

# Movement? Party? The Rightist AfD's Political Strategies Vary in State Assemblies

Wolfgang Schroeder, Bernhard Weßels, Alexander Berzel, and Christian Neusser

Already in the 2013 federal election there were signs that the party system in Germany was facing diversification and that the structure of political competition could change. Starting almost from scratch, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) won 4.7 per cent of the second vote (for party lists) at the polls, falling just short of the score needed to enter the German Bundestag. In all state assembly (Landtag) elections since the federal election on 22nd September 2013, the AfD made it into the state parliaments. In seven states, they reached double figures.

What does the presence of a new party whose role in the work of the Landtag is still unclear mean for political competition and for political mobilization of the electorate? Drawing on material and publications, and above all on focused interviews with parliamentary group leaders of all parties in parliament in the ten state assemblies where the AfD won seats between 2014 and 2016, the research project "The AfD in State Assemblies" examines these questions.

In two assemblies, the AfD with over 20 per cent of the vote is the second largest party and in another two the third largest. They have thus driven the so-called established parties from their accustomed places. A total of 153 AfD candidates have been elected to the Landtag by almost two-and-a-half million voters. It is not so much the size of AfD parliamentary groups as their political style that poses a challenge to other groups in state assemblies.

Members and officers (chair, secretary) of parliamentary groups other than the AfD agree that the presence of the new party has changed parliamentary work. Discussions on how to handle the AfD have come to a clear conclusion: excluding and ignoring the newcomers is not a viable approach. The better answer is disassociation without exclusion.

The challenges posed by the AfD are far greater than the conflicts to which the traditional parliamentary parties in most state assemblies are accustomed. Above all, the presence of the AfD in Landtag introduces communicative uncertainty – provoked by the conduct of the AfD, which on occasion flies in the face of usual parliamentary practices. Verbal and non-verbal provocations sometimes make any purely political and substantive reaction difficult, according to officers from other parliamentary groups in almost all state assemblies.

This might be due to the bipolar structure that characterizes the AfD in state assemblies: a clear division of labor between provocateurs and pragmatists. This makes it difficult for competing parties to devise strategies for handling and countering the situation politically. Regardless of whether the distribution of roles is strategic – as members of other parliamentary groups sometimes surmise – or whether it merely reflects plurality within AfD groups, it makes it hard to deal with them.

Also striking in most assemblies is the disparity that prevails between plenary and committee activities. Whereas AfD members in the first and second rows in plenary sessions are quite active, they contribute little or nothing to work in committees.

This is because, first, the majority of AfD members of state assemblies have hardly any prior experience in elected representative bodies, so that they (still) lack the necessary qualifications. AfD parliamentary group officers have to some extent also admitted this. Second, plenary sessions offer more possibilities

**Summary:** Since 2014, the young populist party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD) has won seats in German state assemblies (Landtag). A first systematic analysis of AfD work in ten of these regional parliaments offers insight into the party's strategic bipolarity: some AfD politicians emphasize constructive parliamentary action, whereas others prefer fundamental opposition. A common feature of AfD parliamentary groups is their focus on plenary sessions while neglecting committee work.

for garnering attention outside parliament in the mass media. A member of another parliamentary group put it thus: “the plenary assembly is the extended arm of Facebook.”

Despite congruence in how the party presents itself and how it is seen in the ten state assemblies, there are a number of differences that give a more mixed picture. Thus within AfD parliamentary groups there is not only bipolarity between those that pursue the development of a movement-oriented party and those that advocate a pragmatic, parliament-oriented role with the prospect of participation in a future government. There are also differences between the parliamentary groups of different assemblies. The attempt to establish a typology of AfD parliamentary groups in state assemblies is based first on strategic orientation and second on the policy dimension.

The strategic orientation of the groups in the parliamentary system is determined by their leadership – only about half of parliamentary group chairs can be described as “parliament-oriented.” The assemblies concerned are first of all Berlin, Saxony, and Rhineland-Palatinate and, with some reservations, Hamburg. The chief protagonist on the movement-oriented side is the Thuringian parliamentary group. Also to be counted among the “movement-oriented” forces are the groups in Brandenburg, Saxony-Anhalt, and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania. Not least because of the role played by their leader Meuthen as party chairmen, the Baden-Württemberg political group adopts no clear positions, but leans towards movement-oriented opposition. Here, again, we find a double structure with clear bipolarity across all state assemblies.

Is such a bipolar structure also to be found in matters of policies? As far as can be judged by their motions and minor interpellations, parliamentary groups also differ quite strongly on content. Overall, AfD parliamentary groups place

Electoral success of the AfD in ten state assemblies						
State	Date Election	Result in %*)	Result absolute*)	MdL Start of LP	Strength Parliamentary	Direct-mandate
Baden-Württemberg	13/03/2016	15.1	809,564	23	3. Force	2
Berlin	18/09/2016	14.2	231,492	25	5. Force	5
Brandenburg	14/09/2014	12.2	120,077	11	4. Force	0
Bremen	10/05/2015	5.5	64,368	4	6. Force	**
Hamburg	15/02/2015	6.1	214,833	8	6. Force	0
Mecklenburg-West Pomerania	04/09/2016	20.8	167,852	18	2. Force	3
Rhineland-Palatinate	13/03/2016	12.6	268,628	14	3. Force	0
Saxony	31/08/2014	9.7	159,611	14	4. Force	0
Saxony-Anhalt	13/03/2016	24.3	272,496	25	2. Force	15
Thuringia	14/09/2014	10.6	99,545	11	4. Force	0

almost twice as much value as other parties on issues of asylum, refugees, migration, and integration. Surprising is the comparison on matters of internal security, i.e., crime, security, order, and police. Although regarded as a “law-and-order” party, this makes no visible impact on their parliamentary work. Among the just under 4,700 minor interpellations by AfD parliamentary groups in ten state assemblies, the two issue areas together were addressed by about one third; for other groups by less than one fifth.

However, there are major differences in how the topic cluster asylum/refugees/migration/integration, and internal security are treated. This shows whether AfD parliamentary groups concern themselves predominantly with only a few issues or whether they take a broader part in parliamentary work. We take as our yardstick the other parliamentary groups in the given state assembly and, second, the average for AfD groups in the assemblies under study.

Although thematization by the AfD differs somewhat from state to state, in principle the profile of the party remains the same. In Berlin and Thuringia, migration was the issue most frequently addressed (35.7 % and 23.6 %), and in Rhineland-Palatinate and Saxony-Anhalt it was the least frequently raised topic (13 and 11 per cent). Internal security is brought up by the AfD most often again in Berlin and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania (20 % and 16.2 %) and least often in Rhineland-Palatinate (5.2 %) and Saxony-Anhalt (8.3 %). Nowhere are AfD parliamentary groups below average in addressing migration and integration, but they are so in the question of internal security in the two states in which this topic is least often brought up.

No clear connection is apparent between concentration on the two fields asylum seekers/refugees and internal security/order and strategic orientation (parliament vs. movement). Parliamentary groups with a more parliamentary orientation, such as in Berlin or Saxony, concentrate between 35 % and 55 % of their minor interpellations on these topics, as does the movement-oriented group in Thuringia. By contrast, the parliament-oriented group in the Rhineland-Palatinate assembly, like the more movement-oriented Saxony-Anhalt group address these topics in fewer than 20 % of interpellations. Parliamentary groups that adopt a movement orientation can therefore not be accused of limiting themselves to one or two issues, of being “single-issue” groups. Similarly, parliament-oriented groups cannot be said to take a broader range of substantive positions.

The activities and positions of the AfD thus vary; they present a uniform picture neither vis-à-vis other political actors nor the public. For the other parties, this heterogeneity and bipolarity bring uncertainty and difficulties in political competition. So far, the AfD possibly owes its attractiveness to this variation, because the party and its parliamentary groups cover every facet of dissatisfaction and thus enjoy broad mobilization. It remains to be seen whether disunity up to and including conflict within the AfD will remain a recipe for success. Structural bipolarity will at any rate continue to shape the course of the party.

## References

Schroeder, Wolfgang/Weßels, Bernhard/Berzel, Alexander/Neusser, Christian: *Parlamentarische Praxis der AfD in deutschen Landesparlamenten*. WZB Discussion Paper SP V 2017–102. Berlin: WZB 2017.

Schroeder, Wolfgang/Weßels, Bernhard/Berzel, Alexander: “Die AfD in den Landtagen: Bipolarität als Struktur und Strategie – zwischen Parlaments- und ‘Bewegungs-Orientierung.’” In: *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen*, 2018, vol. 49: pp. 91–110.



Wolfgang Schroeder (left) is professor at the University of Kassel, where he heads the department Political System of the Federal Republic of Germany; he is also WZB fellow in the research unit Democracy and Democratization. In 2017, his book “Konfessionelle Wohlfahrtsverbände im Umbruch” was published by Springer VS. Bernhard Weßels is deputy director of the research unit Democracy and Democratization and professor at the Humboldt University of Berlin. He is particularly interested in electoral research, as well as interested in intermediation and political representation. [Photo: private]

wolfgang.schroeder@wzb.eu

bernhard.wessels@wzb.eu

Alexander Berzel is research fellow at the University of Kassel in the project: “Arrangements in Preventive Social Policy. Conception and Implementation of Preventive Social Policy at the State Level – Learning and Transfer Possibilities.” His research focuses on political parties, the welfare state, and political communication.

alex.berzel@uni-kassel.de

Christian Neusser is research fellow at the University of Kassel. He is particularly interested in party, government, and association policy, as well as comparative social policy.

christian.neusser@uni-kassel.de