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By Hartwig Pautz

Introduction

This chapter analyses how Germany’s four most important mainstream parties – the Christlich Demokratische Union (CDU – Christian Democratic Union) and its Bavarian sister party Christlich Soziale Union (CSU – Christian Social Union), the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD – Social Democratic Party of Germany), and Die Grünen (Greens – Green Party) – have, between 2008 and 2018, and therefore in a decade of crisis, responded to the emergence and electoral success of populist ‘challenger parties’ (Hobolt and Tilley 2012). These are identified, following Cas Mudde’s definition of populism adopted in this volume, as Die Linke (The Left) on the left and the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD – Alternative for Germany) on the right. Furthermore, the chapter considers how these two populist parties have, in turn, dealt with the responses of mainstream parties to their arrival on the electoral stage and, lastly, scrutinizes how far Die Linke, as the older of the two populist parties, may have reacted to the AfD’s emergence. This analysis will be guided by a three-fold typology of strategic choice by mainstream parties – dismissal, accommodation, and adversarialism – which is discussed in full detail in Chapter 3 of this volume.

The chapter will proceed as follows: first, a short overview of history, electoral performance and ideological orientation of the six parties discussed is provided. The subsequent main part discusses the strategic choices made by mainstream and populist parties in the specific contexts of, first, European Union (EU) and Eurozone crises and, second, the ‘refugee crisis’, as moments which altered the ‘opportunity structures’ (Kitschelt 1986) in which these parties operated. The main part also addresses the question of whether convergence between populist parties and their policy agendas or a ‘contagion effect’ (Hicks and Swank 1992), i.e. the adoption of the populist agenda by the mainstream parties, has occurred. Lastly, the analysis briefly considers how far Germany’s wider political environment may have changed as a consequence of the strategic choices of mainstream and populist parties.

Germany’s mainstream and populist parties – a short overview
The German political party system appeared to be ‘frozen’ (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) for roughly 30 years after the foundation of the Federal Republic in 1949. Between 1961 and 1983 only the CDU, CSU, SPD and the small (but ‘pivotal’, or ‘king-making’) liberal Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP – Free Democratic Party) held seats in the federal parliament, the Bundestag. In the late 1970s, the party system started to change. The most noteworthy newcomer parties since then have been the Green Party (1980), Die Linke (1990/2007), and the AfD (2013). The federal elections of 2017 saw the ‘materialization’ of this fragmented party landscape in the shape of a seven-party federal parliament. While increased electoral volatility and unprecedented party competition have so far mainly spread to some, mainly East German, Land (state) parliaments, the transformation of Germany’s party politics is remarkable. Over the past decade, this transformation has contributed to what appears to have become the near-normalcy of centrist federal ‘Grand Coalition’ governments, formed by the catch-all (or people’s parties) CDU, CSU and SPD. In these coalitions, the SPD has played the role of the ‘junior partner’. There are two reasons for this development. First, all federal elections since 2005 – with the exception of those in 2009 – have made it impossible for ‘small coalition’ governments to be formed – for example, between the CDU/CSU and the FDP, as was the case for much of Germany’s post-war history, or between the SPD and the Greens, as was the case between 1998 and 2005. Both CDU/CSU and SPD were simply either too weak on their own to build a parliamentary majority with one of the smaller parties, or had lost their ‘natural’ coalition partner as happened when the FDP failed to clear the 5% electoral threshold in 2013. Second, the ideological barriers between some parties, and also the political culture of non-cooperation with ‘extreme’ parties, made it harder to form broader coalitions – for example, between SPD, Green Party and Die Linke. Indeed, while the SPD has, since unification, rejected any coalition deals with Die Linke and its predecessor certainly on the federal level, CDU and CSU leaders have ruled out cooperation with the AfD. While this may be changing, the last years saw party competition becoming increasingly centrifugal, so that some argue that Germany is witnessing the renaissance of ‘polarized pluralism’ (Schmitt 2018). This describes a situation where, on the left and the right, parties have emerged and stabilized which do not seek compromise and cooperation with any other party, before or after elections. Hence they appear to be mostly interested in seeking votes – not gain office – by taking extreme positions, sometimes verging onto the territory of ‘anti-system parties’ (Capoccia 2002). The chapter looks at this development through the lens of the strategic choices of dismissal, accommodation, and adversarialism made by parties when competing with each other. Before this analysis is presented, the six parties covered in the discussion are introduced.
The two centre-right parties are the CDU and the CSU, both founded after the Second World War. These parties have an electoral pact, whereby the CDU does not compete in the CSU’s homeland of Bavaria, while the CSU does not field candidates in the rest of the country. However, when severe disagreements between the two parties emerge, some representatives (particularly from the smaller CSU) may threaten to terminate this agreement. Combined, CDU and CSU are Germany’s largest parties in terms of membership, despite significant declines over the past decades. Both parties are proto-type ‘catch-all parties’ (Kirchheimer 1966), grounding their electoral appeal to skilled workers, the self-employed and business people on their support of the social market economy. Together, CDU and CSU have been the dominant parties since 1949 and led the federal government between 1949-69 and 1982-98. They have been in government again since 2005, with either the SPD or the FDP as their junior partners. In the 2017 federal elections only 33 percent of the vote went to these parties – their worst result since 1949. These losses, and similar losses in Land elections before and since, may indicate that both parties are no longer able to integrate a wide spectrum of voters and that their status as ‘people’s parties’ is under threat.

This is also true of Germany’s second-largest party, the SPD, in fact even more so. Founded in 1875 as a revolutionary Marxist working class party, the SPD reinvented itself as a centre-left catch-all party. By embracing the social market economy, it was able to create a broad electoral alliance of unionized manual workers and middle-class employees. As a consequence of this modernization, the SPD succeeded in ending, at least temporarily, the dominance of CDU and CSU on the federal level and governed the country, between 1969-82, in a coalition with the FDP. However, in the late 1970s the SPD started to suffer membership decline and waning electoral fortunes. This had much to do with losing some of the ‘post-materialist’ (Inglehart 1977) vote to the emergent Green Party. In the mid-1990s, the SPD adopted a centrist ‘Third Way’ approach, like many social democratic parties in Europe. This shift into the electoral centre contributed to achieving a decisive electoral victory in 1998 so that the party could form a federal government with the Greens. However, in 2003 the SPD started losing support to Die Linke because of its neo-liberal labour market and welfare policies. At the 2017 federal elections, it only gained 20 percent of the vote. In the 2019 European Parliament elections, it saw its vote plummet from 27 to little more than 15 percent, leaving it in third place behind the Green Party which enjoyed a doubling of its vote share to nearly 21 percent. The SPD’s electoral decline has also been accompanied by a loss of members. Despite these developments, the SPD has been a party of government, as junior partner to CDU/CSU, between 2005 and 2009 and from 2013 onwards. These ‘Grand Coalitions’ appear to have worsened the crisis of the
SPD, costing it ever more votes and contributing to the alienation between party chiefs and its rank-and-file.

The reader may be surprised to find that the Green Party is treated as a ‘mainstream party’ here. However, not only have the Greens moved towards the political centre since the 1990s and served in government, but they have also recently overtaken the SPD as the second-largest party in some Land elections and the European elections. Indeed, some opinion polls from mid-2019 suggested that the Green Party had established a lead over CDU and CSU, too (Forsa 2019). Such mainstream status was unthinkable when the Green Party was founded in 1980 as an ‘anti-party party’ (Poguntke and Scarrow 1996), rooted in the new social movements of the 1970s. Since the 1990s, the Greens have gained considerable experience in government, mostly in coalitions with the SPD. After the federal elections of 2017 – at which they gained a disappointing 8.9 percent of the vote, thus becoming the smallest party in the Bundestag – the Greens were willing to join a coalition government with the CDU, CSU and FDP. However, the coalition talks were abruptly terminated by the FDP’s somewhat erratic leadership, and another Grand Coalition between CDU, CSU and SPD was formed instead. The Greens came out of the aborted coalition talks as a party grown in stature, having demonstrated pragmatism and an ability to compromise in order to govern responsibly. Green voters can be found predominantly in urban areas, they tend to be highly-educated and middle class, and the party attracts more female voters than its competitors. Some among the party’s members are uneasy about the Greens’ centrist shift and their professionalization.

Moving from non-populist to populist parties, *Die Linke’s* roots are in the Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (SED – Socialist Unity Party) of Communist East Germany. After unification, and by building on the SED’s membership, organizational network and finances, in 1990 the Partei des Demokratischen Sozialismus (PDS – Party of Democratic Socialism) was set up. Due to its origins, the party was branded ‘extremist’ and treated with disdain by the West German political elite, thus being unable to make much electoral impact in the West. In the East, however, the PDS regularly attracted more than 20 percent of the vote in Land elections and eventually became the SPD’s junior partner, first informally in the Land of Sachsen-Anhalt in 1994, and later via formal coalitions elsewhere. This happened despite misgivings within the SPD about the arrangement, due to the PDS’s past and personnel. Events in 2003 and 2004 were a game-changer for the PDS. In 2004, trade unionists and former Social Democrats mostly from West Germany founded the Wahlalternative Arbeit und Soziale Gerechtigkeit (WASG – Electoral Alternative Labour and Social Justice) to oppose the neoliberal labour market and welfare policy agenda of the SPD-Green federal coalition government. WASG and PDS signed an electoral pact before the 2005 Bundestag elections to ensure
that they would not stand candidates against each other and, in 2007, merged to create Die Linke. Now there was a party to the left of the SPD not only in the East, but across the whole country, and one that considered the SPD as its main competitor.

*Die Linke* currently offers an example of ‘pragmatic populism’ (Hough and Keith 2019). While it governs on the local and Land levels with a commitment to problem-solving and a demonstrated ability to strike compromises with coalition partners, on the national level, and also in the West, it behaves more as a populist force in its rejection of economic and political elites and in its quest to overcome the ‘economic system’. The coalitions between SPD, Greens and *Die Linke* in Berlin and in Thuringia provide an example of the former approach, while the 2011 party programme’s embrace of ‘democratic socialism’, as well as its rejection of capitalism as something that produces ‘farcical’ elections, an example of the latter (*Die Linke* 2011, 21, 35).

When *Die Linke* entered the seven-party Bundestag of 2017 as the smallest party and, with the self-declared ‘anti-establishment party’ AfD taking seats in parliament for the first time, it suddenly was at risk to be seen as part of the ‘old system’ itself. Worse, while making some gains in the West, in the East *Die Linke* lost many of its voters to the AfD. When it comes to national elections in Eastern Germany, the two parties are now ‘populist competitors’ (Olson 2018), as they both vie for the voters with the most ‘populist attitudes’ (Vehrkamp and Merkel 2018).

The AfD is the latest addition to the now unfrozen German party system. Founded in February 2013, in September of the same year it only narrowly missed the five percent electoral threshold for the Bundestag elections. The 2014 European Parliament elections were the AfD’s breakthrough: having gained the same number of votes as in 2013 but on a lower turnout, it gained seven seats. Since then, the party has won seats in each subsequent Land election. The party’s finest moment was when it entered the Bundestag on a vote of 12.4 percent in 2017, thus becoming the third-largest (and the main opposition) party, while in the 2019 European elections it got 11 percent (better than in 2014, but below the expectations of some in the party).

The AfD has attracted people from very different backgrounds. First, there are the “ordo-liberals” – followers of a variant of economic liberalism, paired with social conservatism, which sees a strong role for the state as the guarantor of the free market (Schui 1997). They rejected the Euro and, during the Eurozone crisis, criticized the ‘rescue packages’ for some EU countries and ‘bank bailouts’ which Chancellor Angela Merkel described as being ‘without alternative’ (Bebnowski and Förster 2014). Second, there are those who had been active in small far-right parties or in the circles of the New Right. Third, the AfD is a home to Christian fundamentalists opposed to same-sex
marriage, abortion rights, and the so-called ‘gender ideology’ (see Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). Ordo-liberalism and strong EU-scepticism have been the most important ingredients of the party’s early electoral successes. The ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015 and a string of Islamist terror attacks in Europe provided an opportunity to move the party further to the right, onto the fertile ground of ‘nativist’ politics on culture and identity. The party’s programme today is evidence of this shift towards nativism (and populism). It attacks Germany’s ‘political class’ – defined as a ‘secret sovereign’ – and accuses it of exploiting media and education institutions ‘to trick’ the German nation (AfD 2016, 8). The new leadership team after the successful 2017 federal election cemented this shift to the right, as the party developed its links to New and Old Right organizations and the Identitarian Movement. In 2019, few if any of the ‘original’ ordo-liberals are still in prominent positions, economic criticism of EU and Euro has been largely supplanted by a nationalist and culturalist discourse, and there are few signs that the party is becoming ‘office-seeking’.

Party strategies: dismissal, adversarialism and accommodation

The main part of this chapter is dedicated to addressing the following key questions: How have the mainstream parties responded to the emergence and electoral success of populist parties? Have populist parties, in turn, reacted to the responses of mainstream parties, and how has Die Linke, as the older of the two populist parties, reacted to the arrival of the AfD on the electoral stage? This analysis will consider the period from 2008 to 2018, i.e. the ten years which saw the Global Financial Crisis, the Great Recession, the Eurozone crisis, and the refugee crisis unsettle the EU. These crises altered political opportunity structures and facilitated the emergence (or resurgence) of populism on the left and on the right in many European countries, thus requiring established parties to develop new strategies. These strategies – and how they played out in the interaction between parties – will be analysed through the typological lens of strategies of dismissal, adversarialism or accommodation (see Chapter 3 in this volume). The analysis presented here is based on the critical interpretation of party leaders’ speeches and interviews, party manifestoes and programmes, as well as texts documenting internal party discussions.

The Eurozone crisis was arguably the most urgent problem that European governments had to tackle between 2008 and 2014. The measures pushed through the Bundestag – for example, the parliament’s confirmatory vote on the ‘rescue packages’ for highly-indebted Eurozone economies, the ‘bank bailouts’, and the various new mechanisms designed to entrench austerity more deeply in the Eurozone – were by no means undisputed. They were also unpopular among voters – in 2010,
close to 70 percent of Germans were against providing financial assistance to Greece and 76 percent against creating the European Financial Stability Facility (Politbarometer 2011). However, Chancellor Angela Merkel, who was also the CDU’s leader, said that there was no alternative to these initiatives (Merkel 2010). All mainstream parties were in general agreement and cooperated both inside and outside the Bundestag. This meant that between 2008 and 2013, Die Linke was able to position itself as the only party that offered an alternative to this approach, by rejecting much of the informal ‘super coalition’ consensus of CDU, CSU, FDP, SPD and the Greens. In this vein, Die Linke accused the Greens of betraying their own ideals when they supported the government’s plans for the ‘rescue packages’ (Lötzsch 2010), demanded that other opposition parties support their challenge to Merkel’s Euro policies in the courts (Wagenknecht 2012), and finally declared that theirs was the only true opposition party left in the country (Gysi in Hollstein 2014). However, in 2013 a new party emerged on the back of the Eurozone crisis that offered a far more powerful criticism of the ‘super coalition’ and its Euro policies: the AfD. This began to capture the headlines with demands to dissolve the Eurozone, cut the debt of some countries, and reform the EU into one of ‘sovereign states’ (AfD 2013).

There is no doubt that the simultaneity of economic crisis and Grand Coalition politics – or, rather, ‘Super Coalition politics’ – provided opportunities for populist forces on the right and the left to emerge and make electoral advances. The palpable disenchantment with the ‘politics of the centre’ was reflected in declining levels of trust in politicians and the political system. For instance, polling data published in 2018 showed 57 percent of respondents agreeing with the statement that ‘politicians do what they want, regardless of what citizens say’, with 75 percent not trusting political parties (Ipsos 2018).

While Die Linke and the AfD were united in their opposition to Merkel’s EU and Euro policies and policies, they were treated somewhat differently by the mainstream parties. The AfD was largely faced with an adversarial strategy which ultimately sought to marginalize it (cfr. Chapt. 3), whilst its proposals of abolishing the Euro and creating a loose EU of sovereign nations and its criticism of how the ‘super coalition’ was dealing with the crisis were mostly dismissed. Die Linke, as a more established populist party, was more readily accepted as a political actor. However, its policies on the Eurozone crisis were countered with what could be described as ‘clashing adversarialism’. In the early days, the strategy employed against the AfD included attempts to stigmatize it as a party with Nazi characteristics. For example, when the party’s co-founder, economics professor Bernd Lucke, criticized how the Bundestag had less and less say over significant decisions on how to ‘save the Euro’ and called German democracy ‘entartet’ (i.e. ‘degenerate’) (Lucke 2013), mainstream parties
tried to dismiss his criticism purely on the basis of his choice of words (reminiscent of the Nazi period). Such a marginalization attempt banked on the expectation that Germany’s post-war political culture, characterized by an anti-extremist and anti-totalitarian consensus (Jesse 1998), would finally ‘kick in’ and facilitate the ostracization of the AfD. However, the stigmatization strategy eventually failed. After all, the early AfD focused essentially on the EU and the Euro, not migration, and its leaders were of economically ordo-liberal persuasion, morally conservative views, usually former CDU or FDP members, and often economics professors or business leaders. At least with hindsight it is hardly surprising that this strategy was not successful: between 2013 and 2015 – when party leader Lucke was toppled and replaced by national-conservative and openly anti-immigration leaders with far less interest in the economics of the Eurozone – the public saw the AfD as only slightly to the right of the CSU (Wagner et al 2017). Also, mainstream parties’ derogative usage of the term ‘populism’, again to marginalize their challenger, did not catch on. Following accusations by, for example, the SPD’s secretary general, that the party was engaging in ‘foolish populism’ (Fahimi 2014), the AfD kept pushing its narrative that it was standing up to the ‘cartel’ of the ‘Altparteien’ – the old parties (Lewandowsky 2015).

While the mainstream parties also dismissed the policy positions of Die Linke on the EU and the Euro as unworkable or ‘ideological’, they made only limited attempts to adopt an adversarial marginalising strategy against that party. This had been tried with the ‘Linksfront’ campaign of the CDU in 1994 (e.g. Der Spiegel 1994) which sought to delegitimize cooperation between SPD and PDS as an attack on democracy and freedom (as it would bring the ‘old Communists’ into power). This strategy was tried again in 2011, after Die Linke’s party leader imprudently spoke of the party’s ongoing search for the ‘paths to Communism’ (see Holzhauser 2014): on this occasion CDU and CSU, and also some in the SPD leadership, sought to ostracize Die Linke as a party unsuitable for government (e.g. Steinmeier in Meisner and Monath 2011) or even anti-democratic (e.g. Dobrindt in Der Focus 2011). As time moved on, CDU and CSU accepted that SPD and Die Linke would govern together at the Land level in the East so that today few attempts at marginalising Die Linke are made (usually on the basis of claims that it seeks to undermine Germany’s market economy and democracy). Also, neither CDU nor CSU see Die Linke as their electoral competitor. This is, of course, different for the SPD. The Social Democrats lost voters to Die Linke and its predecessors because of the labour market and welfare reforms of 2003, and the Eurozone crisis raised the possibility that Die Linke would attract further SPD support, specifically thanks to its opposition to the unpopular bank bailouts and due to its anti-elite discourse. However, in the end the SPD stayed the course on the Eurozone crisis like other mainstream parties, while its leadership adopted what
could be categorized as an adversarial-clashing strategy against Die Linke at the federal level. This was exemplified by the SPD’s leader in the Bundestag who described Die Linke’s policy positions as those of a party unable and unwilling to govern, going as far as saying that the party was redundant (Oppermann in Paulsen 2012). However, in several Eastern Länder, the SPD actually cooperated with Die Linke. On this level of government, the SPD adopted a strategy of cooperation and treated Die Linke as a party they could do business with.

The fact that all mainstream parties – bar the CSU – maintained their positions on the Euro crisis can be explained by their general allegiance to the project of European integration. This position has not been significantly influenced by office-seeking behaviour even at times when Euroscepticism could be expected to be a ‘vote-winner’. Also, everything but dismissal and adversarialism towards the AfD may have cost the CDU and CSU more votes than it could win. As Zohlnhöfer argues, voters had most confidence in the CDU and CSU on the issue of the Eurozone crisis and European politics more generally and professed little faith in the AfD on this issue, (Zohlnhöfer 2017) so that any co-optation of these by Merkel could have backfired.

This was clearly felt by the CSU, the only mainstream party that diverged from the ‘super coalition’ consensus on the Euro ahead of the 2014 EU Parliament elections and decided to co-opt some of the AfD’s ideas. The party spoke of the EU as a faceless monstrosity, of the Euro as a flawed construct, and of ‘welfare tourism’ by European citizens, by launching the slogan: ‘those who cheat get kicked out’ (Gath et al. 2014; see also Rohrschneider and Whitfield 2017 about party positions on the EU). This adversarial co-optation strategy was rooted in the CSU’s long-standing fear that a party to its right could threaten its dominance of Bavarian politics and weaken its position in federal politics, too. This fear was not irrational, as the (ultimately short-lived) success of Die Republikaner in Bavaria in the 1980s had shown. However, the co-optation of AfD’s positions ultimately did not work and at the European elections the CSU’s vote declined by 7 percent, while CDU and SPD held firm, or even improved their share of the vote by sticking to a pro-European discourse. Nonetheless, the CSU strengthened its criticism of Merkel’s course on the Euro crisis, and some even demanded that their party should not preclude a coalition with the AfD (Neuerer 2014). At the same time, CDU and SPD did not revisit their strategy of marginalizing the AfD. For example, the leader of the CDU’s parliamentary party made it very clear that he did not even want to engage in public debates with the AfD (Der Spiegel 2014).

In the context of the Eurozone crisis, the dismissive and adversarial strategies adopted by the mainstream parties against the AfD and its policies seem to have paid off, while co-optation damaged
the CSU’s electoral fortunes. Likewise, the SPD’s adversarial strategy against Die Linke and its policies was possibly the right choice, as most Germans saw Merkel as competent on the Eurozone and the EU, and a divergence from Merkel’s course by the Social Democrats (who were not seen as equally competent on these matters) could have damaged them. The mainstream parties and Die Linke had several good reasons to hope that the AfD would disappear from the electoral stage once the Eurozone crisis was settled (or at least its salience had dropped). After all, between 2013 and July 2015 – when the refugee crisis started to make headlines and became the most salient political issue (Bauer-Blaschkowski et al 2019) – voter volatility was still relatively low, and political satisfaction with the work of both the Grand Coalition and the opposition in the Bundestag (i.e. Greens and Die Linke) was surprisingly high, despite the European crisis. At the same time, the AfD’s internal leadership struggle, resulting in the ousting of Bernd Lucke in favour of the national-conservative Frauke Petry in the summer of 2015, saw the party dropping to 2 percent in opinion polls (Bauer-Blaschkowski et al 2019). Lastly, the German electoral system could have rendered the AfD a mere ‘flash in the pan’ party. While the country’s federal structure, proportional electoral system, and public party financing promote a multi-party system, the 5 percent electoral threshold is a powerful constraint on party formation and establishment (Bolleyer 2013). However, the AfD weathered internal troubles and the easing of the Eurozone crisis and used the refugee crisis to their advantage.

The number of people seeking asylum in Germany had started to rise already in 2013, but the year 2015 saw this development turn into what came to be discussed as the ‘refugee crisis’. By the end of the year, just under 900,000 people had reached Germany, escaping the worsening civil war in Syria and the situation elsewhere in the Middle East and Northern Africa. Observers had, during the peak of the crisis, predicted that over one million people would seek refuge in Germany. The coalition partners of CDU, CSU and SPD, led by Chancellor Angela Merkel, adopted a ‘welcome culture’ in the face of the crisis and positioned Germany as a safe haven for refugees. Merkel in particular, with her famous ‘We will do it’ (‘Wir schaffen das’) dictum, tried to frame the refugee crisis as a challenge that could unite Germans as defenders of humanitarianism (Merkel 2015).

However, it seems that the welcome culture was only short-lived and that the mainstream parties had misjudged the salience of the refugee crisis. Certainly, the AfD – led, since July 2015, by Petry and now on a clear national-conservative path showing diminishing interest in the Eurozone or other economic matters – turned its full attention to the refugee crisis and immigration matters more generally and successfully linked these with questions of national sovereignty and identity. Furthermore, the refugee crisis provided the opportunity to the AfD to present itself as an advocate of the victims of the neo-liberal labour market and welfare reforms of the early 2000s and to position
itself as the sole defender of those not benefitting from European integration and suffering economic hardship while ‘the banks’, ‘the Greeks’ and ‘the refugees’ were saved. The AfD pursued this course with vigour, leading to demands by Beatrix Storch (a leading AfD politician and member of the European Parliament) that German border police fire at refugees illegally crossing the borders, including children (Der Spiegel 2016). Confronted with such discourse and a shift of opinion on the welcome culture and the refugee crisis, the mainstream parties adopted a strategy of marginalization vis-à-vis the AfD by appealing to Germans’ assumed opposition to any form of extremism. For example, the SPD’s secretary general alleged that there were links between the AfD and neo-Nazis and said that the party should be monitored by the secret services – a first step towards banning it as ‘unconstitutional’ (Barley 2016). Christian Democrat Volker Bouffier, the First Minister of the Land of Hesse and one of Merkel’s confidantes, said that the AfD was unelectable for ‘true democrats’. He equated the AfD to the SED, the party that had ruled Eastern Germany until 1989, when he referred to it as the ‘second German party to advocate shooting at the border’ (FAZ 2016). Die Linke endorsed the proposal of placing the AfD under secret service monitoring, after years of enduring demands from CDU and CSU that it itself be placed under surveillance. Die Linke also accused SPD, CDU and CSU of co-opting AfD policies, specifically in the form of the Asylpaket II legislation brought before the Bundestag in February 2016.

The Asylpaket II introduced a tougher approach to asylum matters, including: a) the creation of residential centres for refugees deemed unlikely to succeed in their claim and the restriction of their free movement within Germany to facilitate deportation; b) limitations of the right to family reunification; c) classification of some Maghreb states as ‘countries of safe origin’ to reduce the number of asylum claims; and d) quicker deportation procedures, including for those who were sick. A proposal coming from the CSU to introduce an annual ‘upper threshold’ for Germany’s refugee intake (e.g. FAZ 2015) was hotly debated within the Grand Coalition and rejected by SPD and CDU leaders. The idea, however was popular among 71 percent of Germans (Infratest Dimap 2015), and not far off AfD demands to put in place a temporary stop to the refugee intake (Gauland 2015). The CSU’s insistence on legislating for an upper threshold in the refugee intake was motivated by its fear that the AfD could become a permanent fixture on its right and by the knowledge that many AfD supporters in Bavaria were former CSU supporters (Schmitt 2018). This mattered a lot before the 2017 federal elections and the 2018 Bavarian elections. After the 2017 elections, the CSU abandoned the terminology of ‘upper thresholds’ and succeeded in enshrining a policy in the 2018 coalition agreement between CDU, CSU and SPD which stipulated that the annual refugee intake should not be higher than 220,000 (CDU, CSU and SPD 2017, 104).
In this period the SPD found it difficult to develop a strategy on immigration and asylum which would help them retain their appeal to liberal-minded voters and heed the concerns of those critical of the ‘welcome culture’ and worried about immigration at the same time. The outcome was a somewhat confused approach, evidencing the challenge of trying to attract both ‘populist-minded’ and ‘non-populist’ supporters, with both groups each making up about half of the Social Democratic support (Vehrkamp and Merkel, 2018). Ahead of the 2017 federal elections, warnings by SPD leader Sigmar Gabriel that the AfD’s entry into the Bundestag would mean that ‘for the first time since 1945, there would be real Nazis in the German parliament’ (Gabriel in Shalal 2017) were clearly meant to ostracize the party. Others in the party, such as Olaf Scholz, had earlier cautioned that this approach might backfire and that the SPD should rather engage with the AfD and its policies without dismissing its voters (Scholz 2016).

In late 2015 the positions of mainstream parties on immigration and asylum started to become less liberal (König 2017). This did not mean that mainstream parties co-opted specific AfD policies – in fact, the AfD’s proposals that the right to claim political asylum in Germany should be abolished (Gauland 2017) or that a deportation quota should be introduced were never taken up. While the mainstream parties’ discourse and policy on immigration and asylum were becoming more restrictive, they also ramped up their criticism of the AfD as a populist, right-wing and extremist party. With the AfD doing well in polls and elections throughout 2016 and 2017 (especially in the East) and adopting ever-harder views on immigration and nativist views on welfare rights, its opponents’ strategy of marginalizing the AfD as a party, and clashing with its discourse, while adopting more restrictive immigration and refugee policies, may have contributed to the AfD’s success at the 2017 federal elections.

Generally speaking, opponents of the AfD sent confusing signals in this period. For instance, some in the Green Party adopted a harsh tone on immigration and asylum, too – especially leading local government politicians whose municipalities had to deal with the consequences of the refugee crisis. Hence during the refugee crisis the popular mayor of Freiburg, Boris Palmer, started to argue against the grain of Green Party positions when he demanded that Germany reduced the intake of asylum seekers and increased deportations. He also moved closer to the AfD’s discourse when he demanded the armed protection of European borders and rejected German ‘refugee idealism’ (Palmer 2015). He, and also the popular Green First Minister of the government of the Land of Baden-Württemberg, Winfried Kretschmann, have since continued with such co-optive rhetoric (Kretschmann in Der Spiegel 2018). These contributions were not welcomed by the Green leadership at the federal level, and the Greens did not co-opt such proposals. They also voted against Asylpaket
II in the Bundestag and confirmed their support of the ‘welcome culture’ (Grüne 2019), so that the Green Party is now the ‘non-populist party left of the centre’ (Vehrkamp and Merkel 2018, 18).

Die Linke officially rejected most of the Grand Coalition’s policies on immigration and asylum and remained committed to liberal positions in this policy area. The debate at the time shows that Die Linke was of comparatively little concern to the mainstream parties as they focussed their strategic thinking on the AfD as the most threatening of the two populist parties and the only party with a substantially different view on immigration issues. However, as the refugee crisis wore on and the electoral success of the AfD solidified also at the expense of Die Linke, tensions within the latter party started to show. In particular, the leaders of the party’s left wing, Oskar Lafontaine and Sahra Wagenknecht, made demands which resembled the discourses and policies coming from AfD and CSU. In 2016, after a number of violent crimes, including terrorist attacks, were committed by refugees, Wagenknecht argued that taking in immigrants and refugees in high numbers had caused significant problems, that the state should do all in its power to assure that citizens felt safe, and that those who committed crimes had outstayed their welcome. In addition to this, Wagenknecht seemed to support the CSU’s demand to limit the intake of refugees (Wagenknecht 2016a, 2016b). On top of that, Wagenknecht and the AfD leader, Frauke Petry, agreed to a joint interview in October 2016. While Petry was keen to highlight communalities between the two and their parties, Wagenknecht rejected her advances for co-operation by pointing out to what divided the parties (Wagenknecht and Petry 2016). Nonetheless, by agreeing to do the joint interview Wagenknecht acknowledged the AfD as a competitor and thus adopted an adversarial strategy and engaged with the AfD by discussing its policies – much to the dismay of many in Die Linke. The interview demonstrated how Die Linke was internally divided between those wishing to maintain a liberal approach to immigration in order to keep the party’s cosmopolitan vote, and those favouring more restrictive policy positions, attractive to many of those former Die Linke supporters who had defected to the AfD.

A central problem for both factions of Die Linke was how to develop an adversarial strategy to tackle the AfD on policy fields beyond immigration and asylum. On these, the AfD had said little in public debates between 2015 and 2017 – possibly for a good reason, as many AfD voters had little in common with the party’s positions on social and economic policy, as they favoured a more generous welfare state, a higher minimum wage, and a reigned-in market economy (Schwarzbözl and Fatke 2016). In the run-up to the September 2017 federal elections, the AfD started to adopt positions closer to Die Linke when it demanded the partial roll-back of the neoliberal labour market
and welfare reforms of the early 2000s and talked increasingly about social justice (FAZ 2017). While this did not amount to a very substantial co-optation of Die Linke’s policies or discourse, it was an acknowledgement by the AfD of the need to address voter concerns beyond those revolving around immigration. This superficial co-optation added to the worries of those in Die Linke, for example Wagenknecht and Lafontaine, who had seen their voters shift allegiance to the AfD because of its positions on immigration and refugees. Doubting their party’s ability to challenge the AfD because of its positions on immigration and refugees. Doubting their party’s ability to challenge the AfD, these two representatives set up a new organization in September 2018, called ‘Aufstehen’ or ‘Rise’. Designed to become a movement to unite the left, attract citizens without a ‘political home’, and diminish support for the AfD, Aufstehen demanded a strong welfare state and a ‘united Europe of sovereign democracies’ (Aufstehen 2018). Whilst little was said on immigration in Aufstehen’s founding manifesto, Wagenknecht, as one of its most high-profile founders, stressed that immigration should be regulated and reduced (Wagenknecht 2018). The AfD itself welcomed Aufstehen as a bridge-builder between left and right (Gauland 2018).

In summary, mainstream parties adopted different approaches to Die Linke and AfD during the Eurozone and refugee crisis. Concerning the EU and the Euro, they chose dismissive and adversarial strategies towards the AfD and adopted none of its policies. This approach was maintained throughout the crisis. However, mainstream parties may have paid the price for this approach as it promoted the AfD’s status as an anti-establishment party. Die Linke was more readily accepted as a political actor but its policy proposals on the Eurozone crisis were engaged with through a strategy of clashing adversarialism.

The refugee crisis and the debate about immigration more generally saw strategic shifts by the mainstream parties, and also by Die Linke. SPD and CDU initially adopted mostly adversarial-marginalizing strategies to ostracize the AfD, but adjusted their strategic responses to a co-optation approach of the AfD’s policy discourse, taking the lead from the CSU, when polls and elections indicated that the party and its positions were popular. At the same time, they continued to paint the AfD as an extreme party. Die Linke put its internal tensions on public display when some of its most prominent leaders co-opted a discourse resembling that of the AfD and established Aufstehen. Among the mainstream parties, the Greens were the exception as they held onto their positions. By late 2019, no mainstream party has adopted an accommodative strategy towards the AfD by cooperating with it in any form. However, some in the East German branches of the CDU have started discussing publicly whether collaboration with the AfD on the Land level might have become necessary (Sirleschtov 2018) to avoid multi-party coalitions with SPD and Greens and to form right-of-centre governing majorities.
Besides analysing the strategies of political parties, our analysis shed light on why asylum and immigration policy have become more restrictive in Germany since 2015. There is little doubt that the pressure of the AfD’s electoral successes has contributed to policy contagion in this field (which did not happen on EU-related matters). While the electorate did not see the AfD as competent in solving problems or proposing credible policy alternatives, its demands pulled CDU, CSU and SPD, but not the Greens or Die Linke, towards adopting tougher policies.

If there was contagion, to what extent can we also speak of populist convergence? As the discussion has shown, there was a limited degree of convergence between AfD and Die Linke. Both shared an agreement on the need to roll back neo-liberal labour market and welfare reforms and at least some in the two parties shared superficial communalities with regards to immigration. However, the underlying ideological reasons for this convergence on a limited number of issues differ significantly. Hence, regarding labour market and welfare reforms, the AfD claims that ‘the Germans’ deserve a better deal, while Die Linke demands policy change that benefits ‘everybody’. In other words, it seems that left- and right-wing distinctions remain significant enough to disallow full convergence.

The main part of this chapter ends with a brief discussion of how Germany’s political environment changed in the context of the two crises and due to the arrival of a new populist challenger party. First, it seems that not all mainstream parties have understood the new realities of party competition. For example, most parties do not want to fully engage with the AfD (even in late-2019), and continue to hope that an adversarial strategy mix of marginalization, clashing and co-optation will diminish its electoral appeal. However, it might be the case that only a clashing adversarial strategy on policy issues beyond immigration may make voters realize that the AfD is a typical case of a far-right party reluctant to discuss its neo-liberal economic and social policy positions in detail in fear of losing votes (Rovny 2013). Some in Die Linke have understood this, but opted to set up a new vehicle in the form of Aufstehen as they could not change their party’s course. With its focus on labour market and welfare policy it might have been a valid attempt to challenge the AfD from outside party politics. However, it has not sustained its initial momentum and, with the resignation of Wagenknecht from its leadership team in March 2019 (Meisner 2019), lost its most prominent founder. Since then, the movement appears to have stalled. At the same time, the AfD’s success has changed German politics in some ways, including how parliaments in the Länder and in Berlin conduct their work. These institutions are now faced with a political party with little experience in, and competence of, parliamentary business, and with parliamentarians who at times show disrespect towards parliamentary democracy and what the AfD calls the ‘parties of the system’. As
examples of this approach to politics one can cite AfD representatives in Land parliaments wearing a niqab to underpin their demands for ‘banning the burka’, or their carefully orchestrated collective exits from the debating chamber following an admonition of an AfD representative by the speaker. The fact that the party leadership continues to show little interest in seeking office proves that this extra-parliamentary ‘movement orientation’ is still very much a feature of the party (Schroeder et al 2017; Rütters 2017). *Die Linke*, in comparison, even when mainstream parties sought to ostracize its predecessor in the early 1990s, never attempted such a strategy.

**Conclusions**

It seems that the SPD is the only party in need of a strategy that deals with two populist parties at once, the AfD and *Die Linke*. Given the characteristics of the SPD’s supporters, a populist shift may alienate as many supporters as it may gain. The SPD’s incremental distancing from its own legacy of neoliberal labour market and welfare reforms may perhaps be seen as a response to *Die Linke*, and also to the AfD. However, in matters of immigration and asylum the SPD has found it much more difficult to give in to the ‘populist temptation’. The CDU and the CSU have ‘only’ had to fend off the AfD from amongst the populists: *Die Linke* has never posed an electoral threat to them, while the AfD’s rapid growth across the country has come, certainly in the West, at their great expense. Whether the strategy of co-optation of a more restrictive immigration and refugee policies will reconcile former conservative voters is unclear. The Land elections of 2019 were disastrous for the CDU and would not suggest so. It also remains to be seen whether the post-Merkel CDU will recapture terrain on its right, and whether the CSU will recover from the electoral inroads the AfD has made in Bavaria in 2018.

The Greens seem to be the party which changed its positions the least when it came to the rise of the AfD in the course of the refugee crisis. Staying the course was relatively easy for them and apparently paid off – after all, they only have few supporters with populist mind sets and stand little to gain from co-opting AfD policies. Certainly the polls throughout 2019 (and the European Parliament Elections in May 2019) showed the party coming second only to the CDU and CSU, and replacing the SPD as their main competitor. As a result of this, CDU and CSU are now squeezed not only by the AfD, but also by the Green Party. Last but not least, the pattern of competition between AfD and *Die Linke* shows only superficial indications of populist convergence. This was largely driven by those who disagreed with *Die Linke*’s stance on immigration and, later, founded Aufstehen.
However, Aufstehen, since its inception, has also struggled to pursue a convincing adversarial strategy to engage with the AfD’s anti-immigration discourse in the hope to regain voters.

References


