppressed due to oncology or transplant treatment (BfG 2021).

In the second category of “higher priority,” the ministry listed the eligible as people over the age of seventy, people with preexisting medical conditions, first responder workers or teachers, and designated types of government employees (BfG 2021). The third and final category of priority included people with more manageable preexisting conditions, with two contacts in categories one or two, German government workers or diplomats, and with relevant

positions in industries of interest, such as people working in the pharmaceutical, funeral, food service, waste management, or other relevant industries (BfG 2021)

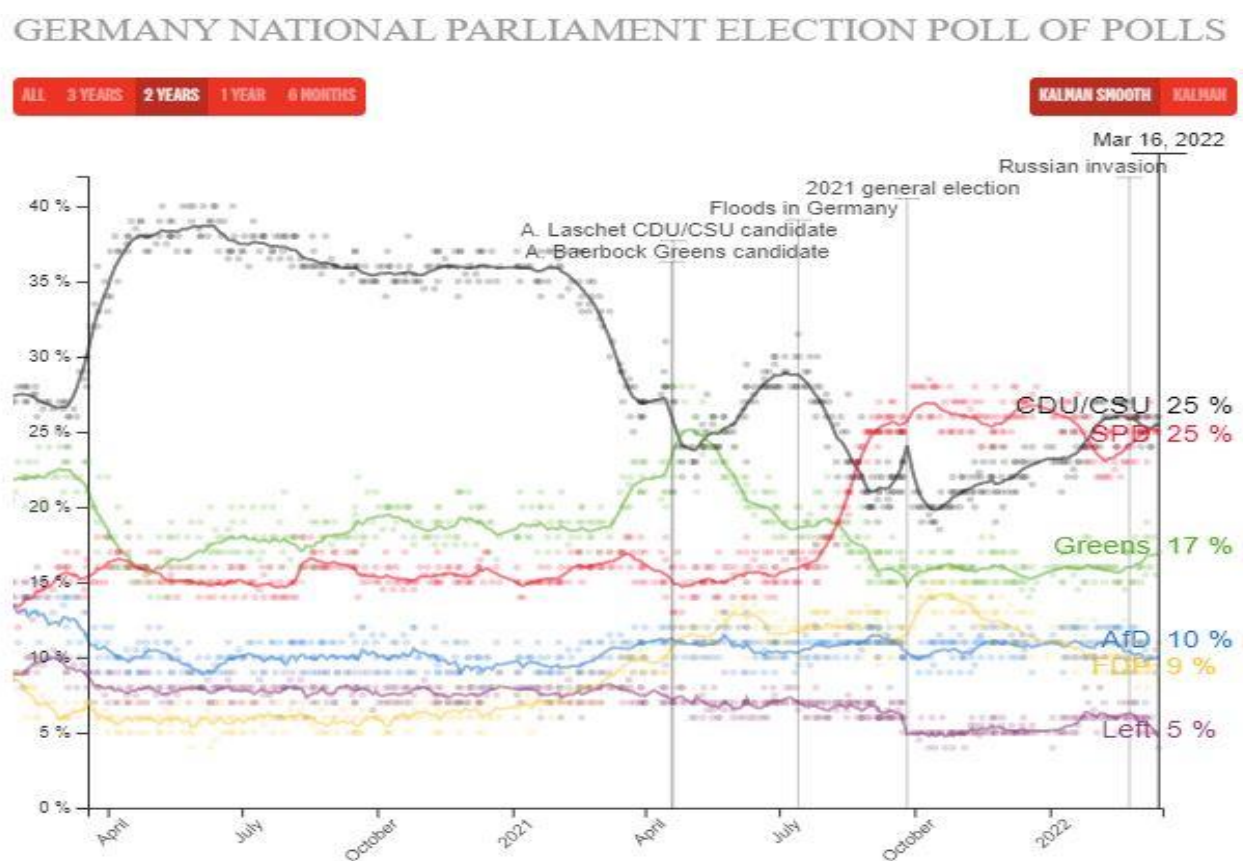
The rollout of the vaccine plan, while comprehensive, was not smooth. According to news outlets like CBS and Deutsche Welle (DW), the rollout got off to a rocky start for a number of reasons. One of the chief reasons, as noted by Anna Noryskiewicz of CBS, was due to excess bureaucracy and the sixteen Bundesländer being left to “[organize] vaccinations in their own jurisdictions” (2021).

Additional factors that led to a flawed vaccine rollout included: only allowing those in the first category to be vaccinated, prohibiting most physicians from providing vaccinations in their clinics, only allowing “dedicated mass-vaccination centers and mobile units that visit nursing homes” to administer inoculations, excessive paperwork, and a lack of flexibility (Noryskiewicz 2021). On top of the rigidity and structural hindrances in place, questions over the safety of the AstraZeneca vaccine began to grow at the time “due to concerns over a possible link to blood clots” (DW 2021). This chaotic vaccine rollout certainly did not help Merkel’s CSU/CDU party in the polls. The result was a swift drop in support from thirty six percent at the beginning of February 2021 to twenty seven percent by the beginning of April, as seen in Politico’s election poll (Figure 6). Yet that did not mean a rise in the AfD’s support.

While the AfD crept up slightly in the polls during the vaccine debacle, it never climbed higher than eleven percent, just two points up from where it was in February (Figure 6). The anti-vaccination rhetoric is one factor to examine more closely. As early as November 17th, 2020, just a few short months before vaccines were dispersed to the qualifying public, Sylvia Lemmer discussed that any plan by the European Union or German government to mandate vaccines or require proof of vaccination would endanger civil rights (AfD 2020). Lemmer stated that “The

state must not use the Corona epidemic to undermine these civil rights. . . [and] The safety and effectiveness of possible Corona vaccines may be affected by the shortened approval procedures. In such circumstances, requiring a state-controlled immunity certificate is dangerous” (AfD 2020). Lemmer goes on to say that “As sensible as vaccinations are, the state is not responsible for keeping individuals healthy. . . vaccinations must be voluntary” (self-translated, AfD 2020).

Figure 6 (credit: Politico.eu)



This antivaccination rhetoric prioritizes the civil rights and freedoms of choice to get the vaccine, not so much as denying the benefits of vaccines altogether. While there was one critique that directly targeted the government’s rollout of the vaccine via AfD press release, the remainder of the party’s official criticisms focused almost exclusively on any attempt to mandate vaccines being an infringement on civil rights, not mandating testing, and not vaccinating children (AfD

2021). Amid the AfD's antivaccination mandate messaging, the CSU/CDU lost support and the Green party saw a sharp rise in support (Figure 6).

All the anti-compulsory vaccine rhetoric was also happening at a time of great consequence for the AfD. In March 2021, as the federal government released its vaccination plans and began to administer doses, the domestic intelligence service was also busy “[placing] the Alternative for Germany (AfD). . . under formal surveillance” (Karnitschnig 2021). Though it was a controversial move due to perceived partisanship and influence in an election, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, or *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz* (BfV), essentially determined that there was enough evidence present to suggest that the AfD could be engaged in anti-democratic activity. The decision to surveil the AfD enabled the BfV “to use wiretaps and other surreptitious methods, including informants, to spy on party officials and anyone else connected with it” (Karnitschnig 2021).

This prompted the AfD to take legal action against the BfV. Though granted temporary success, the party ultimately lost in the Cologne Court one year later in March of 2022, with the judges deciding that “there was more than sufficient evidence that the AfD was advocating an anti-constitutional ethnic concept” (Schumacher 2022). While this ruling did not impact the AfD's ability to participate in the 2021 election since it was issued after the fact, the notice of surveillance issued by the BfV in March 2021 likely had some impact on voters' decisions during the September election (Karnitschnig 2021). Karnitschnig (2021) suggests in his article for Politico Europe that “conservatives and moderates who have backed the [AfD] in the past. . . may be less likely to do so again given the investigation.” Though it is difficult to determine the exact electoral impact that the notice of surveillance had on the AfD, it evidently played a significant role in the public sphere and influenced perceptions of the AfD, outcome or not.

In the lead-up to the election, from April to September of 2021, the AfD doubled down on its anti-restriction, anti-compulsory vaccination, and anti-vaccination of children rhetoric. Yet, it continued to lose seats in some state-level elections throughout the spring and summer of 2021. This reduced the party's influence in places that were a traditional stronghold, like in the Eastern state of Saxon-Anhalt (Schultheis 2021). Party leaders also ramped up their rhetoric calling any restrictions placed on unvaccinated citizens “discriminatory,” with Alice Weidel arguing just weeks before the federal election that “the vaccination status query would be a further step towards discrimination and the exclusion of unvaccinated, healthy citizens,” criticizing any attempts by the government to request the vaccination status of employees and the requirement of vaccination documentation to participate in much of public life (AfD 2021). Though the AfD maintained a cohesive message against restrictions, lockdowns, and eventually vaccination requirements from the end of the first lockdown, this messaging did little, if anything to help the party in the federal election in September.

On September 26, 2021, German citizens went to the voting booth for the first time since the pandemic began and decided who would lead their government in the post-Merkel era. In a close race, the SPD won the largest share of seats in the proportional representation system and, pending their coalition building skills, would be poised to replace Merkel with, now-Chancellor, Scholz (Economist 2021). Merkel's party, the CSU/CDU won only ten fewer seats than the SPD, making them the second most powerful party in the Bundestag.

This also gave the CSU/CDU the potential to form a coalition large enough to overtake the SPD and place their Chancellor candidate, Armin Laschet, in the Chancellors seat (Economist 2021). The Greens finished in third place, followed by the FDP, and the AfD finished fifth (Economist 2021). Compared to the previous federal election in 2017, the AfD saw

a decrease in vote share of 2.3 percent, leaving them with a mere eighty-three seats and 10.3 percent of the vote in a Bundestag of seven hundred and thirty-five members (Sorkin 2021). Coupled with the fact that “[N]either party [CSU/CDU or SPD] is willing to form a coalition with the AfD,” this leaves the AfD, in effect, powerless at the national level (Sorkin 2021).

It also saw the party go from the “largest opposition party and the third-biggest party overall” to the fifth-place finisher with no prospects of agenda control (Schultheis 2021). However, the election results indicated that the AfD base of support remains strong in the former East German States. According to Schultheis (2021), the AfD “came in first in both Saxony and Thuringa with 24.6 percent and 24 percent, respectively,” indicating that their solid base of support in the East “isn’t going away any time soon.”

Analysis

Why did the AfD lose seats overall but manage to maintain a margin of success in the East? I provide an explanation in this section.

Thus far, I showed how (1) the AfD emerged, (2) framed crises in its initial years, (3) achieved electoral success, and (4) responded to the new health crisis of the coronavirus pandemic. To reiterate some of the central claims around the concept of process tracing, we must agree that “an antecedent event *X* occurs before a subsequent event *Y* in a particular case” (Mahoney 2012, 578). In this case, we have a series of events that precede *Y*. As discussed in the methodology section, the smoking gun test is the test that best represents what has occurred throughout this research, from the initial crisis framing used by the AfD from their inception to the start of the pandemic, to their reframing of the party narrative after the first wave of COVID-19, to their loss of seats in the Bundestag in 2021.

In this thesis, I posited two hypotheses: (H_1) if a new crisis presents itself during a party's existence, then it will have to reframe the narrative in order to maintain relevance; and (H_2) if a party reframes its narrative in response to a new crisis, then the party will see an impact on electoral success. In using the process tracing method for the smoking gun test on H_1 , our X , or the cause of the narrative reframing, is the COVID-19 pandemic itself. As also stated in the methodology section, the causal mechanism M is posited to be the lack of salience of the AfD's traditional narrative once the pandemic has begun, with the outcome of Y being identified as the party's shift in narrative framing within the context of the pandemic.

Another reason why I decided to use the smoking gun test is because it is *sufficient* to affirm any causal inferences, but not *necessary*. Due to the nature of this research and the types of information gathered, as well as the number of potential causal factors at play, the only stronger process tracing test that could be used is the *doubly decisive* test, which eliminates all other rival hypotheses. The smoking gun test, if passed, can confirm the hypothesis, and substantially weaken any possible rival hypotheses (Collier 2011, 825).

Therefore, by utilizing the smoking gun test, we can sufficiently support our hypotheses through this case study without the requirement of fully eliminating any plausible alternatives, as that would likely require information and data that is not yet available. As established in Section I, we know the AfD gained success by its framing of the eurozone and refugee crises. However, my goal is to examine why party leaders changed their rhetoric and narrative frames of during COVID-19 crisis. In this sense, (X) is the pandemic, or a cause of the loss in salience of the party's old narrative (M), which led to a shift in narrative by the AfD during the pandemic(Y) .

The alternative would be that the cause X --the loss in salience of the party's crisis framing M --could be due to less German citizens supporting the AfD for reasons other than the

pandemic. This may mean that the loss of salience in the public *M* would still lead to the change in framing *Y*, but *X* would not sufficiently cause *Y* by itself.

However, I believe that this alternative is weakened significantly throughout my research. The relevant information and data included in this thesis shows that the new framing of the narrative throughout the coronavirus crisis *Y* directly addressed issues associated with the pandemic, including, the closure of public life, job loss, mask wearing, and the AfD's support for protests against government restrictions.

This indicates that in Section II, the onset of the pandemic, the AfD realized that its conventional narrative framing during the previous crises would no longer work, especially since the federal government was receiving such high levels of support for its response to the initial wave of the virus. Therefore, this causal mechanism *M*, which stemmed from the rise of COVID-19 *X*, sufficiently explains *Y*, or why the narrative perpetuated by the AfD was reframed. Of course, the AfD maintained their old narrative framing to an extent, continuing the xenophobic and Eurosceptic sentiment from previous crises. However, it was more difficult for them to maintain that old narrative due to the threat, time pressure, and uncertainty associated with a global health crisis like COVID-19 compared to crises with less immediate threat, less pressure for immediate action, and less uncertainty for the entirety of the country, as was seen during the eurozone and refugee crises (Lipscy 2020, E99).

Additionally, since the Coronavirus was an exogenous crisis that elicited swift government response from Germany, opportunities for RWP groups, like the AfD, to take control of the narrative were less readily available. In the eurozone crisis and refugee crisis, the German government actively took steps to support the bailout of EU periphery-state economies and admitted refugees fleeing war-torn nations, giving the AfD the opportunity to capture the

narrative and frame the crisis as a failure of the government “to implement policies to prevent crises or mitigate their potential consequences” (Lipscy 2020, E107).

Since, in the eyes of the AfD, the German government did not put an end to the eurozone crisis and, in a way, bought into it, the AfD was able to organize around this perceived failure of the government to attract supporters, thus growing their base and forming a narrative that was much more popular among members of the public. The same goes for the AfD’s response to the refugee crisis. As Lipscy addresses, however, the time pressure, threat, and uncertainty of a crisis can impact responses and, in this case, can propel the government to success and relegate RWPP like the AfD, who were not able to formulate a swift, cohesive response to the threat, to the sidelines (2020, E111).

An additional factor that differentiates the severity of the COVID-19 crisis from the crises that gave the AfD their initial platform to stand on is that “COVID-19 stands out for heavily afflicting citizens of advanced industrialized democracies in North America and Europe” (Lipscy 2020, E114). The other crises, while impactful, did not see such a direct hit on the people of Germany more broadly, and the threat was outside of the nation’s borders. Analyzed together, it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic (X) created a loss in relevance of previous party narratives (M), which ultimately led to the AfD’s decision to reframe their narrative within the context of the pandemic (Y). Though this is not definitive, it severely weakens any alternative, as discussed previously.

But what about the reduced electoral success of the AfD? That is not something that can be excluded from this analysis. To analyze the second hypothesis, that if a party reframes its narrative in response to a new crisis that it will experience a change in electoral success, I posit that the Y result of H_1 , or the change in narrative framing, is what led the AfD to lose seats in the

2021 federal elections. For this secondary analysis, the X_1 will be the shift in narrative framing of the crisis in response to COVID-19 (Y).

Still utilizing the smoking gun test, our causal mechanism M_1 is the sustained support of German civilians for COVID-19 measures instituted by the government and the lack of widespread support for the anti-restriction rhetoric from the AfD, ultimately leading to the result of Y_1 , the loss of seats in the Bundestag by the AfD. The shift in narrative framing not only came at a consequential moment for German society, but also at a defining moment for the AfD.

The AfD had the opportunity to latch onto a crisis frame early on, but the slow response and disjointed messaging from the party caused setbacks. It is clear from information gathered that most German citizens supported the actions taken by the federal government to control the spread of the virus, which further weakened the new messaging by the AfD starting in May of 2020. This leads to the M_1 causal mechanism that sustained support by German citizens of COVID-19 measures and the new narrative frame of the AfD was sufficiently caused by the framing methods used by the AfD to minimize the risks of the pandemic and to advocate for an end to policies that were widely supported. Thus, this M_1 can be posited to cause Y_1 , or the loss of seats by the AfD in parliament. The smoking gun test, while still plausible, gives reason to support an alternative hypothesis. That is, that the reason for AfD loss in electoral success could have come from other causal mechanisms than their reframed narrative and support of Germans for COVID-19 measures. For instance, the announcement that the AfD had been put under surveillance by the BfV could be another explanation for the loss in electoral support, as discussed in Section III. Though the M_1 and X_1 could be the causes of Y_1 , it is not clear that this was the primary causal mechanism and thus fails the test, which somewhat weakens the hypothesis in this case (Collier 2011, 825).

If we were to combine the two hypotheses and use the smoking gun test to determine whether the Coronavirus pandemic X led to the loss of AfD seats in the Bundestag Y_1 , it is evident from the causal mechanisms that, while possible, there is not sufficient evidence to determine that the pandemic itself led to the loss of AfD representation in parliament, though I hope this research will compel other scholars to tackle this question in future studies.

Overall, this method of analysis helps provide an explanation for why some types of crises lead to successful and unsuccessful narrative framing. As we can identify from Lipsky (2020), depending on the threat, time pressure, and uncertainty of the type of crisis, one actor's response can lead to successful or unsuccessful framing and thereby the acceptance of the narrative by mainstream society, which can in turn impact the electoral viability of the actor.

The Future of Crisis Framing

I hope this thesis contributes to the ongoing debate about narrative and crisis framing by right-wing populist groups. As I showed, certain crises allow RWP groups like Germany's AfD to formulate dominating narratives that gain traction and support among general publics.

For example, the endogenous politics of the eurozone and refugee crises gave the AfD leverage to oppose actions of the German government and frame these crises in ways that resonated with voters uneasy or uncertain about the actions taken by Merkel and her cabinet. The AfD channeled those discontented feelings. Further, I showed how the nature of crisis matters. When crises seem less time sensitive or are slower to escalate, that enables groups like the AfD to craft narratives and responses more carefully. Whereas a global health crisis exerts threat, uncertainty, and time pressure on everyone, giving oppositional groups like the AfD less time to formulate a crisis response or to effectively restructure preexisting narratives (Lipsky 2020).

We must evaluate what type of crisis is present before we can dive in and measure the causation of certain phenomena. Going forward, I hope that economic, security, and other types of crises are analyzed in conjunction with once-in-a-generation types of crises like the Coronavirus pandemic, since each crisis has just as tangible and significant an impact on the actions of parties and groups as crises that are less urgent and slower to develop in a system.

Concluding Remarks

Throughout this thesis, I examined the Right-Wing Populist response to COVID-19, focusing specifically on the case of the AfD in Germany. Early on, I posed a series of related questions to be answered. Specifically, I asked (1) how can the introduction of a global health crisis shift the framing tactics of far-right populist groups; (2) why would these groups shift framing tactics to Pursue their political objectives; (3) why has the introduction of a new global health crisis shifted the RWP narrative; (4) how has the German far-right responded to the global COVID-19 pandemic; and (5) how do different types of crises impact the party's framing and reframing of the narratives they are pushing?

I examined each of these questions in the context of the AfD in Germany, showing the evolution of the party from its inception, its initial crisis framing and electoral success in 2017, and how the onset and duration of the coronavirus pandemic caused the party to restructure its crisis and narrative frame in response. I also explored how reframing the narrative during the pandemic may have contributed to the party's ultimate loss of seats in the 2021 federal elections. The question remains open for further research, as does whether the COVID-19 crisis *itself* caused the AfD to lose seats in the Bundestag. It is clear that the German far-right is a political force to be reckoned with going forward. While the AfD may have suffered a setback in the most recent election, the successful framing of past crises to its advantage prompts close scrutiny of

the kinds of crisis opportunities which are likely to advantage far-right political forces in the future.

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