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Control the borders, not the citizens!

A frame analysis of Alternative for Germany in the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

The unanticipated and abrupt outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 rapidly shifted the political opportunities for the family of parties residing on the far right of electoral politics. Prior to the pandemic, these parties had experienced mainstreaming and advancement, gaining ground in several countries. This thesis, accordingly, examines the impact of the pandemic on the Alternative for Germany (Alternative for Deutschland, AfD), by investigating how the party changed its framing strategies of political issues before and outer the outbreak. By analysing the evolution of the AfDs framing strategies, this research seeks to uncover how the party met the challenge of the pandemic.

This thesis builds on research on the far right and the postulation that demand and supply must be analysed together in order to analyse party agency. In addition, the thesis sheds light on the agency of far-right parties in the pandemic, recognizing their active role in shaping discourses. By utilizing a frame analysis of Facebook posts, this thesis is situated within the realm of far-right party research, providing insights into how far-right parties strategically employ framing techniques to communicate their messages and engage with their audience, with the goal of achieving resonance and mobilization.

The empirical analysis in the thesis demonstrates that the AfD adapted its frames to the pandemic by bridging its former anti-immigration sentiment to the pandemic. Furthermore, the thesis highlights the important strategy of the AfD in framing the pandemic as a domestic, political crisis, using populist elements to frame the government as incompetent and itself as a defender of freedom and rights. It becomes evident in the thesis, however, that despite the agency of the AfD, aligning its frames with the pandemic, the nature of the crisis shifted discursive opportunities away from the core of the far right, and their framing as a result received mixed responses. This difficulty, however, does not entail a permanent shift, and the thesis points to the survival of far-right parties by maintaining their core issues as best they can.

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Any errors or inaccuracies in the thesis are my own.

Amanda Mylius Krause
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Abbreviations

AfD	(Alternative für Deutschland) – Alternative for Germany
DOS	Discursive opportunity structures
SPD	(Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) – Social Democratic Party of Germany
CDU/CSU	Christlich Demokratische Union/Christlich-Soziale Union) - Christian Democratic Union of Germany/Christian Social Union in Bavaria
FDP	(Freie Demokratische Partei) – Free Democatic Party
BfV	(Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz) - The German domestic intelligence services
EP	European Parliament
PEGIDA	(Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes) - Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West

1. Introduction

On the 24th of September 2017, the 19th Federal Election in Germany took place, marking a significant turning point with the entrance of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) into parliament. This, spectacularly, was the first time in more than half a century that a far-right party was elected to the German parliament. Addressing the euphoric party members, Alexander Gauland, a top AfD candidate, declared that they would "hunt" Merkel over her refugee policies, announcing that they intended to take their country and people back (Connolly, 2017). The success in the 2017 election has, largely, been attributed to the presence of the eurozone crisis (Franzmann, 2016, p. 473) as well as the so-called refugee crisis (Decker, 2016, p. 10). As a result, crises have been argued as beneficial for reactionary parties on the far right, through their creation of grievances and "windows of opportunity" (Chadi, Cohen, and Wagner, 2022, p. 373; Caiani and Graziano 2019, p. 1150), as well as anti-elite stances and possibilities of blame-attribution of those in charge (Moffit, 2015, p. 190-5).

In 2020, however, a crisis of a different calibre swept across Europe: The COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis, shifting issue salience away from core far right issues and towards public health, created a vastly different landscape for political engagement, as many citizens "rallied-around-the-flag", supporting incumbent governments (Wondreys and Mudde, 2020, p. 93). Thus, the presence of a worldwide pandemic, emerging abruptly and extraordinarily, begs several questions of researchers, as the nature of the crisis was significantly different from previous crises that had enabled the rise of far-right parties.

This thesis aims to understand how the far-right party Alternative for Germany responded to the crisis through its framing of issues, examining their adaption of ideology and rhetoric. Framing, as such, is the active and conscious signifying work of focusing attention to events and social facts to make party policies, rhetoric and ideology resonate with constituents (Lindekilde, 2014, p. 201). Accordingly, this thesis asks the question: *"How did the AfD change its framing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?"*. By employing a frame-analytic approach, the thesis sheds light on how the far-right strategically constructs narratives to mobilize supporters or demobilize adversaries (ibid, pp. 195-6), while facing the relative decline of their core issues, that were successful before the pandemic.

The significance of the pandemic and its impact on success of the far right is still not fully understood. In contrast to its success before the pandemic, the AfD experienced a slight vote loss in the 2021 Federal election that coincided with the pandemic. This has been speculated by several to stem from the loss of issue-salience for far-right policies, as the presence of a health-related crisis distracts from the core issues of the far-right (Wondreys and Mudde, 2022), while others argue that the struggles are just temporary and that a far-right backlash might arrive when the consequence of the pandemic plays out (Bieber, 2020).

Understanding the extent to which the far-right shifted in response to the pandemic is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, the long-term effects of the pandemic have not yet been probed, and so this thesis utilizes a longer time-scope, looking up from the initial stage of the pandemic and to the period where parties had devised stances and policies on the pandemic. Secondly, the successful development of the far-right prior to the pandemic is a dynamic seen in many other countries, which researchers attribute to the various grievances resulting from the so-called refugee crisis and the economic crises of the 2000s and 2010s (Golder, 2016, p. 482). However, the focus on grievances has not accounted for the role which the far-right parties themselves have played in politicizing the sentiment (ibid, p. 486). As such, the thesis provides important insight into the agency of far-right parties and how they reacted to the demand in the crisis, attempting to facilitate mobilization.

The advancement of the far right before the pandemic has been labelled as a mainstreaming-process, where far-right parties have increasingly become integrated into European politics, transitioning from outsiders to members of the political landscape, without significantly moderating their policies (Mudde, 2019). This mainstreaming trend also applies to the AfD, which challenged the German taboo of voting far right, emphasising nationalism as a value they believed had, for historical reasons, been denied to them (Cain, 2021, p. 51). However, the mainstreaming has contributed to several controversies for the AfD. The party has been associated with extreme-right protest groups like Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes (PEGIDA) and the Reichsbürger movement, the latter famous for its anti-constitutional, historical revisionist perspective and planned coup d'état in 2022 (Crossland, 2022). Furthermore, in 2021, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV) placed the AfD under surveillance as a suspected extremist group. Consequently, Jörg Meuthen resigned as the party's chairman in January 2022, citing that the party had "moved too far right and adopted totalitarian traits that have no place in a democracy" a well as having a "cult-like"

stance on COVID-19 (Deustche Welle, 2022). Therefore, the pandemic presents a valuable research opportunity due to its confounding impact on the mainstreaming process of far-right parties. Understanding how these parties position themselves and engage in politics during crises sheds light on their agency and the potential effects they can have on electoral politics.

By employing a frame-analytic approach, the thesis demonstrates that the AfD maintained its fundamental positions of nativism, populism, and authoritarianism during the pandemic. However, it adjusted its messaging to align with the context of the crisis, placing a particular emphasis on populist themes and seizing opportunities to criticize the government. In particular, the AfD voiced criticism of the measures taken by the government to alleviate the pandemic and their failure to address other priorities, such as their core issue, immigration. This sentiment is reflected in one of the many slogans employed by the AfD during the pandemic, arguing that the government should "control the borders, not the citizens". Thus, the analysis investigates their posts on Facebook as a primary channel of communication with voters. The analysis reveals that the AfD, throughout the pandemic, consistently adhered to their pre-pandemic policies, adapting, and bridging them to the current situation, while positioning themselves, importantly, as defenders of the freedoms and right of the people.

To answer the research question, the thesis proceeds as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the available literature on the topic of far-right parties, discussing the categorical separation into supply and demand and the importance of bridging the concepts to understand the role of crises. Chapter 3 provides the theoretical framework for the thesis, discussing the far-right conceptualization, the modelling of the relationship between supply and demand as well as the ability of the frame-analysis to shed light on the strategy and agency of the far-right in the pandemic. Chapter 4 presents and discusses the data, methods, and research design, explaining how the frame analysis approach may answer the research question, its limitations and the various ethical considerations undertaken in the thesis. Chapter 5 provides an in-depth view of the framing-opportunities for the far-right in the context of the pandemic in Germany. Chapter 6, 7 and 8, accordingly, provide the frame analyses before and after the pandemic, as well as an in-depth discussion of the main findings and their implications over time. Lastly, chapter 9 summarizes the analysis, makes some conclusions regarding the implications of the findings, and suggests alleyways for further research on the topic.

2. Literature review

This thesis, situated within the field of Peace and Conflict studies, builds on the existing literature on far-right parties. As discussed in the introduction, literature on parties that reside on the far right of the political spectrum encompasses a wide variety of approaches to explain, describe or predict the activities that the parties participate in, such as elections, statements online, statements offline and confrontational tactics (Bosi and Zamponi, 2015). The study of party positioning, in particular, consists of two possible approaches, bottom-up or to-down (Green-Pedersen, 2019), where the bottom-up approach emphasizes voter demand and the top-down approach highlights supply of parties.

Accordingly, the following chapter reviews the literature on the demand- and supply-sides, respectively, before emphasizing the importance of bridging the two approaches, as demand generates grievances which the far-right themselves must politicise. Building on this logic of bridging, the literature review then discusses the role of crises for far-right party positioning and the importance of analysing crises on a case-by-case basis, because of mainstreaming and heterogeneity of the far-right.

2.1 Demand-side explanations

A majority of the literature on far-right parties emphasizes what generates demand for far-right parties as well as understanding the motivations behind individuals who vote for them (Golder, 2016, p. 482). Literature typically centres around modernization, cultural incompatibilities, and economic grievances and their importance to the origin and initial success of far-right parties. Modernization-related grievances suggest that far-right support emerged in post-Soviet countries during the deindustrialization era, when insecurities arose from the emergence of democracy and capitalist economies (Golder, 2016, pp. 482-3; Minkenberg, 2002). Similarly, cultural, and economic grievances have also been highlighted in terms of their ingroup-outgroup dynamics, where the outgroup is blamed for generating grievances (Golder, 2016, pp. 483-5; Ivarsflaten, 2008, p. 3). Thus, research on demand has linked grievances to the success and consolidation of the far-right across Europe (Loch and Norocel, 2015, p. 252).

Research on the AfD, in particular, has argued that anti-immigration sentiment and cultural grievances have been important mobilizing factors for voters (Arzheimer and Berning, 2019). The effect has become visible in the mobilization of former non-voters (Hoerner and Hobolt,

2017), as well as in the mobilization of voters in Eastern Germany, where economic grievances have created a "wall after the wall" following emigration to the West after the German reunification (Weisskircher, 2020, pp. 615-9). Economic grievances have also been cited as important on the district-level, as districts with lower levels of education and lower disposable household income were associated with higher shares of votes for the AfD (Wolff, 2017). These findings, arguably, highlight the importance of anti-immigration sentiment and grievances as mobilizing factors for voters.

Despite the importance of the demand-side literature, the approach has been increasingly challenged on grounds of it not accounting for the role parties play in actively politicizing grievances. Thus, while the presence of grievances is important for the AfD, the party's ability to shape and politicize them is crucial. Furthermore, as far-right parties are increasingly mainstreamed, the traditional postulation of the typical far-right voter as young, uneducated, and unemployed has been questioned (Rooduijn, 2018, p. 351; Golder, 2016, p. 483). As a result, researchers increasingly highlight the role of parties in politicising grievances, which the next section provides an overview of.

2.2 Supply-side explanations

The supply-side explanations focus on far-right party agency and positioning, in contrast to the demand-side which emphasizes the grievances that facilitate engagement. Much of the literature highlights the importance of "political opportunity structures" (POS) which are shaped by electoral rules, party competition, and political cleavages, and consequentially determine the permissiveness of the electoral system and possibilities for entrepreneurs within these systems (Arzheimer and Carter, 2006). In addition to the POS, and less frequently studied, are the "discursive opportunity structures" (DOS), which is the degree to which the messages of the far-right succeed in the public sphere, based on dominant issues and ideology (Golder, 2016, pp. 486-9). The DOS is, accordingly, determined by discursive factors in the public debate, and rests primarily on the visibility of issues and legitimacy of the agent (Koopmans and Muis, 2009, p. 648). Thus, the DOS is comprised of engagement with voters, where a higher degree of visibility and legitimacy of far-right issues increases the potential for mobilization (Castelli et al, 2019, p. 1035. Koopman and Statham, 1999, p. 228). In total, research on the POS and DOS have highlighted permissiveness, party competition and the importance of issue-ownership (Chadi et al, 2022, p. 380; Arzheimer and Carter, 2006, pp. 422-4).

Research on the AfD has primarily highlighted the POS, pointing both to the difficulties generated from the federalist system and German electoral thresholds. Some argue that the decentralized nature of the federalist system originally posed a challenge to the AfD, but that they overcame it and managed to build cross-country membership, consolidating their embeddedness (Heinze and Weisskircher, 2021, pp. 264-9). Others emphasize the difficulty of entering the German electoral system, as the Basic Law sets a five percent threshold, where parties are excluded from parliament in cases where it is not obtained. Germany does not, however, possess electoral thresholds to the European Parliament, on grounds of them not requiring the same smooth functioning as the German legislature. Accordingly, the absence of a hurdle to the EP was a significant factor in the initial success of the AfD, as the party narrowly missed the threshold to enter the Bundestag in 2013 but was able to gain momentum in the EP election that followed, consequentially providing a platform for the initial supporters (Taylor, 2017, pp. 734-7). This is also reflected in other research, which shows that EP elections may facilitate success of small and radical parties which in turn provides success in the domestic arena (Braun, 2021, pp. 451-2). Others have also highlighted the competition in the POS, pointing to the provocative and self-scandalizing strategies of the AfD between 2015-2018, which resulted in increased media coverage that, in turn, increased public awareness of them (Maurer et al, 2022, pp. 7-15).

Research on DOS is less highlighted than the POS, but there is some evidence of the role of discursive opportunities both overall and in the case of Germany. Empirically, research on discursive opportunities in Western democracies have identified some correlations between issue salience and the rise of the far right, where the shift from traditional socio-economic issues towards cultural issues are cited as important (Stövsand et al, 2022, p. 78). The AfD have been found to utilize DOS on social media (Froio and Ganesh, 2019, p. 516), bypassing traditional media which is an attribute of their success (Serrano et al, 2019, p. 214).

The research on the POS and DOS in the German case, however, have highlighted mostly the emergence of the AfD in the political system – and not their continuance. As a result, this thesis builds on the findings, highlighting the important role of the POS and DOS, shifting towards a long-term perspective on the AfD positioning on the ideological spectrum, as the topic is underresearched (Mudde, 2007, pp. 255-76).

2.3 The role of crises: Bridging supply and demand

The preponderance of demand-side, individual-level explanations, and the categorical separation of supply and demand, as discussed above, may be labelled as the "normal pathology thesis". The normal pathology thesis asserts that far-right values are alien to western democratic societies, but there exists a small potential for them nevertheless, which may become politically relevant under extreme conditions. According to Mudde, however, this does not hold when discussing the perseverance of far-right parties (2010, pp. 1170-7). Thus, instead of a normal pathology, Mudde argues that the far-right is a pathological normalcy; The far-right is not alien to western democracies and may, in fact, become accepted and integrated into mainstream politics over time, without changing their core values or agenda (ibid p. 1178). Within this argument, Mudde concludes that the role of demand should, accordingly, explain the existence of attitudes at the mass level at a given point in time, while the supply should empirically evaluate the positioning of far-right parties in response to these attitudes (ibid, pp. 1179-80). This argument is significant to this thesis, which builds on the pathological normalcy thesis and, as a result, analyses supply and demand as two necessary components. Accordingly, the pathological normalcy argument allows for an analysis of the far-right as an active agent in the face of discursive opportunities, not reducing it to a passive observer in the face of external political conditions (Muis and Immerzeel, 2017, p. 915).

However, political parties' response to social change are complex and difficult to analyze. Drawing on cleavage theory, Hooghe and Marks argue that changes in party systems are disruptive rather than accumulative, which entails that periods of stability may be followed by periods of unanticipated change. They argue, furthermore, that recent rises – such as the so-called refugee crisis or the Eurozone-crisis – represents a crucial juncture, as change is driven not by mainstream parties adapting to voters' preferences, but by voters turning to distinct party programmes related to the crises themselves (2018, p. 126). For the far right, in particular, these events have offered several discursive opportunities (Caiani and Graziano, 2019), on issues such as immigration, economic grievances or unemployment (Rooduijn, 2015, p. 7). Accordingly, researching the responses of the far right to these crises has shed light on their political agendas and impact on the political landscape (Mudde, 2016, p. 303).

Crises may increase the favourability of the DOS for far-right parties if the context of the crisis coincides with the core issues of the far-right, namely: Nativism, authoritarianism, and populism (Caiani and Graziano, 2019, p. 1150). As such, crises may provide "windows of

opportunity" for the far-right to frame their ideology. Social media has, importantly, facilitated this, through simplified and antagonistic forms of communication (ibid, p. 1151). In addition to the "windows of opportunity", crises may also generate spontaneous grievances which have two overall effects on demand: They might shift attitudes, or they may increase the salience of certain issues over others (Chadi, Cohen, and Wagner, 2022, p. 372). Furthermore, the spontaneous grievances may also generate anti-elite stances if someone can be blamed for the crisis (ibid, p. 373). Thus, the far-right may actively frame crises, by both spectacularizing the failure of those to blame for the grievances and by perpetuating a sense of crisis (Moffit, 2015, p. 190-5).

Many of these dynamics have been found in research on the AfD, where the origin of the party is attributed to its effective politicization of Euroscepticism, and the German government's handling of the so-called refugee crisis (Decker, 2016, p. 10). This, in turn, allowed the AfD to develop from a niche party to, temporarily, the third-largest German political actor (Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2022, p. 550).

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has dealt the far-right with a different set of discursive opportunities, as the pandemic is an event highlighting issues outside of their regular domain (Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2022, p. 546; Bobba and Hubé, 2020). Thus, the far-right has been found to rhetorically emphasize domestic elites more so than foreign targets, framing the crisis as a domestic political crisis, demonizing governmental restrictions, rather than framing it as an international health-related crisis (Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2022, pp. 565-6). Some researchers suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has not had a substantial impact on the electoral success of far-right parties. They argue that Europe has been undergoing a gradual political transformation, where crises like the pandemic only have a moderate influence. This is attributed to the fact that far-right parties have become more mainstream and diverse, resulting in their success and survival being determined on a case-by-case basis (Wondreys and Mudde, 2020, p. 98).

When analysing the AfD in its context, the party was found to struggle in the initial phase of the pandemic. In one contribution by Lehmann and Zehnter, press releases between January 2020 and March 2021 were analysed, arguing that the popularity of the AfD dropped before the 2021 Federal Election because of the loss of issue-salience for their core issues (2022, pp. 15-16). Others have also stressed the importance of issue-salience, arguing that the shift towards

the pandemic led to a decline in favourable opinions of the AfD (Cain, 2022, p. 52). Despite these initial struggles, however, researchers have found that crises are generally considered a temporary worsening of situations and that far-right parties are flexible in the face of crises (Spier, 2010). Thus, despite loss of issue salience, the discursive opportunities may still be politicized.

This thesis builds on these findings in three main ways. Firstly, the studies on the AfD highlights the initial stage of the pandemic, which arguably was a period of uncertainty and confusion following the rapid and lethal advancement of the crisis. As such, this thesis adopts a longer time-scope to probe the agency of the party outside of first phase of the pandemic, when it had had the opportunity to generate policies and opinions on the handling of the crisis (Cain, 2022, pp. 63-4). Secondly, this thesis builds on the logic of investigating the internet and social media, as the domain has been underemphasized in favour of party manifestos and issued statements (Caiani and Parenti, 2013). Finally, given the AfDs history of seizing opportunities presented by crises, this thesis examines their response to the pandemic as a specific case of far-right party framing, investigating their unique approach. These three points, subsequently, lay the foundation of the theoretical framework that will be discussed in the next chapter.

3. Theoretical framework

As discussed in the literature review, there exists a consensus that both a mass of demand and a presence of supply – both in terms of ability and opportunity – is essential for far-right parties to thrive (Golder, 2016, p. 490-1). Based on this consensus, the following chapter discusses the "Integrative Model of PRRP support" by Mols and Jetten (2020) as a framework for investigating the agency of the AfD in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The model is, subsequently, enhanced with indicators to investigate the supply-side of framing, namely the frame-analysis. Accordingly, the ensuing chapter offers, firstly, a conceptual clarification of the far-right party terminology, before discussing the Integrative Model of PRRP support and what it aims to explain. As an extension of this model, the third and fourth sections of the chapter considers the frame-analysis approach and the theory frame-alignment, that enables the interpretation of evolving frames over time.

3.1 Conceptual clarification: Populist radical right, extreme right, or far-right?

A multitude of terms and theories exist to describe the range of parties located on the far right of the political spectrum, along with their accompanying justifications. Scholars in the field frequently diverge in their conceptualizations, which has led to debates regarding the analytical applicability of these concepts. Nevertheless, two primary concepts are commonly used to categorize these groups: the "extreme right," encompassing extremist organizations, and the term "populist radical right (PRRR)," which refers to political parties.

The term PRRP emerges from a consensus that parties on the far right constitute a single family of parties, separate from the centre right, that possesses a common core of nativism, authoritarianism, and populism. Nativism, firstly, is a radical exclusionary form of nationalism based on a belief that states should be inhabited, and ruled by, native ingroups (Mudde, 2007, p. 19). Non-natives and non-native elements are perceived as a threat to the ingroup and should, appropriately, submit to the authority of the natives. Accordingly, PRRPs seeks to preserve their dominance through the second and third core, namely, traditional authoritarian structures and populist elements (Miller-Idriss, 2020, p. 8). Authoritarianism refers to the belief in a strictly ordered society where infringements on authority and moral norms should be punished. Populism, on the other hand, is an ideology that considers society to be separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2016, p. 296-7).

PRRPs may be discerned from moderate-right parties through the concept of liberal constitutionalism, which encompasses rights, rule of law and checks and balances, which the moderate-right endorses (Pirro, 2022, p. 3). PRRPs, on the other hand, may be labelled as illiberal democratic: They acknowledge the procedural vestiges of democracy but hollow out its liberal nature, by attacking political rights and liberties (ibid, p. 4).

The main difference between PRRPs and the extreme right, on the other hand, is the stance on democracy itself. Where PRRPs focus on exerting influence through electoral means, extreme-right groups engage in street-level politics. As a result, PRRPs may express dissatisfaction with the existing socio-political order and liberal democracy's status quo, but they do not actively seek to dismantle the democratic system (ibid, p. 5), whereas the extreme right outright rejects the constitutional order and aims to undermine the established democratic norms. Consequently, conflicts escalate beyond electoral processes, leading to street demonstrations or violent acts (ibid, p. 6).

In practice, however, differentiating between the extreme right and PRRP is becoming a task of increasing difficulty. This is a result of the proliferation of PRRPs, which has led them to become a heterogenous group with substantial differences in ideology, stability, and longevity from party to party (Mudde, 2010). In particular, the increase in ties between the extreme-right and PRRP has led to a blurring of boundaries between the two. This blurring generates several issues, including the theoretical issue of conceptual stretching. In short, conceptual stretching occurs when researchers attempt to fit concepts generated for one category to another, which risks compromising the analytical ability of the original concept, as it might not fit the case at hand. This may be avoided by utilizing a more inclusive concept, which entails moving up the ladder of abstraction towards less precise concepts (Sartori, 1970, p. 1041).

Within this context, the term "far right" has been proposed to avoid stretching the PRRP term, as it identifies and brings together the actors that exist on the rightmost end of the ideological spectrum. Hence, the term "far right" enables a more precise placement within the family of groupings, including spatial positioning, which is crucial when studying the advancements within this party family (Pirro, 2022, p. 3).

Thus, I argue that the term far right is applicable to denote the AfD. At large, the AfD is situated within the European PRRP family. Upon closer inspection, however, there is considerable evidence of the contact and ties between the AfD and the extreme right in Germany. Firstly, several state-level factions have been found to cooperate with extreme-right groups such as the PEGIDA and Neue Rechte[1] (Bennhold, 2021). Furthermore, in 2017, 47 of the 396 AfD candidates for the Bundestag were found to not actively distance themselves from right-wing extremism, and some both displayed it and associated with extreme-right activists (Der Stern, 2017). Additionally, there has been a significant amount of controversy surrounding "Der Flügel", meaning "the Wing"[2] , which has been found to cooperate with other extremist movements (Deutsche Welle, 2020). The AfD Youth Party has also been found to harbour extreme-right connections (Krass, 2014). As a result, The Wing, the Youth Party, and the AfD have come under investigation by the BfV. The Wing was, in 2020, classified as right-wing extremist by the BfV, for its continued efforts against the free democratic basic order, placing the group under intelligence surveillance as a consequence (Bennhold, 2021). Officially, the Wing has been dissolved and does not formally exist. However, no Wing-members have been dismissed from the AfD, which led the BfV to denote the whole AfD as suspected right-wing extremists, as they found no reliable evidence of the dissolution of the Wing (Der Spiegel, 2022).

In conclusion, the AfD may not be classified as an extreme-right organization given its electoral nature. However, as the nature of the party exists both in its core and fringes, the extreme-right elements within in the AfD must be taken into consideration when deciding upon appropriate terminology (Pirro, 2022, p. 8). Accordingly, I argue that the AfD is primarily a PRRP, but the extreme-right fringe element makes the umbrella concept "far-right" appropriate in this thesis to avoid conceptual stretching.

3.2 The integrative model of far-right support

This thesis draws on the model constructed by Mols and Jetten to generate a general theoretical framework, modelling the relationship between supply and demand through a comprehensive interpretation of the effects they have on each other.

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[1] Right-wing political movement in Germany found in opposition to the "New Left" of the 1960s.
[2] "The wing" is a far-right faction within the AfD, founded by Höcke and Kalbitz (banned from the AfD in 2020) who are famous for their controversial links to neo-Nazi groups (Bennhold, 2021).

The model originates from the difficulties that arise when isolating supply and demand, as discussed in detail in the literature review. Demand-side research, on one hand, are in a loop of attempting to identify which competing grievances best explain far-right vote choices, such as unemployment, age, or gender. Despite great efforts, no single variable has been found to outweigh others, which may be attributed to the non-linear relationship between macroeconomic and social trends (Mols and Jetten, 2020, p. 3). Thus, if a direct link between grievances and far-right support did exist, a statistical model could be created with ease, something the literature shows we are no closer to (ibid, p. 6). Difficulties also arise on the supply side, where researchers have consequently focused on narratives and the positioning of parties, without sufficiently considering the effect demand has on the positioning itself (ibid, p. 7).

Appropriately, the Integrative Model of far-right support was established to overcome these issues, by capturing the interplay between supply and demand. The interaction is captured in a feedback loop which assumes that far-right parties can read the demand and subsequently shape their supply based on their interpretation, as shown in Figure 1.
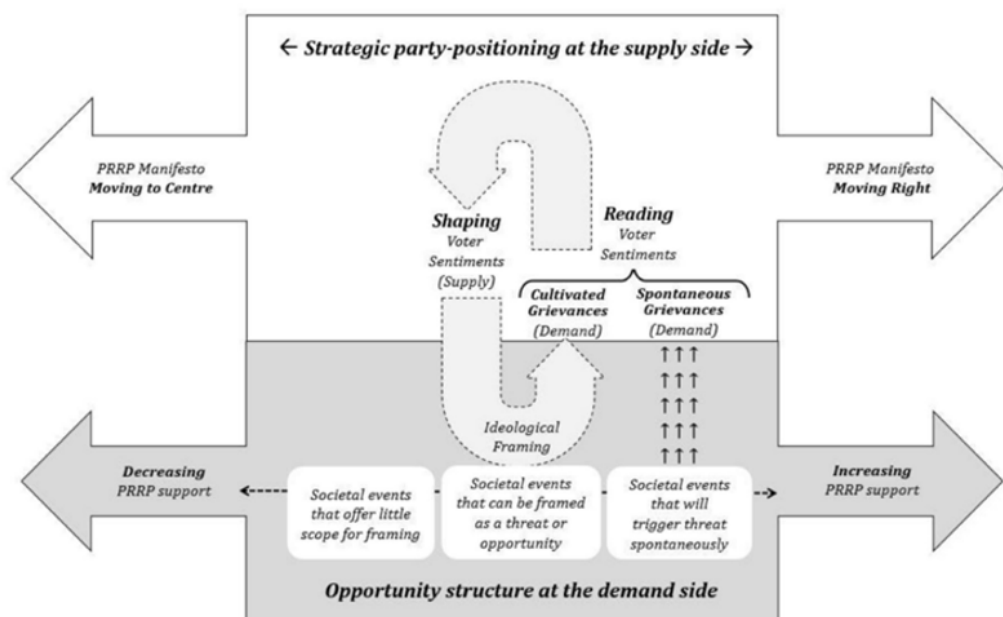
Figure 1: The Integrative model of far-right support (Mols and Jetten, 2020).

The model, although intricate, is based on two main assumptions. Firstly, the demand side – labelled as "opportunity structures at the demand side" – assumes that societal events may either offer little scope for framing or offer scope for framing through cultivated or spontaneous grievances, depending on the context at hand. Secondly, the supply side – labelled as "strategic party positioning on the supply side" – assumes that far-right parties may read the voter

sentiment that arises through the cultivated and spontaneous grievances and attempts to shape them to achieve a higher degree of support. In combination, the supply and demand form a continuous loop where the demand is a combination of past and present events and framing. Subsequently, the degree to which the far-right manages to gather support depends on both the supply and demand and success may then, according to the model, be witnessed in the ideological positioning of the party (ibid, p. 3).

The model is of significance to this thesis as it provides the framework for bridging supply and demand. Despite the significance of the model, however, there are some challenges related to the substantive measurement of supply. Firstly, the model does not provide measurement indicators of the supply-side and arguably, presents the reading and shaping of voter sentiment by far-right parties as self-evident, witnessable characteristics. I argue, however, that the degree to which political parties read and attempt to shape sentiment is a difficult task to probe because political parties rarely wish to share their potential winning strategies, as it might fall into the hands of their adversaries. For that reason, I argue for the use of an in-depth frame analysis, as it is the most applicable theory to investigate both the agency and intentions of political parties. Secondly, for the purpose of this thesis, the supply-side takes precedence over the role of events, as demand may – as Mudde argues – explain the existence of attitudes at the mass level, while the supply empirically evaluates the positioning of far-right parties in response to these attitudes (2010, pp. 1179-80). Accordingly, the demand side is not excluded, but discussed instead as a context, following the logic of discursive opportunities outlined in the literature review.

3.3 Frame analysis: Strategic party positioning at the supply-side

The main component in this thesis is the frame analysis. The approach was developed by Snow and Benford, with the ambition of investigating actors as significant agents who actively interprets grievances, and not as passive carriers of ideology (Snow and Benford, 1986, p. 466). The frame analysis was originally developed for studying social movements. However, through theory-development of theory, social movement and political party research has been bridged, culminating in "movement party" theory. In short, movement-parties originate through the transformation of movements into parties or through the influence of movements within established political parties (McAdam and Tarrow, 2010, p. 533). As such, the success of movement-parties increases if their interest is held by a large constituency and established parties make little effort to embrace the interests of the movement (Kitscheldt, 2006, p. 282).

Therefore, they often mobilize on non-represented issues and anti-establishment frames to achieve electoral success (Della Porta et. Al. 2017, p. 10-11). I argue that the AfD may be categorized as a movement party, because it emerged as a separatist movement within the Christlich Demokratische Union (CDU), protesting the eurozone crisis politics, and because it maintained its electoral success because established parties rarely addressed the crisis (Demuth, 2014). Thus, the nature of the AfD as a movement party demonstrates the applicability of the frame-analysis approach.

The frame analysis theorizes that parties actively frame their policies and grievances in the population. Accordingly, the analysis examines how actors, through various activities, strike chords of narratives within target audiences (Snow and Benford, 2000, p. 614), which allows, for a study of how ideas and statements construct patterns to deliberately mobilize supporters or demobilize adversaries (Lindekilde, 2014, p. 195-6).

The frame analysis is often associated with its adjacent theory and method, namely the discourse analysis. Consequentially, a brief separation is needed. The approaches share some epistemological characteristics but diverge in analytical ambition (ibid, p. 196). Discourse analysis is the study of how social reality is linguistically constituted and is performed by observing the interplay between discourses in texts and the wider contexts in which the texts reside. Hence, a discourse analysis will uncover how certain texts reproduce or challenge established understandings of social reality (ibid, p. 198). Despite the similarities, the discourse analysis does not account for the deliberate side of social reality, and most importantly, the degree of strategic rationality of actors (ibid, p. 200). Thus, the frame analysis is a better approach to the research question at hand, as it allows for an analysis of intentions and motivations behind statements.

The procedure of the frame analysis is as follows. Firstly, a frame is a mental script that facilitates perception or action based on events (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). Accordingly, individual frames may be the basis of collective action or mobilization if the frame reaches a vast amount of the constituency (Lindekilde, 2014, p. 201). The active task of framing done by agents, itself, involves three core framing tasks, which are: "diagnostic", "prognostic" and "motivational" framing (Snow and Benford, 2000, p. 615). The first task, diagnostic framing, involves diagnosing issues, in essence, arguing for what they see as right or wrong in society at large. An efficient diagnosis is, therefore, contingent on a source of causality and has an attributional

component focusing on responsibility for the diagnosis. The component of responsibility informs the second task, prognostic framing, which involves the articulation of a proposed solution to the diagnosis through suggested strategies and policies (ibid, p. 616). The last task, motivational framing, provides a clear rationale for engagement of individuals, based on the diagnosis and prognosis. Attending to this task is a "call to arms" and entails actively engaging the constituents (ibid, p. 617). The following table, accordingly, provides a summary of the various tasks, highlighting their differences using an AfD Facebook-post from January 14th, 2020.

Diagnostic framing	*Description:* What is the problem and who is to blame for the problem? *Example:* The AfD discussing terrorism as a threat to security, arguing: "Islamists - again they are targeting our way of life and the peaceful coexistence of Germans (…) Germany needs real internal security - that is not to be expected from a toothless Bavarian tiger as interior minister"
Prognostic framing	*Description:* How can we solve the problem? *Example*: Prosecuting terrorists, implementing stricter immigration policy, arguing: "This needs to end now! Attacks on the state must be prosecuted with all severity. We need to take a closer look at who is coming to this country. It must not be tolerated that terrorist Islamist cells nest everywhere"
Motivational framing	*Description:* What can you do, and why should you support us? *Example:* Encouraging constituents to vote for them, arguing: "It's in your hands with your vote! The AfD has the program and the personnel for a real change in security".

Table 1: Core framing tasks (Snow and Benford, 2000).

3.4 Frame development over time

The framing processes, as a strategic effort to mobilize and de-mobilize, is a continuous endeavour over time, because of events and changing contexts. Accordingly, frames will vary in their relative degree of success, as they must resonate within their own context (Lindekilde, 2014, p. 202). As such, framing is contingent on both the opportunities and constraints offered by the political environment in which parties reside, and the degree to which they can shape their framing in accordance with the environment (Berman, 1997, p. 118). It is a difficult task

to establish a causal relationship between frames and electoral success, however, as electoral success hinges on a variety of other factors than framing. As such, investigating the framing over time allows, instead, for a discussion on how political parties attempt to facilitate success, using their deliberate frames (Lindekilde, 2014, p. 207). arties therefore attempt to create resonance with adherents over time, striving to make the frames "speak to" their perceptions (ibid, p. 208).

In the attempts to make frames resonate and in the hope of achieving success, parties may utilize frame alignment strategies to fit their frames to new contexts. These "frame alignment processes" are comprised of four strategies: Frame-bridging, frame-amplification, frame-extension, and frame-transformation (Snow and Benford, 2000, p. 624). In short, the processes are part of the continuous loop of reading and shaping voter sentiment to make frames congruent, aimed at mobilizing supporters.

Frame-bridging, firstly, involves linking two or more ideologically congruent yet structurally unconnected frames, by linking established frames to un-mobilised sentiment pools. This is the most prevalent alignment strategy, as it is often undertaken to target potential audiences. Frame-amplification, secondly, entails clarifying and invigorating frames, based on the importance of amplifying extant values to make frames resonate. Amplification is particularly relevant for stigmatized movement that challenge dominant core values in a society (Snow and Benford, 2000, p. 624). Frame-extension, thirdly, involves extending the frame beyond its primary interest to include new issues or concerns. This task, despite being important, is often constrained as it might compromise the original purity of the frame. Lastly, frame-transformation entails changing old frames and, in some cases, generating new ones. Transformation is undertaken when the frame is perceived as not resonating, and entails changing standpoints accordingly (ibid, p. 625).

In conclusion, the concept of frame alignment will be used alongside the frame analysis to discuss the changes in frames, providing an in-depth insight into the agency behind the framing responses in the pandemic. Appropriately, the procedures and research design to investigate the framing and frame-alignment is covered in the next chapter.

4. Method and research design

The main research question in this thesis is: *How did the AfD change its framing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?* Corresponding to the framework outlined in the previous chapter, the approach, accordingly, is to investigate the framing-strategies of the AfD in response to the pandemic, shedding light on the agency of the party in the presence of a crisis. The frame-analysis approach is a qualitative method based on non-numerical data that allows for an in-depth understanding and insight into the targeted population, which in this thesis is the positioning of the far-right party, the AfD (Punch, 2013).

Accordingly, the following chapter covers, firstly, the case-selection in the thesis, followed by a discussion on data-collection and the nature of the data at hand. Third, the chapter discusses the frame-analysis methods and the steps taken to mitigate its limitations. Lastly, the chapter offers some ethical considerations of the data and the topic of the thesis itself.

4.1 Case selection

The frame analysis uses qualitative material as data, as the symbolic meaning of text is analysed in the frames (Linekilde, 2014, p. 209). The frame-analysis, with its ambition to probe the mobilization intentions behind the text, entails that case-selection follows a logic of "most similar systems design" (Ritter, 2014), selecting cases that differ in terms of strategies or mobilization success (Lindkilde, 2014, p. 212). Accordingly, this logic informs the choice to investigate the framing before and after the pandemic, boosting the internal validity of the frame analysis as a result (ibid, p. 213).

COVID-19, however, is a case itself, as it represents a critical juncture for Europe and the world. As such, the case at hand is both typical and extreme (Gerring, 2009, p. 677). The pandemic may, arguably, be considered an "extreme case" as it challenged established norms and is an extreme variation of the phenomenon being studied – namely framing (ibid, p. 653). The pandemic is, on one hand, an extreme event in terms of its effects across the world, visible both in the number of infected and its complex consequences, such as lockdowns and social distancing regulations (Machado and Lopes, 2020, p. 2953). Furthermore, the pandemic is also an historically extreme event, being one of the most encompassing respiratory, causative pandemics spanning worldwide, since the Spanish influenza in the early 1900s (World Health Organization, 2023). Thus, comparing framing before and after the pandemic allows for an

investigation into the effect of the pandemic on the chosen frames, providing insight into the phenomenon of the pandemic itself, and its effect on party positioning, as the pandemic highlighted issues outside of the usual domains of political competition (Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2022, p. 551).

The extreme case of far-right framing in the pandemic, also entails a typical and representative case of far-right parties, namely the AfD as a case itself. Typical and extreme cases may be seen in conjunction with each other if they are representative of a population of cases (Gerring, 2009, p. 654). The AfD was, therefore, selected as a typical and representative case of Western far-right parties for several reasons. As discussed in the introduction and literature review, there exists a mainstreaming of the far right, as they have become established and embedded within the electoral sector (Wondreys and Mudde, 2022, pp. 87-8), which entails that they possess capabilities as established actors. Furthermore, the parties are relevant political actors in about a third of all European countries, and they are the most successful new parties in post-war Europe, only rivalled by Green parties (Mudde, 2015, p. 298). Accordingly, the AfD is a representative case as it shares the core elements of the far right – nativism, populism, and authoritarianism – which is the only common denominator for western far-right parties given high degree of heterogeneity within the field (ibid, p. 297). The AfDs nature as a Western far-right party is also reflected, empirically, in their participation in the European parliament group "Identity and Democracy" which encompasses right-wing and conservative parties. Most of the group consists of Italy's Lega party, The Rassemlement National from France, and Germanys AfD (ID, 2023). Thus, the AfD as a case informs the understanding of how far right parties responds to crises, because of its representative and established characteristics, that allows for comparison over time.

4.2 Data-collection and sources

There is a magnitude of available data to conduct a frame analysis, and the applicability of the data is dependent on the research question at hand (Bratberg, 2019, p. 15). The frame-analysis approach is oriented towards external validity, which is often procured through population studies, which entails analysing all texts produced by the actor. This, however, is difficult in practice given the large amount of relevant material. Accordingly, this thesis samples texts from both a particular arena and time-period and reproduces the core frame elements through excerpts of texts (Lindekilde, 2014, p. 212).

Accordingly, the data was collected on the arena of Facebook, the Meta-owned platform. The role of the internet in social sciences has increased in prominence and has become a central part of party platforms (Mosca, 2014, pp. 396-7). As such, the choice to collect data on Facebook was made because of its availability, its significant role in political campaigning and expression of opinions (ibid, p. 401). This, in the particular case of Germany, is underpinned by data from the Citizen Browser project, which collects data from 473 German Facebook users. The project found that the AfD and its supporters appeared in the feed of panellists at least three times as often as other political parties, and that they exceled in engaging its core audiences and supporters on social media (Waller and Lecher, 2021). This strategy has previously been attributed as a key to the party's success and has led the AfD to receive the unofficial label as Germanys "first Facebook-party", as its strategies are structured towards utilizing social media and its algorithms (Diehl et al, 2019). Thus, the frames on Facebook represents their preferred habitat where it engages mostly with the electorate.

To select the specific page to collect data, I examined various AfD Facebook-pages. Eventually, I settled on their main page, which as of May 2023 has 523 650 "likes" and 560 300 "followers". Many of the users that "like" the AfD follows the page, but the higher count of followers entails that some 40 000 individuals follow the party on Facebook without "liking" it. The main page is their official and most prominent channel of communication, as their audience is the largest here. Other AfD pages are geared towards more specific purposes, such as one named "AfD in the Bundestag" which covers their debates in parliament and has a total of 148 000 "likes" as of 2023, significantly less than the main page. Individual AfD politicians also have their own pages, but few of them have over 10 000 "likes". Accordingly, the main page was chosen to collect the data. The data at hand, as the AfD is a German political party, is written in German. The posts were therefore collected in their German state but are reproduced and discussed in English through my own translations throughout the analysis. My knowledge of German, therefore, allowed me to engage with the material and highlight the cultural context of the language and terminology employed by the AfD. This enhances, arguably, the credibility of the analysis as I was not reliant on secondary, translated materials (Streefkerk, 2018).

For the data collection itself, the nature of the case and research question necessitated a time-scope to accurately capture the framing before the pandemic and after the pandemic had brought

about its effect on society. To do so, the logic of the Integrative Model of far-right support was utilized, seeing framing as a continuous endeavour that requires far-right parties to read and interpret the context when deciding on frames. Thus, to capture the period before the pandemic, Facebook-posts were collected from June 2019 to January 2020, avoiding the 2019 EP-election held in May 2019, a period where the posts centred on when and where to vote, and who their candidates were. The second period of data consists of posts between October 2021 and February 2022, and the time-scope was selected for two main reasons. Firstly, the period avoids the initial stage of the pandemic, as the crisis was unexpected and so they, at the point of data collection, had time to formulate policies in response to the crisis. Secondly, the period avoids the 2021 Federal election, which was held in September, where the AfD lost votes. Accordingly, the AfD has had time to read the sentiment in the election, and the posts no longer revolve around incitement to vote and voting-practicalities. As such, the time-scope avoids the uncertainties that the initial phase of the pandemic would bring in terms of reading voter sentiment, and the uncertainties that a major election brings in terms of shaping voter sentiment to facilitate mobilization of support. In total, 433 Facebook-posts from the Official AfD Facebook-page were analysed from the two timeslots at hand. For clarity-purposes, the data was collected and sorted on a month-by-month basis into their own files corresponding to the month, which is reflected in the codebook in appendix 1.1 and 1.2. I argue that avoiding the major elections, as well as the initial stage of the pandemic, captures the overall framing strategies, and the lengthy time-scope allows for in-depth insight into the various frames.

In addition to the sources for the frame-analysis, I utilize several sources in the discussion in chapter 5, regarding the context of the pandemic and the discursive opportunities for far-right parties in the pandemic. The DOS, being the conditions that shape the opportunities for framing and political discourses (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003, p. 4), are dependent on the legitimacy of the actor itself, and the visibility of the issues at hand. As such, the background-discussion rests on secondary sources, such as statistics, polls, and news articles, to investigate the general level of demand and discourse in Germany during the pandemic. Legitimacy, firstly, may be defined as the acceptance of political authority (Ashcraft, 1991, p. 524). As such, the legitimacy in the period is discussed by investigating the laws the AfD navigates, the electoral system and political context, using data from the Varieties of Democracy dataset, Freedom House data and the BfV in Germany. The second indicator, visibility, may be defined as the level of attention or importance that an issue receives in a particular political system (Brighenti, 2022, pp. 2-3).

Accordingly, the visibility of issues becomes evident in the public attention and discourses, through polling and media-coverage.

Discussing contextual factors and discursive opportunities, however, is challenged by the fact that scholars of the field have not yet agreed on a measurement strategy. Resultingly, the validity of the observations must be assessed in detail in each individual case (Bratberg, 2021, p. 19). To ensure validity, the contextual elements are thoroughly examined by considering the widely accepted principles of legitimacy and visibility, as acknowledged by scholars in the field of discursive opportunities. Moreover, the aim of the background section is not to advocate for specific numerical or individual-level demand, but rather to present a broad understanding of the overall level of support for far-right policies and issue-salience in the population. This helps to reveal the opportunities available for the AfD to shape their message.

4.3 The frame analysis approach

4.3.1 Method

Framing is the primary way of investigating far-right party agency in his thesis, as it allows for the interpretation of the attempted shaping of voter sentiment. The use of textual Facebook posts as data, subsequently, allows for conclusions to made concerning the intentions of the actors that distribute the text (Bratberg, 2021, p. 11), as well as insights into the political agendas of the actors that present the text (Benoit, 2020, p. 462).

For the frame-analysis, the approach is, firstly, to identify individual frames. A frame is an interpretive schema which allows for the simplification of the world by encoding objects, experiences, and events (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 37). Accordingly, framing is the process of actively using the individual frames with a goal of mobilizing adherents or demobilizing antagonists (Snow and Benford, 2000, pp. 614-5). The core framing tasks – diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational frames – make up the analytical categories in this thesis through the established framework by Snow and Benford (1986).

Within the posts, statements were analysed one by one and taken as single units of analysis. Statements, therefore, include whole or incomplete sentences, as frames sometimes vary in terms of their boundaries to one another and the topics mentioned within the frame (Neuendorf, 2017.) To identify the frames, and because of the nature of the analysis, I utilized a semi-

deductive case-study. The initial part of the coding was done based on the core framing tasks, dividing statements into the different frames at large. The second part of the coding-process was done by revisiting the core categories, identifying the most frequent themes within the frames, subsequently creating sub-codes under the core framing tasks. As such, the second part of the analysis used an inducive coding-strategy to form categories, which constitutes the codebook presented in appendix 1.

A challenge to the analysis is to validate interpretations and ensuring its replicability, which may be done through systematic coding procedures of the sampled material (Lindekilde, 2014, p. 219). Thus, to conduct the frame-analysis, I used the software programme NVivo. There are several benefits to using NVivo, as it allows for efficient and organized management of qualitative data, which creates a systematic, transparent, and replicable analysis. NVivo also possesses a strategy for improving reliability of the data through its "visualise" function, which provides a condensed depiction of the data to detect themes (Dahler-Larsen 2012). Most importantly, it allows for the revisitation of codes, counting of codes within categories and it enables the creation of a code hierarchy. The hierarchy was an important tool in this thesis, as the three core framing tasks are encompassing and the posts themselves are of a lengthy nature, usually comprised of 200 word or more (Saldaña, 2016). As such, after coding the initial core framing tasks, I created new codes and positioned them within the parent code. This, in turn, significantly reduced the risk of error that may occur with data management, as I was able to see both the parent and child codes of specific statements. The hierarchy also facilitated the necessary comparison between the two periods, as I could identity consistencies and inconsistencies within the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

4.3.2 Limitations

A main limitation from the frame-analysis approach is related to its textual nature, and the degree to which a textual analysis may be argued to be plausible and valid (Bratberg, 2021, p. 72). Textual analyses adhere to the constructivist principle of meaning-making as grounds for actions and mobilization, and because of this principle, the frame-analysis does not suit rigidly defined criteria of validity and reliability as the analysis is dependent on the social context of the frames at large (ibid, p. 73).

Firstly, the challenge of validity is related to the operationalization of variables, and the establishment of a causal relationship (ibid, p. 74). Accordingly, the limitations related to

validity may be mitigated by employing a broader definition of the term "validity" itself, as interpretive research is not invalid because of its interpretive nature (Bratberg, 2021, pp. 72-3). Thus, validity may be achieved by providing clear and coherent reasoning for justifications made, as well as scrutiny of the practices of analysis, the choices of documents, theories, and analytical tools at hand (ibid, p. 74). Accordingly, the limitation related to validity is mitigated by employing an established theory, offering transparent coding procedures and, most importantly, discussing the interpretations made in the frame-analysis.

Secondly, the challenge of reliability stems from the challenge of verifying human coding, and replicability issues of case-specific content (ibid, p. 75). The limitations related to reliability may be mitigated by clarifying the criteria for gathering the data-material and the strategy used to code the data (Bratberg, 2021, p. 75). Based on this logic, the justification is discussed in detail in this chapter, and the codebook is included as an appendix. The reliability may also be limited because of the nature of Facebook as a social media, as other social-media platform potentially could produce differing datasets, showing other patterns of framing (Mosca, 2014, p. 399). This concern was mitigated in three ways. Firstly, through a quality control of various sites in which the AfD operates, shedding light on the precedence of Facebook over other sites in the period. Secondly, through and in-depth justification for the use of Facebook, as argued for above. Lastly, using NVivo to systematically code the data.

Third, the frame-analysis possesses a potential limitation regarding the time-consuming process that it entails, as it is done on a large volume of text which must be coded to ensure validity and reliability (Entman, 1993, pp. 51-58). This was mitigated, as discussed above, by selecting a time-scope that represents the framing in the period, as well as automated coding through NVivo, that simplified the process of identifying frames.

Lastly, the degree to which the analysis is generalizable presents a possible limitation. It is important to note that the findings, as they are, are limited to the context and time-period of data collection, because of the nature of the frame analysis (Shanahan, 2021). As such, various methods were investigated to increase generalizability, including triangulation (Mosca, 2014, p. 411). I undertook, in this regard, a quantitative content pilot-study of the AfDs electoral manifestos in the periods, based on a logic that framing may be done both in the online and offline realms, and that the qualitative nature would increase the generalizability (Bratberg, 2021, p. 119). However, there were various downsides to this. Firstly, the AfD communicates

primarily with its supporters and the electorate though social media, and less emphasis is put on the party programme as a way of directly mobilizing the constituency as such. Secondly, the pilot study was done using the Manifesto Project Corpus, which showed few significant differences in the programmes, apart from the introduction of COVID-19 in the 2021 programme. This, arguably, highlighted the main limitation of the qualitative content analysis; that important interpretations may hide within the statistically significant material. As such, the frame-analysis approach was chosen over the content analysis. Accordingly, the generalizability is discussed, instead, in the discussion of the findings in chapter 8, contrasting the frame analysis to previous findings within the field of far-right party research.

4.4 Ethical considerations

Lastly, there are some ethical considerations that must be addressed when selecting the case and methodology in this thesis. One important aspect to consider when conducting internet research is the storage and utilization of web data. Collecting data from social media platforms, in particular, presents challenges related to privacy and ethics (Mosca, 2014, pp. 398-400). Specifically, when examining Facebook, individual commenters on posts may not have given their consent for their comments to be used as a source of information. Additionally, the AfDs posts may mention individuals who did not consent to being discussed in the original material of the posts, as the posts often contain negative descriptions and unflattering photos of their framed opposition.

To overcome this limitation, several measures were implemented. Firstly, the ethical and privacy concerns were addressed by carefully justifying the study of Facebook, as previously discussed, and by seeking approval from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD/SIKT) while considering these ethical considerations. The NSD/SIKT approved the project, stating that it serves the public interest and provides appropriate data management measures (see Appendix 2). Secondly, standardized data-gathering processes were employed, ensuring that no references to individuals, IP addresses, or users were included in the final dataset.

Lastly, a potential ethical limitation arises from my personal political views, as the far-right holds opinions that are considered extreme and are, arguably, shared by a minority of the population. To address this, the analysis aims to maintain objectivity by carefully examining both explicit statements taking into consideration their implicit meanings. Additionally, I

remained mindful of my subjective opinions throughout the data collection and analysis process, striving to comprehend the perspective of the AfD and their mobilization efforts, taking into account their expressed views and their potential resonance. In particular, by attempting to see the intentions behind the framing, objectivity was maintained throughout the analysis.

5. Background: Discursive opportunities in the COVID-19 pandemic

The following chapter builds on the logic of discursive opportunities, as discussed in the literature review, positing the necessary context before moving to the frame-analysis. The DOS is determined by the discursive factors in the public debate resting on the visibility of the issues as well as legitimacy of the sender of the message (Koopmans and Muis, 2009, p. 648). Furthermore, the DOS may be favourable to the far-right if the core issues of the far-right coincide with events, (Caiani and Graziano, 2019, p. 1150), and if the crisis generates anti-establishment sentiment that the far right may spectacularize, perpetuating the sense of crisis (Chadi, Cohen, and Wagner, 2022, p. 373. Moffit, 2015, p. 190-5).

Before the pandemic, the discursive opportunities for the AfD, as discussed in the literature review, were to a large extent favourable as they presented various opportunities for framing the core issues of the far right. The core issues were fortified by the struggles of the German government in handling the so-called refugee crisis and the nativist sentiment in the population in the years after it. The favourable discursive opportunities, however, shifted significantly with the presence of the pandemic.

5.1 Events in the period

First and foremost, the COVID-19 pandemic as an extreme case requires some discussion. Initially, the pandemic was reported by German officials as "very low risk" to the country. At the end of January, the minister of health decided to keep the borders open, arguing that the conspiracy theories regarding the virus were more dangerous than the virus itself (Naumann, 2020). This decision was heavily criticized both by the Greens and AfD, and increased when the number of infected doubled and the first two COVID-19 related deaths occurred on the 9th of March 2020. On March 25th, the virus was determined an epidemic of national significance, and heavy restrictions, travel-bans and closing of borders were introduced. The first few months of the pandemic were considered a success, with a high degree of acceptance of the measures and decreasing cases because of the testing and containment strategies. This points to a "rally-around-the-flag" effect as that more citizens supported the government when the COVID-19 numbers increased (Schraff, 2020; Leininger and Schaub, 2020). The second phase of the pandemic, which began in October 2020, had cases rising rapidly leading to another lockdown, a pattern which repeated itself in the consecutive waves throughout 2021. The second surge

spread to older parts of the population and stretched hospital capacity, shedding light on the difficulty of maintaining success throughout the pandemic, as is visible in figure 2.
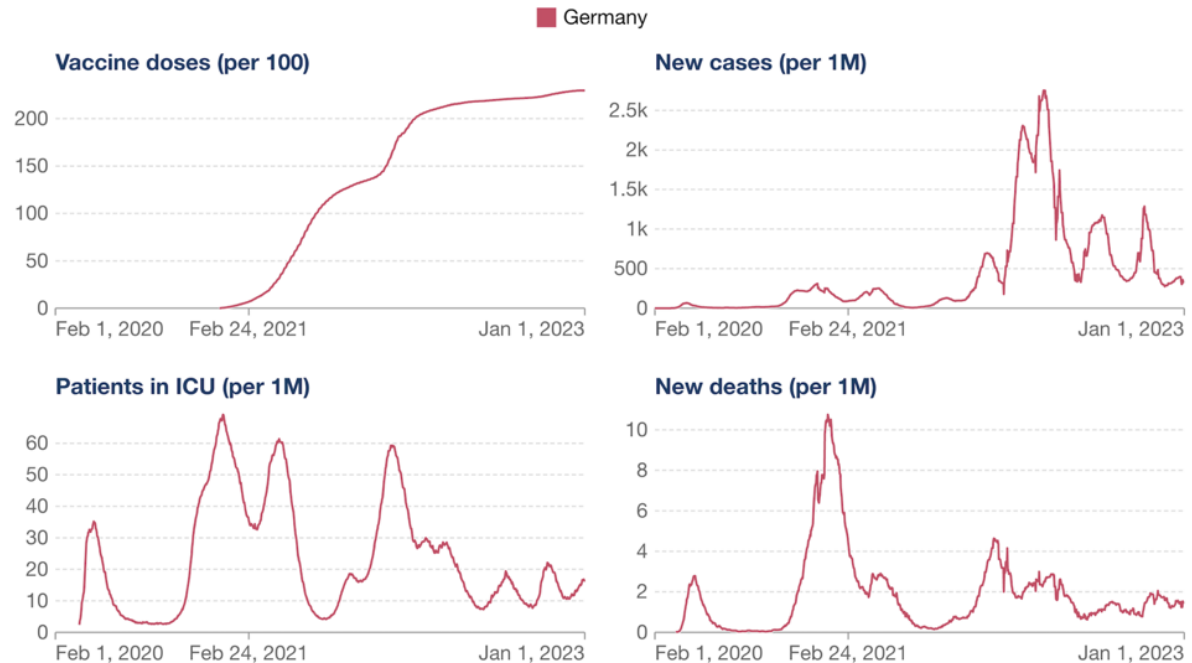
Figure 2: COVID-19 in Germany (Source: Official data collated by Our World in Data, John Hopkins University CSSE Covid-19 Data, 2023)

The highest number of deaths and patients in intensive care were in January 2021 and the most infected were in the beginning of 2022. As also becomes evident, when examining the mass vaccination throughout 2022, is that the numbers of deaths and ICU-patients drop significantly when vaccination is implemented.

Therefore, from August to November 2021, most of Germany operated under what was known as the "3G" rule, which limited various arenas to those who were fully vaccinated, the recovered and those who had recently tested negative, acting as an incentive to get vaccinated (Martin, 2021). When the fourth wave of the pandemic gained momentum at the end of 2021, many called for even stricter rules, adopting "2G", described as a "de facto" lockdown for unvaccinated people (Deutsche Welle[1], 2021). German authorities also began considering mandating vaccination, which generated large debates on its feasibility and fairness. Many argued that the "3G" rule, in practice, constituted a mandate, while others called for stricter and deterrent measures (Noack, 2021). In response to the "3G" measures, some citizens began

protesting, arguing that they were infringements on citizens liberties (Fürstenau, 2021). Here, right-wing voices, such as the AfD, gained influence through arguments such as Germany being under a "corona dictatorship" (Von Bebenburg, 2022). Overall, despite the critique of the measures, the pandemic saw a relatively high acceptance rate of the measures, as many recognized the need for them.

The negative developments of the pandemic in terms of ICU-admissions, deaths, and lockdown-fatigue, however, coincided with the 2021 Federal election. The 2021 election gave the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU) its worst result in history, which some attribute to the presence of the pandemic, among other reasons, such as an ageing German population and a lack of reform within the party. Resultingly, Scholtz's Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) won the election and formed a cabinet alongside die Grünen and the Freie Demokratische Partei (FDP), replacing Merkel and the CDU after 16 years in government (Ellyatt, 2021).

An important factor of the DOS, alongside the pandemic, which may be attributed to the success of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and the Greens, is the 2021 European Floods. The flooding caused the deaths of 184 German citizens, power outages and damages to both infrastructure and agriculture, estimated at about 33.4 billion euros (Trenczek et al, 2022). In the aftermath of the crisis, both scientists and activists have highlighted the connection between the floods and extreme weather as a direct result of climate change (Niranjan, 2021). Furthermore, the floods exceeded the already grim predictions of climate change models, indicating that a tipping point had been crossed (Watts, 2021). The floods, accordingly, significantly increased the visibility of the climate-issue, which resonated with many Germans in the period, creating valuable discursive opportunities for the new government.

5.2 Legitimacy in the period

A major component of the discursive opportunities is the legitimacy of the agent behind the frame, which is an outcome of events both past and present. The AfD, in the period, experienced some difficulties in terms of legitimacy, after the BfV surveillance in 2021. As a result of its political history, Germany possesses precise laws and barriers to avoid the re-emergence of the extreme right and efforts against the liberal democratic basic order (Glaun, 2021).

In the period before the pandemic, however, several events pointed to increased extreme right activity. In 2019, the CDU politician Walter Lübcke was assassinated by a far-right extremist, because of his work for refugees and his outspoken critique of the AfD and the PEGIDA (Fidelius et. al, 2019). Additionally, a synagogue in the German city, Halle, was attacked in October 2019 during the Jewish holiday Yom Kippur, by a Neo-Nazi linked to the assassination of Lübcke. Furthermore, when the murderer of Lübcke was convicted, the investigation shed light on his ties to the AfD (Knight, 2021). These events were part of a 20% increase in extremist violence and targeting between 2019 and 2020 (Ahmed, 2021).

As a result of the increase, existing laws were amended to increasingly deter extremism. Both online speech and the scope of what was considered hate-speech were moderated due to the increase in right-wing and antisemitic crimes, rising by 9.6% and 12.2%, respectively (BfV, 2021, p. 7). However, despite the increased restrictions, events escalated. The BfV put the entire AfD under investigation in March 2021, following the unreliable dissolution of "The Wing" as well as the Young AfD (ibid, p. 16). Furthermore, right-wing extremists, overall, were found to attempt to take advantage of anti-government, anti-lockdown protests. However, these attempts were found to be somewhat unsuccessful (ibid, p. 12). The trend of increased extremist activity developed throughout the pandemic, culminating in media commotion and the resignation of party-leader Methuen in January 2022, arguing that the party had moved "too far right" and adopted "totalitarian" traits.

It is important to note, despite the increase in extremism, that the German democracy is classified as healthy, scoring an overall high score of 0.8-0.85 out of 1 in the Varieties of Democracy dataset (2023). Freedom House has also classified Germany as a representative, "vibrant" democracy with a strong political and civil society where rights are evident both in law and in practice. Freedom house has noted, however, the tensions because of the development of the far right and argues that it may be a possible confounder. Thus, Germany receives a 94/100 score, where points are removed for the increasing antisemitism and criminal offences against minorities. As a consequence of the tightening laws on freedom of speech and surveillance to deter far-right extremists, Germany receives a lower score on the Freedom of the Internet index, at 77/100 (Freedom House, 2020). Therefore, the legitimacy, arguably, risks tainting the discursive opportunities and potential attempts at mobilizing.

5.3 Visibility of far-right issues

The second component of the background is the visibility and issue-salience of far-right issues. The issue salience is the amount of importance individuals attribute to topics relating to society at large, and investigating it provides insights into which questions are present in the electorate at a given time, as the opinions of individuals will, on an aggregate level, shape debates, agendas, policies, and the DOS as a result (Paul and Fitzgerald, 2021, p. 371. Laitin, 1986).

As an extension of the events, it is evident that the most salient issue in the period is the pandemic. This salience is visible both on the individual and mass level, as the pandemic affected both political, financial, and social life. On the individual level, several psychological factors increased, such as symptoms of depression, anxiety, and fear. This may be attributed to the uncertainties generated from the pandemic as well as the challenges to the perceived safe and strong German state and healthcare system (Putinas and Lévy, 2021, pp. 318-20). On the mass level, issues related to economic security materialized because of the pandemic and the recession that followed. The pandemic-related recession was almost as severe as the GDP contraction of the 2000s and 2010s financial crises, as the lockdowns led both to business closures and layoffs. This was mitigated, however, by the German labour system and financial support enacted by the government, making the recovery smoother than in previous crises. To probe salience, in detail, I investigated the "Socio-political attitudes and preferences in Germany and Greece in times of COVID-19" dataset (Katsanidou et al, 2021).
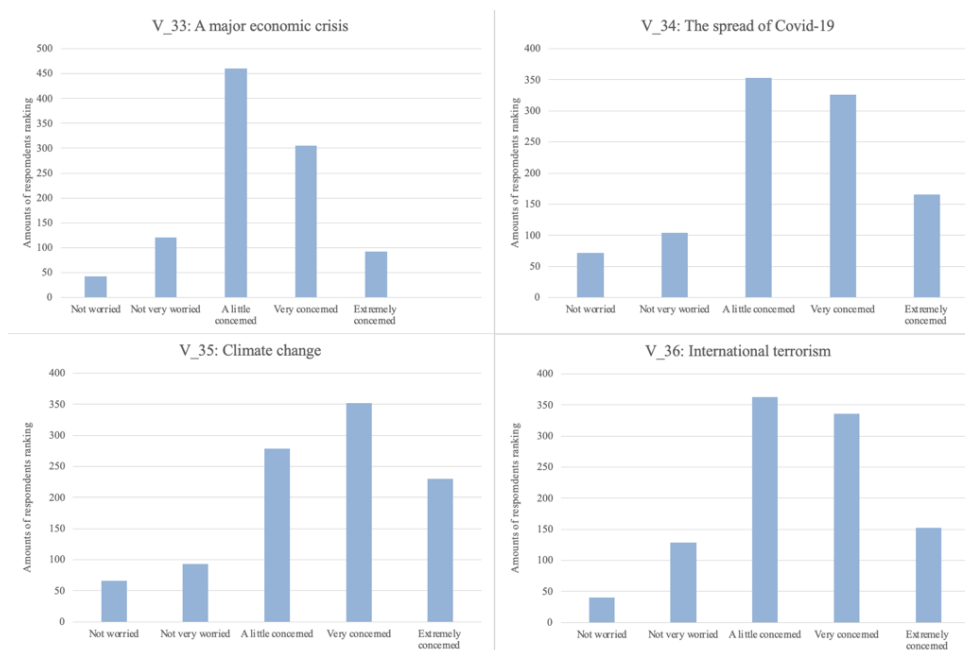

Figure 3: "How worried are you about the following issues?" (Katsanidou et al, 2021).

As figure 3 shows, the respondents were asked to rank their worries regarding specific issues on a scale from 1-5, where 1 is not worried at all and 5 is extremely worried. On average, the respondents rank climate change as a high-concern issue, followed by the spread of COVID-19 and international terrorism. Few respondents were extremely concerned about the economy, which might reflect the policies enacted to remedy the effects of the pandemic. Thus, despite the pandemic, issues that were salient before the pandemic – both climate-change and terrorism – are still salient during the pandemic. This, I argue, highlights both the persistence of salient issues, and the wide array of salient issues during the pandemic, which explains the loss of issue salience of pure far-right tissues, as there is a wide variety of competing issues-

In addition to the salience of issues, the favourability of the DOS increases if there are windows of opportunity for the spectacularizing of failure of the government. When the consequences of the pandemic unfolded, it was evident that intervention was needed, something Germany could afford. As such, the Merkel-led government abandoned the established eurozone-crisis "sound-money" approach that weighed responsibility and conditionality (Bulmer, 2022, pp. 171-6). Instead, they shifted to a solidarity-based approach, with relaxation of debt measures and survival-kits for businesses. Despite the necessary enactments, Merkel and her government was criticized both for abandoning the tradition of stability, as well as for acting too late (ibid, pp. 176-7). In addition, the government was criticized by various protesters, questioning the scientific consensus and lockdown-measures. The protesters also criticized journalists for false and pro-government reporting, and for underrepresenting "critical voices". These sentiments were expressed, in particular, by the far-right, criticizing the media for its dominance of left-green topics and inadequate coverage of eastern Germany (Hölig and Hasebrink, 2021, pp. 80-1).

As discussed, a major event in the period was the 2021 Federal election, where the Greens and SPD did well. In the same election, the AfD experienced a vote loss, which many have attributed to the loss of salience of far-right issues because of the pandemic and the floods in the same year. The same dynamic is visible in other parties. The CDU, for instance, recorded its worst result ever, whereas the SPD recorded is best result since 2005. The Greens achieved 14.8%, its best result in history. I argue that this particular shift may be attributed to the salience of the environmental issue, as 56% of Germans believed the floods made it "more important than ever" to combat climate change and 73% stated the Merkel-government did not do enough for climate change. The only ones to disagree were the established voter-base of the AfD

(Wieder, 2021). In addition, the salience of the consequences of the pandemic, such as unemployment, may have contributed to the success of the SPD, who pledged to increase taxes for the wealthy, devise clean technology and expand social programs. Lastly, the parties on the left, together, possessed an important consensus on climate, health, education, and financial issues that did not exist on the rightmost end of the political spectrum (Jennen, 2021).

Overall, the DOS during the pandemic is multifaceted. Firstly, the legitimacy of the AfD was affected by the development in far-right extremism in the period. Secondly, despite salience of far-right issues not outright disappearing, the crisis increased the spectrum of salient issues, consequently putting less emphasis on the core of the AfD. Furthermore, spectacularizing the failure of the government proved difficult, as the government were not directly to blame for the pandemic. In addition, the government enacted measures that the AfD themselves campaigned for, such as closing the German borders, leaving the AfD in a difficult position between maintaining their populist line of critique or applauding the authoritarian border closures. The nativist core was also challenged by the rally-around-the-flag effect and increased solidarity, which becomes evident when investigating the lack of support for anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination protests as a majority the people agreed with the measures. There are, however, some elements in the context which create favourable framing opportunities, including the deterioration of the GDP, increased unemployment, lockdown-fatigue, and scepticism of increasing the restrictive measures from 3G to 2G.

In conclusion, I argue that the favourability of the discursive opportunities in the period was determined by an overall lack of alignment with the core of the far right. The nature of the crisis made it difficult to critique the government, which consequently weakened the populist core. Additionally, the government enactment of policies – which the AfD had pushed for – undermined the nativist and authoritarian core, as the pandemic led to a reduction of their most important issue, immigration. The weakening of the discursive advantages they previously held, created, arguably, a trade-off between populism, nativism, and authoritarianism, which challenged the framing-efforts. If they chose the populist critique, this undermined their own, initial suggestion of strict COVID-19 policies and border closures. If they chose a nativist and authoritarian stance, this would undermine the populism as they would de-facto support the government politics and argue, inherently, to re-open society to foreigners (Lehman and Zehnter, 2022, p. 17). As a result, the discursive opportunities were less fruitful than before the

pandemic, creating a more challenging environment for the party to operate in. The following chapter will explore how the AfD adapted their framing strategies to these limitations.

6. Framing before the COVID-19 pandemic

The following chapter probes the framing efforts by the AfD in the period before the pandemic. Throughout the chapter, detailed findings are presented, including specific quotes sourced from the AfD's Facebook page. The structure of the chapter mirrors the core framing tasks, starting with the examination of diagnostic framing, including its various themes and references, and subsequently exploring the consequential framing of both the AfD and others. The discussion then transitions to prognostic framing, policy suggestions, and concludes with an in-depth exploration of motivational framing.

In the period, a total of 207 posts were published on the AfD main Facebook page, of a four-month average. Within these four months, the AfD on average posted 1.7 posts a day. M On average, the AfD made 1.7 posts per day within this timeframe. While most days consisted of one post, there were some days with higher activity, reaching up to four posts. This indicates a consistent effort in framing through frequent posting during the period. For the overarching frame analysis, a total of 362 frames were identified as diagnostic, 215 frames were prognostic, and 38 frames were motivational. Consequently, diagnostic frames accounted for 58.9% of the total, prognostic frames constituted 35%, and motivational frames made up 6.2% of the total frames.

6.1 Diagnostic framing

Of the three main framing categories, the most attention is paid by the AfD to the diagnostic framing. The focus on diagnostic framing by far-right parties is a commonly used strategy, as it allows them to define and point out problems that both resonates with their supporters and assigns blame to specific groups (Gill, 2022). Accordingly, the strategy involves presenting a problem and who is responsible for it, inadvertently framing themselves as the only ones who highlight it or have the solutions to aid the problem (Lindekilde, 2014, p. 207). As a member of the far-right party family, the AfD also adheres to this logic, evident in their framing of issues and the attribution of blame to certain actors.

6.1.1 Diagnoses

The AfD points to various problems as part of its diagnostic framing, as shown in the graphical depiction in figure 4.
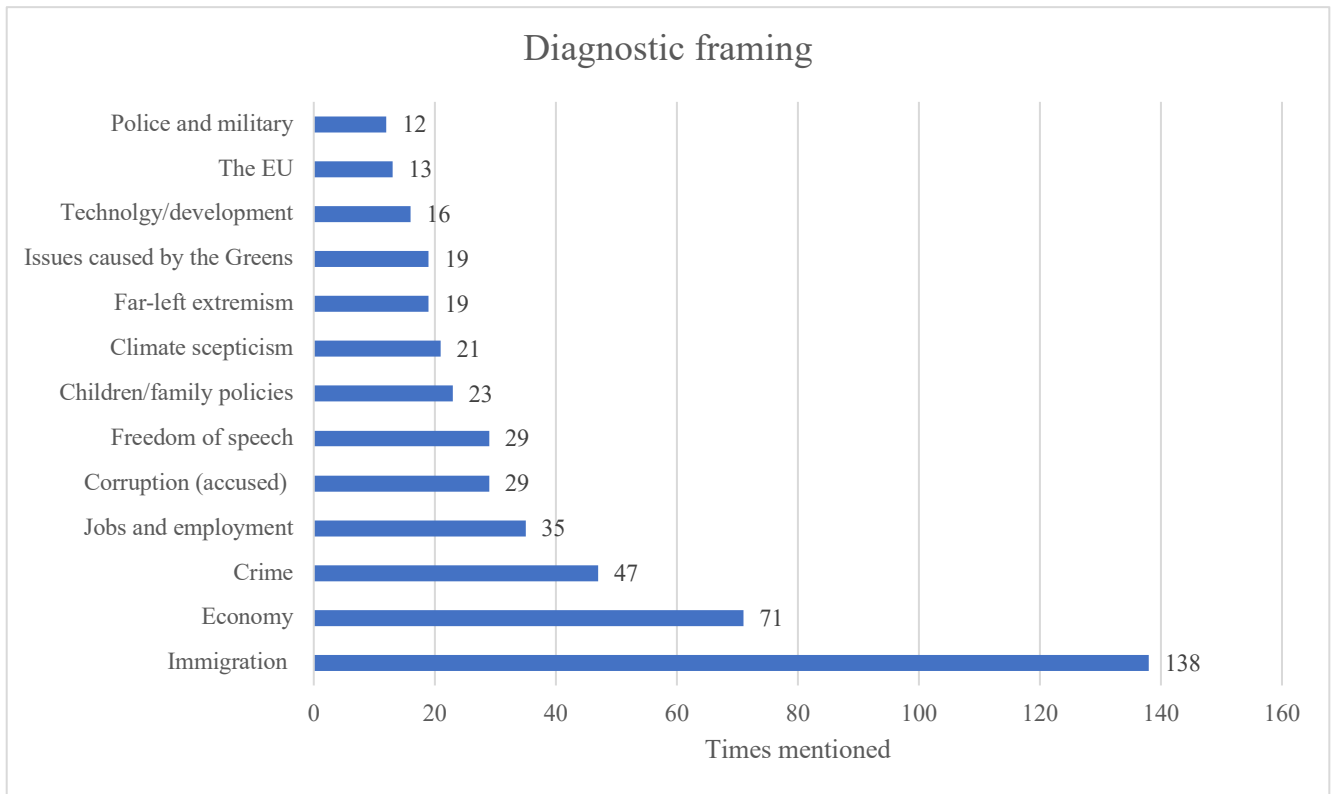
Figure 4: Diagnostic framing

A significant amount of focus is directed towards immigration as an issue (138). This focus is an extension of the discursive opportunities in the period and the legacy of the so-called refugee crisis. The issue is a central part of the AfD platform, consequentially outweighing other diagnosed issues in the period. To shed further light upon the immigration-related diagnostic framing, it is separated in three various sub-categories, which are security-concerns, economic insecurity concerns as well as social and cultural concerns, as evident in
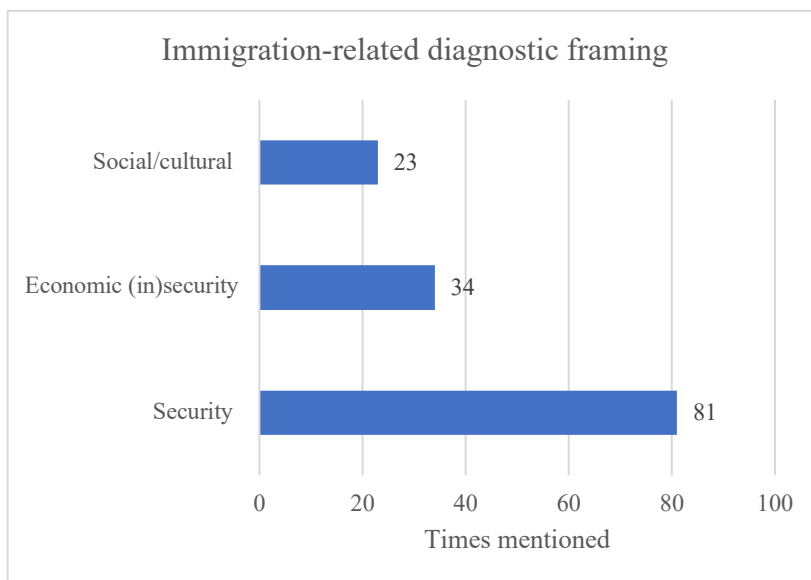
Figure 5: Immigration-related diagnostic framing

figure 5. When examining the frames, it becomes evident that they highlight, overall, the consequences of the welcoming-policies enacted by the government on Germany and German citizens. Accordingly, the diagnostic frames possess an intrinsic critique of the choice to open

the borders and let immigrants and refugees into Germany, which is reflected in various statements throughout the posts.

The biggest problem that immigration brings, according to the AfD, are security-related (81) issues, which centre on the crimes committed by asylum seekers, refugees, and immigrants, which the AfD frames a consequence of the immigration- and refugee-policy. The posts discussing security often recapture the crimes, and a common recurrence is a focus on violence and sexual violence, as reiterated the following post from June 11th, 2019, where they write: "Disgusting: African asylum seeker abused 9-year-old-girl (…) This joins the countless cases of sexual violence that have increasingly affected our country since 2015." Here, the AfD clearly references the "increasing effect since 2015", thus highlighting the consequences and legacy of the crisis. Terrorism is also discussed as a security-related concern of immigration. In particular, ISIS and Islamist terrorism is in focus. The posts discussing the issue are often framed as news content, as the AfD highlights events both nationally and internationally, such as the following post from October 4th, 2019: "France has been the focus of violent Islamists for years. There have been 24 bloody attacks since 2012. (…) There is only a matter of time before it is Germany's turn again. Believe it or not, 26 560 Islamists live among us". In these frames, in addition to the focus on the consequences of policy, they point to Islam and Islamists as a problem, which was, arguably a salient issue at the time. Despite Jihadist attacks only making up a sixth of all terrorist attacks in Europe in 2018, the attacks were responsible for all ten terrorism-related deaths and twenty-six of twenty-seven terrorism-related injuries (Directorate General for Communication, 2021). The posts also point specifically to the ethnicity and origin of perpetrators, and they express their frustration if they are not able to recount the ethnicity of people because of privacy-related laws. Furthermore, the AfD also points out the overarching consequences of security threats, such as the following post from the 17th of October 2019, where they reference the 2019 Shell Youth Study. Here, they argue that "66% are fearful of terrorism and a third is of the opinion that German society is being undermined by Islam". Accordingly, the AfD emphasizes the mental health baggage that arises from security concerns, framing young people as aligned with their policies regarding Islam. The use of the study by the AfD point, however, to a general theme in the framing, namely the ambiguous nature of what they themselves label as facts. This is visible when examining the Shell Youth Study itself, as there is no question asking if society is being undermined by Islam. Thus, the facts are, arguably, selected strategically to support their own conclusions.

Immigration is also discussed in terms of its effect on the economy (34), pointing specifically to it as a threat to people's personal economies and the German welfare state. References are made to immigrants as "asocial", "expensive", "premium misguided people" and as "burdens to tax bearers". They are, in particular, accused of exploiting the German welfare system, redistributing goods away from Germans themselves, as in this post from the 23rd of September 2019, where they argue: "The social system groans under the burden of those who haven't lived here that long. 75% of Syrians and 43% of Afghans depend on social benefits. How much longer can the welfare state bear this burden?". The years following the so-called refugee crisis is characterized by various attempts at integrating the refugees, a project which proved to be difficult both because of the high costs in the public sector and security-related fears of individuals (Trines, 2019). Thus, people had anxieties related to the labour-market as well as crime (Wike et al, 2016), and respondents in the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) ranked immigration as a top issue alongside socio-economic ones (Stövsand et al, 2022, pp. 83-4). Accordingly, posts pointing to the struggles of the welfare system often plays on these sentiments, asking rhetorical questions such as the one above to make readers engage with the discussion.

The AfD also focuses on cultural incompatibilities (23) of immigrants, refugees and Germans. In particular, they point to specific groups of people and their traditions, labelling them as "cultural peculiarities", claiming that Germany is under a "cultural stranglehold". The focus on Germany as being "strangled" is done both by pointing to specific events, such as Turkish weddings, or by emphasizing wider consequences of cultural differences in society. The cultural incompatibilities are used to contrast the negative consequences of immigration for Germans. An example of this is found a post from June 25th, 2019, where they critique a public pool's choice to refuse a sunburnt child to wear a t-shirt while swimming, while at the same time allowing "burkinis[3]". Here, they ask: "Is a ten-year-old with fair skin a second-class child? Should she become a Muslim to be allowed to swim with a swimming shirt?". The same logic is also used when framing Muslims as culturally incompatible in Germany, arguing that headscarves are "the symbol of oppression of women" and a "demarcation of our free society".

The second largest problem that the AfD discusses within diagnostic framing covers the economy (71). The category encompasses a wide variety of issues affecting the German people,

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[3] A burkini is a women's swimsuit that covers the entire body, leaving only hands, feet, and face exposed. The AfD have on several occasions opposed the wearing of these, claiming: "we prefer bikinis" (Wildman, 2017).

their personal economies, and the macroeconomic situation in Germany. The AfD, in the period, highlights issues such as increasing fuel prices, increasing electricity prices, the cost of maintaining the bureaucracy and contributions to the. Accordingly, the main focus within the category is the consequences of various policies, and their detrimental effects to German society and individuals. Furthermore, the diagnostic framing of economic issues points out culprits, namely those to blame for creating the policies. A main offender is institutions such as the EU and the European Central Bank, who the AfD argues to be "radical", "outrageous" and "killers". The AfD argues, in particular that "We are Brussels paymasters, bringing in far more than anyone else" asking "should they now more than double Germanys financial burden?" (19/10-19). The EU, being a main perpetrator, also gets its own category (13) where their policies and the consequences of them are criticized in detail, pointing to what they argue to be an unfair and unequal obligation for Germans within the EU.

In addition to the EU, political parties and the German government are also framed as responsible for allowing policies with negative consequences to pass, highlighting issues through arguments such as: "Municipalities will soon squeeze citizens even more, and the next avalanche of costs is rolling towards the citizens" (17/10-19). In other cases, the AfD references specific cases and policies rather than the general negative consequences for German citizens, critiquing policies. They often reference a "tightening screw", framing the government as putting too much pressure on the citizens. One example of this is found in a post from October 5th, 2019, where they discuss the closing of children's hospital clinics, describing it as a "nightmare for parents". Within the post, they ask the readers: "Where is a state that writes off medical care for the next generation headed? There is enough money in the coffers for a million asylum seekers and Turkish family members abroad, but not for our children. It is an unparalleled shame! The GroKo[4] must act!". The emotionally charged discourses coupled with the juxtaposition of refugee expenditure effectively frames the policies of the AfD as in line with the interests of the German people, while highlighting the government's failure to work for its constituents. This focus on the government also becomes evident in the discussion on children and family policy (23), where the AfD attributes falling birth rates, child-poverty, and lack of teachers as a result of the un-social policies that the government implemented. The same logic is applied when discussing police and the military (12). Here, the government is also

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[4] "GroKo" describes a governing coalition of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and its sister party, the Christian Social Union of Bavaria, CSU, and the Social Democratic Party (SPD)

accused of not prioritizing educating police and strengthening the military, arguing that Germanys is left vulnerable as a result of their policies.

The third largest category within the diagnostic framing is the focus on crime (47). The framing of crime is of a similar nature as the immigration-related challenges to security. The category, however, is without a nativist focus as there are many instances where immigrants or refugees may not directly be blamed for criminal acts. In particular, the AfD highlights gang-violence, violence on a general level, far-left violence, and organized crime. As in the security-related framing of immigration, the AfD here recaptures events in great detail. Despite the difficulty of attributing the events to immigrants, the category does not lack speculation regarding the involvements of foreigners or refugees. This becomes evident, in particular, through discussions on organized crime, such as the following from June 13th, 2019, where they argue: "Parallel societies, organized clan crime, and human trafficking overflow the prisons. The nationwide situation picture of the BKA shows solved crimes involving (!) at least one immigrant". Arabs and Turkish individuals, in particular, are framed as perpetrators of organized crime, the AfD arguing that they "have no respect for our laws, no respect for our courts and no respect for the German constitutional state" (7/1-20). Similarly, to the framing of immigration as a security-related problem, the AfD also focuses a lot of attention on women and sexual harassment. An example of this is evident in a post from June 17th, 2019, where the AfD discusses their suggested ban on the phenomenon of "Upskirting[5]". Here, they question the lack of policies enacted to prevent sexual violence, asking: "Why is there not enough courage to finally punish other assaults on women? Are our girls' fair game?". They follow by arguing that "As long as the perpetrators, mostly from non-European cultures, are not shown crystal clear what is not allowed here, things will only get worse". Thus, foreigners are, despite not being connected to the phenomenon, framed as accountable. The general theme of crime and what is deemed "acceptable" is often framed to portray perpetrators as actively rejecting German values and "despising" the country. This form of emotionally charged framing positions Germans, on one hand, as peaceful and security-seeking, and criminals on the other hand, as disruptors of this inherently German peace.

A similar, emotionally charged focus in also used in the focus on employment (35). The AfD

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[5] "Upskirting" is the act of taking intrusive photos under the skirt of individuals without their permission. The act became illegal in Germany in 2020

focuses on job losses in industries, in particular, car-manufacturing, which historically is a central party of the German economy. They highlight the annual losses of jobs and the future prospects of the industry, blaming climate-policies and the governing parties for the development. They also point to lack of sustainability, overall, in the German labour-market, pointing to short-term contracting or the phenomenon where individuals take on second part-time jobs, arguing that "these are precarious working conditions" or "for many, a job is not enough to live on". They also highlight emigration of skilled labour and the lack of favourable working-conditions in the German welfare state, blaming not only the government for enacting unfavourable policies, but also those that leave for "greener pastures" arguing they are "turning their back on their homeland". In particular, academics and those with higher education are criticized. This is, in parallel, reiterated in the category surrounding lack of technological development (16), which they argue puts Germans at a disadvantage in terms of international competitiveness and future job opportunities.

In addition to crime, the AfD points specifically to cases of accused corruption (29). There are few outright accusations of corruption, but the regularly AfD asks leading rhetorical questions regarding the integrity of politicians and the sincereness of their intentions. As such, they actively guide the readers to making conclusions on the legitimacy of the government and other political parties, asking questions such as "what is citizens money spent on" or "what is the government doing to fight crime". In particular, they make specific note whenever politicians "step out of line", often pointing out cases where money is spent on various purposes, politicians resign, or policies go awry.

Furthermore, the AfD champions the focus on freedom of speech (29), a right which they argue to be in dire straits in the current political environment. This becomes evident in a post from January 7th, 2020, where the AfD discusses a case of a Bavarian man suing to keep his Facebook-account, as it was blocked because he criticized Merkel and her refugee policy, sharing a post by Hungarian Prime minister Viktor Orbán. The AfD, in response, asks: "Is it appropriate that the man had to sue for his right to freedom of expression in court? Does he simply have the "wrong" opinion in the sense of the rulers?". Accordingly, the AfD questions both the government, pointing out their worries about alleged censorship and suppression in the public discourse. Arguably, the issue of a lack of freedom of speech is framed by the AfD as a threat to the German democracy. In particular, they highlight freedom of speech as an important right and element of engagement in the political debate. They follow by writing: "We ask: How

can it be that left-wing extremist not only spread hate speech against everyone who is not left-wing and conspire to attack opponents, call for violation of the right to demonstrate and incite murders and publish building instructions for deadly weapons?". As such, the focus on freedom of speech is consequentially contrasted with what they argue to be an oppressive liberal establishment, painting themselves as defenders of this freedom. Furthermore, they argue that the policies, as they stand, favour the "left-wing" extremists.

The argument that there exists an oppressive liberal establishment becomes clear in several other categories, such as climate-scepticism (21), far-left violence (19) and issues caused by the Greens (19). Here, in particular, the AfD discusses policies introduced by leftist parties and organizations, questioning both their legitimacy and consequences for the people. They point to the cost of green policies for the people, both on larger and smaller scales, such as the focus on CO_2-taxes or in other, smaller cases, such as the Green proposed ban on balloons.

6.1.2 Us and them: Framing of the opposition and framing of identity

Framing of others

The diagnostic framings sheds light on the importance of blame attribution, through the 426 various mentions of those responsible for the diagnostic frames. The group is diverse, with targets both in Germany and internationally, as shown in Figure 6. The AfD, overall, blames two main groups. Firstly, they target immigrants and Muslims, and secondly, they target, other politicians such as the government, the CDU, the SPD, or the general opposition.

The focus on immigrants (88) and Muslims (37) is an extension of the diagnostic framing. The terminology to reference the group, however, is somewhat cryptic and the use of the term "immigrants/immigration" in the analysis therefore becomes an umbrella-term of sorts. The ambiguous strategy of referencing the group employed by the AfD, inherently questions its legitimacy of immigrants or refugees, as an extension of the focus on crime and security. The word refugee is mostly written in "brackets" as a form of punctuation to denote sarcasm or irony, referring to them as "refugees", "the vulnerable", "the guests" or simply by their country of origin. The term "migrant" is also frequently used to discredit refugees framing them as economic opportunists.
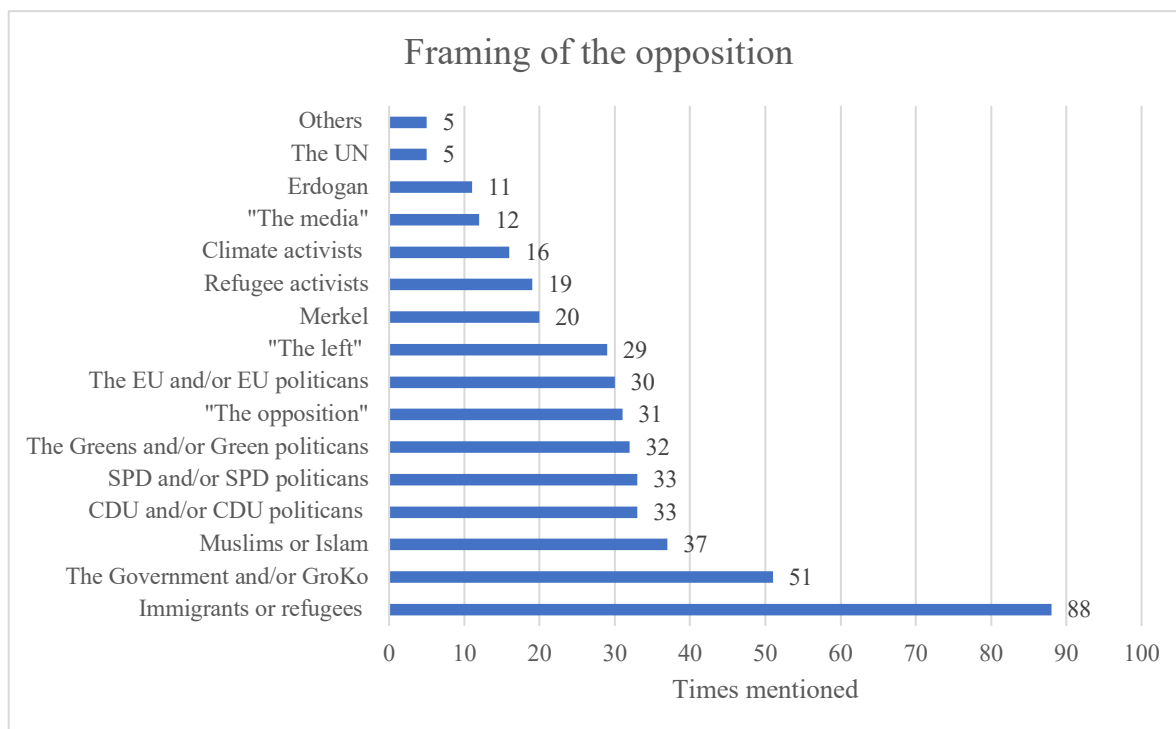
Figure 6: Oppositional framing

Politicians are also framed in a negative light, and the government (51) is the entity that gets criticized the most. The AfD labels them either as "the government" or "GroKo". As became evident in the diagnostic framing, the AfD critiques their lack of working for the German people, both internally and externally. The framing of the CDU (33) may, in turn, be seen as an extension of the framing of the government as it is the main governing party. They are argued to be elitist, old-fashioned and out-of-touch. This framing touches on important sentiment in the period regarding the CDU and its "open-door" policy (Saatçioğlu, 2021, p 815). In 2015, Merkel stated that "Wir schaffen das" – "We will manage it", highlighting the welcoming culture Germany would exhibit to the refugees (Maurer et al A, 2022, p. 224). This legacy was often used, as is evident in the framing, to underpin government criticism. To strengthen their claims, the AfD points to surveys, such as one in a post from January 10th, 2020, where they write: "The vast majority of those surveyed (57%) consider the cabinet of the CDU competent, and when asked, "Which politician do you trust the most?", just 18% named a Union politician". Merkel herself is also avidly criticized, a total of 20 times, an evident dynamic throughout 2019, where 72% were somewhat or completely dissatisfied with the government – and only 28% were satisfied or very satisfied (Deutsche Welle[2], 2021).

The same tactic is used in the face of other political parties such as the SPD (28) and the Greens (32). The framing of these, as the AfD disagrees with them to a larger extent than the CDU, is

reflected in the assertiveness of the frames, arguing for instance that the Greens are "self-righteous climate disciples, who fall miles short of their own promises" and that "they would finally destroy Germany as a business location and lose us billions for a utopian climate policy" (19/6-19). This logic is also utilized in the framing of the media (12) and the opposition (31), as they write in a post from October 15th, 2019: "Thank you dear media, thank you dear nanny talk shows, thank you mainstream, politics and left-aggressive do-gooder hordes!".

The opposition is also framed in international terms, citing activists, the EU and Erdogan as adversaries to the AfD and Germany. Climate activists (16) are framed as "sect-like", "reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan", "ideologically panicky outlines" and as "doomsday fanatics". Refugee activists (19) are also framed as "unintellectual" and dangerous "fanatics". As for larger institutions, the EU (30) is framed as a "burgeoning superstate, which brooks no dissent and warmly greets its comrades in North Korea" (23/6-19) and as a "despot". The same denotation is also put on Erdogan (11), achieving the label "the despot of Bosporus" (6/9-19).

Framing of the self

The framing of themselves follows the framing of the opposition, where the AfD adopts an approach that presents itself as an alternative to the existing political parties. This framing subtly reinforces the party's positive self-representation. They spend less time framing themselves overall, referencing themselves a total of 173 times, shown in figure 7.
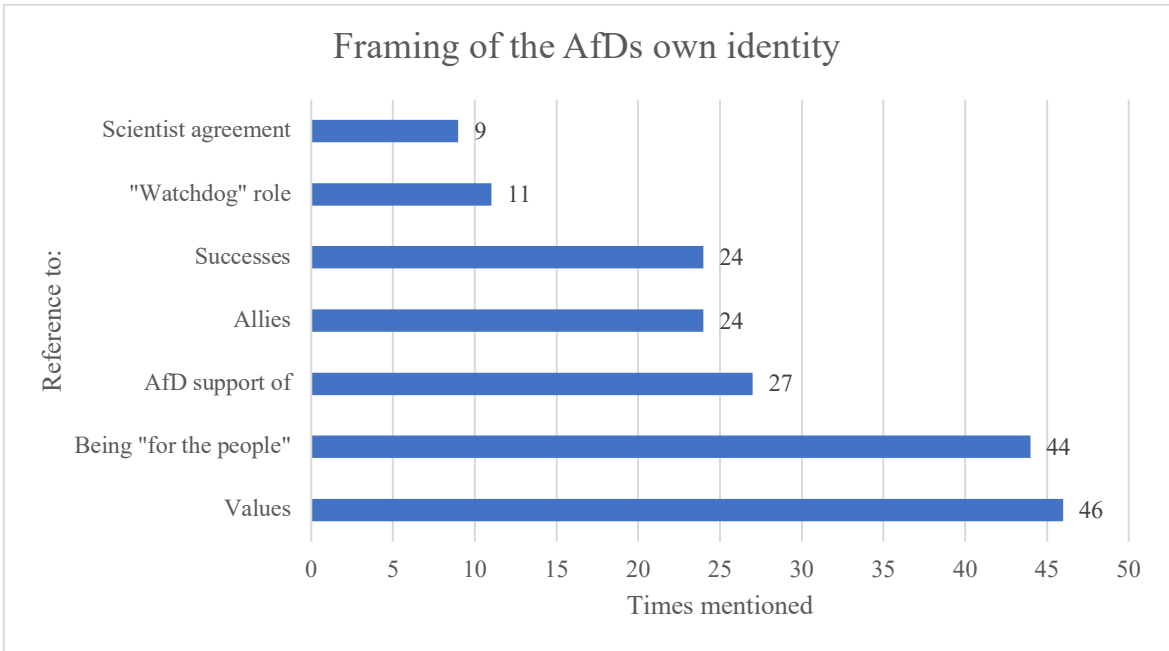

Figure 7: Framing of identity

The AfD highlights mostly on their own – superior – values (46), as an extension of the significant lack of values they frame the other political parties to possess. Accordingly, their values are framed directly through discussions surrounding their own candidates and references to specific German "virtues". In one post, from June 14th, 2019, the AfD discusses their candidate for Mayor in the city of Görlitz[6], arguing: "We want to rule. We want to shape the European city of Görlitz. Make it secure, family-friendly, and attractive to young entrepreneurs and investors. This is what out candidate stands for". Within this framing of themselves, there is a degree of foreshadowing to both what the other candidates lack and what they themselves wish to do, in making it "secure and family-friendly". To further emphasize their values, the candidate is frames as a "married father of three children and police officer born in Görliz", which serves to highlight his alignment with what they frame as "traditional German values". Accordingly, the framing of the candidate may be upscaled, as he is a representative of the AfD. Furthermore, framing him as a law enforcement official that "listens and delivers", contrasts the critique of the government in not listening and underprioritizing law enforcement agencies. The focus on values also becomes evident when diagnosing issues such as crime, family-policy, or freedom of speech, arguing that they "advocate for a society aware of German values again and passing them on to future generations in a targeted manner" (13/1-20).

In close contact with the focus on values, the AfD also highlights its role for "the people" (44) – namely the German people. They refer to themselves as working for the people both inherently when discussing how the government does not work in the interest of Germans, as well as explicitly. Throughout the posts, the continuously AfD refers to itself as "the citizens alternative, "the real workers party", "the real peoples ally" or by making promises to "all Germans".

Furthermore, the AfD often highlights events, individuals, or policies they support (27). They frequently express their support for law and order by emphasizing the importance of law enforcement officials, stating that: "the police, the fire brigade, the ambulance – these are people of respect" (13/1-20). They also point to specific events to bolster this position such as a post from June 12th, 2019, where they discuss a criminal event being countered, praising "the prudent walkers, the committed passers-by the active cooperation of the children and the exemplary police action" that led to the apprehension of a "asylum seeker from Niger". This

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[6] Görliz is the city in Germany located furthest to the east.

focus, again, highlights their diagnostic framing of crime and security, positioning themselves as an alternative to the current situation, which they frame as riddled by crime because of immigrants. The support for specific polices is, accordingly, also expressed by highlighting events, such as Denmark's "ghetto-law" aimed at achieving integration, as shown in a post from June 5th, 2019. The post praises the dissolvement of "parallel societies of mostly Muslim residents" and argues that "if there is one thing the Danes won't let go of, it's their identity. That is enviable!". This, in turn, reinforces the diagnostic framing of immigration as a problem and offers a prognostic frame by suggesting integration-policies as a solution to integration issues and "parallel societies".

In addition to highlighting those they support, the AfD also emphasizes those who supports them (24) as well as their achievements (24). They reference outspoken critics of Islam, individuals who claim they have voted for the AfD and various organizations they collaborate with. For example, in a post from October 17th, 2019, they mention a "handball star" who argued that "we have no true freedom of expression in the true sense", using the statement to bolster their argument that "we will take revenge in the voting booth!". The AfD also points to scientists (9) who agree with their polices, particularly in discussions on the perceived negative effect of climate-policies.

Lastly, the AfD presents itself as a watchdog[7] (11), providing information about facts, statistics, and events that they frame as the truth in contrast to the bias of the mainstream as well as the diagnoses related to accusation of corruption. They emphasize this role by using phrases like "we will keep a close eye on them", "we will tell you the truth" or "we will keep you up to date". In other cases, they report on current events, as seen in a post from January 13th, 2020, where they share details about a knife attack, appealing to the public to come forward with information as the one responsible should be arrested, writing: "He is to 18 to 19 years old, black skin colour, black jogging suit, cap, backpack (…) If you have observed the crime or have any information about the crime or the alleged perpetrator, please contact the police". This unofficial watchdog role underpins both the diagnostic framing of a biased and leftist media and of increased crime. By framing themselves as a truth-teller and law-and-order party, the

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[7] The labeling of the category as "watchdog" is based on the logic of watchdog journalism, a form of investigative journalism to increase the accountability of elected officials in democratic governance systems – a role which is usually ascribed to the media (Norris, 2014).

AfD discusses topics that others avoid and consequently presents their views on what should be done in accordance with the diagnosis.

6.2 Prognostic framing

The prognostic frames extend the diagnostic frames by outlining the suggested solutions to the issues at hand. There are 215 various prognostic frames in the period, shown in graph 8. They highlight, most importantly, policies to end immigration and crime as well policies to alleviate their consequences. They also emphasize their role in opposition, advocating for sustained resistance and alternative policies to the courses chosen, such as leaving the EU or improving taxes.

The prognostic frames of the AfD are less specific than their diagnostic frames, which I argue is related to their nature. Policy-suggestions, generally, need to be nuanced, "natural and familiar" to resonate (Gamson, 1992, p. 135). The far right, however, with its core issues of nativism, populism and authoritarianism is not inclined towards being nuanced or stepping outside of their core. As such, they emphasize diagnostic framing over prognostic framing, and provide more vague policy-suggestions than when pointing out what is wrong.
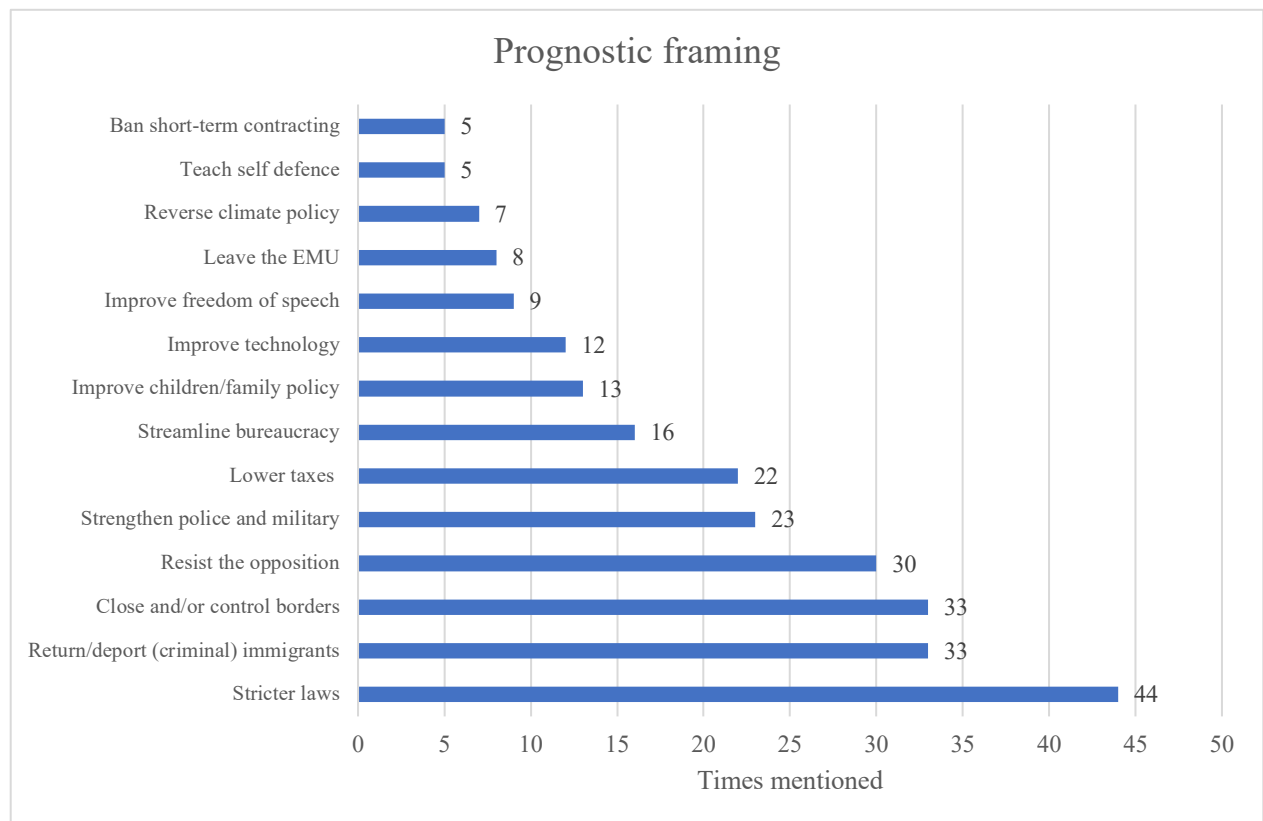

Figure 8: Prognostic framing

The strategy most often suggested to alleviate the diagnoses discussed is the introduction of stricter laws and punishments (44). This is a cornerstone suggestion for the AfD in the period, as they diagnose laws and punishment as too weak, pointing to the various consequences of it. As such, they argue for tightening laws both in scale and severity. The suggestion is made both on a general level through arguments such as "serious offences must be punished consistently", "lower the criminal age of responsibility" or "the rule of law must finally show its teeth to deter potential perpetrators". In addition to the more general calls for stricter laws, they also suggest specific policies, such as penalties, fines, withdrawal of driver's licenses for participating in "wedding parades"[8] or introducing tax evasion as a criminal offence. To clarify, tax evasion is already a criminal offence under §369 of the German Fiscal Code, with penalties of several years of imprisonment. However, the AfD still suggests this as a solution, most importantly – as their own solution – following the same logic as shown in the diagnostic framing, where they cite statistics and use facts based on their own logic.

The second-most emphasized categories are of a similar nature, suggesting closing and controlling the German borders (33) to prevent refugees from entering Germany, as well as deporting criminals, or simply regular immigrants (33). The argument for deportation is often made in conjunction with security-related diagnostic framing, as in a post from January 6th, 2020, where they argue that "when dealing with criminal foreigners and those at risk of terrorism, only a consistent policy geared to the security of the German population can be the way forward. This includes the uncompromising deportation of those who break our laws and disregard our values". Although less explicitly, they suggest in other posts that those who disregard German values should also face deportation. For instance, they urge the "rule of law" to "throw all 'immigrants' out the door" immediately. This argument, however, is geared more towards a policy of increasing German values. The immigration-related problems may also be mitigated by closing and controlling the German borders, a suggestion linked to the diagnostic framing, through statements such as: "If you want to prevent terrorists from entering the country and preparing their next attack here, you have to ensure that all the borders are effectively protected" (8/1-20). Furthermore, they often suggest strengthening the police and military, (23) to make the deportations and border-controls possible. The AfD frequently employs statements such as "security is possible with enough police on the streets" or "police officers and members of the Bundeswehr vote for the AfD because we want them to be perceived again for what they

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[8] The AfD frequently references what may be translated to "wedding parades", a way of celebrating marriages sometimes involving reckless driving or shooting in the air as a celebratory gesture.

are: A mainstay of our free and democratic basic order" (13/1-20). In addition to more police and closing the borders, the AfD suggests teaching women self-defence (5) as a precautionary measure, stating that: "The state no longer protects them, many consider them fair game. The only thing that helps here is self-defence in an emergency" (9/9-19).

As a response to the issues caused by the other political parties and the government, the AfD frames several policies, including resisting the opposition (30), streamlining the bureaucracy, (16) and reversing climate-policies (7). The first, "resisting" the opposition refers to the more general suggestions made, discussing that they wish to limit, stop, and resist the government and political opposition in any way they can. The chosen policy in the face of, for instance, the potential EU increasing of Germanys financial contribution, is the AfD delegation to the EP will "oppose the latest efforts with all severity" (19/10-19). The suggestions are, as the diagnostic framing, emotionally loaded. However, they differ in that there is no outlined policy of resistance, which might be attributed to the AfD wanting to keep their strategies hidden. The focus on resistance, however, works well in conjunction with the identity framing, as discussed, presenting themselves as "fighting for the people". A similar logic is utilized when they suggest streamlining the bureaucracy, as a response to the out-of-touch, elitist government, and bureaucracy. This suggestion is made both in small terms, as they suggest limiting the broadcasting fees in Germany, or in large terms arguing for a "complete and consistent reform of the public service". In particular, they consistently press argue for reforming the Bundestag, by reducing the number of delegates and costs, which they argue would be beneficial to its functioning and to Germany, overall.

The cost-reduction argument is also evident in the focus on lowering taxes (22), improving technology (12), leaving the EMU (8), and ending short-term contracting (5). In particular, the AfD here frames working-class families, the middle class, and pensioners through statements such as "new taxes are completely out of the question" and that they will work to ensure that "solidarity is no longer at the expense of our own population to give tomorrows pensioners a worthy perspective" (29/1-20). The AfD points to banning short-term employment contracts as a solution to improving the field of employment, emphasizing the importance of stability for families. This argument is also reiterated in the discussions surrounding inadequate family policies (13), where the AfD emphasizes the importance of educating more teachers as well as midwives, through arguments such as "children are the future" and "we are committed to family-friendly policies with a wide range of support from the very beginning". The emphasis

on stability is also evident in the discussions on the EU, where they argue both for reforms of the union or potentially leaving it. This is visible in a post from September 18th, 2019, where they argue that "the euro is terminally ill and destroying Europe, our prosperity, and our banks. It is time to finally unwind the monetary policy stillbirth."

6.3 Motivational framing

The motivational framing is the task of appealing to and encouraging constituents to take active part in achieving the various goals set out in the diagnostic and prognostic frames. The category itself, however, consists of a lot fewer cases than the former categories, as the AfD spends significantly less time on this core framing task. The motivational framing takes on a similar logic to that of prognostic framing, as it is less emphasized. This may be attributed to the optimistic nature of motivational framing, which may not resonate as strongly with the AfD basis of support, as they are usually motivated by diagnostic framing or grievances. Of the frames themselves, however, the most attention is paid to voting, followed by a lesser focus on party membership, social media, and protest.
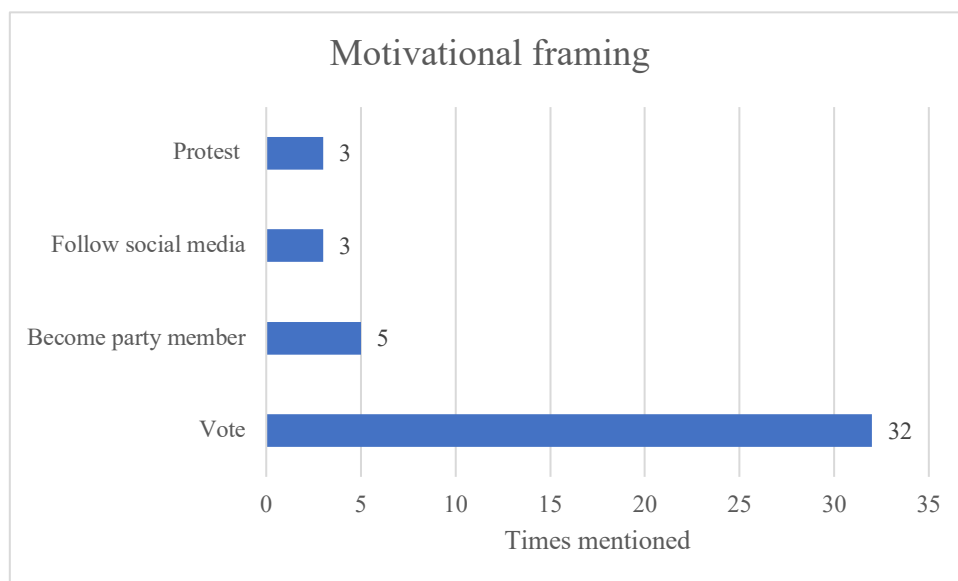
Figure 9: Motivational framing

The largest category, which calls for people to actively vote (32), is a logical motivational frame given the nature of the AfD as a political party with a goal of electoral success. Incitements to vote are, consequently, done both with a basis in diagnostic and prognostic frames, through statements such as "the AfD has the program and the personnel for a real change in security policy. It's in your hands with your vote!" (14/1-20), or "set the course for a healthy constitutional state that declares the defence against extremism of any kind to be a top priority. Thuringia will vote on October 27th. We are counting on you!" (14/6-19). Accordingly, the call

for votes is framed as an easy action to take, as they claim, "all you have to do is vote". Within this category as well, the AfD directly addresses their supporters and encourages them to spread the message, bringing friends and family.

In addition to the focus on voting, the AfD addresses potential supporters, arguing for joining as a party member (5), as visible in a post from September 3rd, 2019, where they argue: "Do you want to be involved, meet like-minded people, participate in day-to-day politics, or do something good for the AfD as a sponsor? Don't hesitate! Help us continue our triumphal procession for Germany and its people. Become a member!". The motivational frame, in this case, gathers strength from its framing of itself as a party for the people as well as the prognostic frames and the focus on sustained resistance to the governing parties.

The AfD does, sparingly, reference their other social media (3) such as YouTube and Twitter, and occasionally calls for protests (3). These categories, however, being only mentioned a few times, are therefore rarely a priority.

There are several possible reasons for the absence of motivational frames in the period. Firstly, it may be attributed to the nature of far-right parties, which arguably makes them less inclined towards motivational framing. Secondly, there is an argument to be made that, within this period of framing, there is a low likelihood of the AfD achieving governmental responsibility. Thus, the AfD will not be measured and scrutinized if their suggested policies or calls to action fail. This, in turn, allows for them to make more general suggestions and focus primarily on diagnoses. This is, in particular, evident in the prognostic frames, as their populist policies such as "leaving the EU" or "deporting immigrants" are comprehensive endeavours suggested without outright arguing for how it will be undertaken in practice. As such, the lack of motivational framing may therefore be attributed to the absence of elections and the maintenance of the basis of support through diagnostic framing.

On the other hand, there is an argument to be made that the lack of direct motivational framing might be a result of the inherent and built-in motivational framing, because of the nature of the Facebook-posts themselves. As discussed, the AfD targets primarily its own voter base. Yet, the posts are made on its public Facebook page for all to see. Furthermore, the AfD is known to take advantage of the Facebook algorithm to appear on the feeds of people more often than other political parties. Accordingly, there is a high likelihood of the posts being seen by possible

Image 1: AfD post (25/6-19)

voters, and the continuation of their frames may, therefore, be important in convincing them. Thus, all the posts are accompanied by photographs with the AfD logo and slogans, and there is a high frequency of posts. This is illustrated in the following post from June 25th, 2019, where the AfD discusses the possible deportation of asylum seekers, with an icon of an airplane with the statement "cut off criminal asylum seekers immediately", creating a recognizable pattern. I argue, therefore, that the lack of direct motivational framing is mitigated by the subtle and continued endeavour to establish itself through the indirect motivational framing.

In total, the framing before the pandemic is centred largely around the diagnostic framing focused on immigration. Additionally, a significant portion of the framing is angled towards a more general critique of the AfDs opposition, both the government and other political parties which they disagree with. This is reflected, both in their focus on votes and the highlighting of themselves as a party for the people. With the frame-analysis before the pandemic now accounted for, the following chapter investigates the framing in the situation of the pandemic.

7. Framing after the COVID-19 pandemic

Having now accounted for the framing before the pandemic, the following chapter analyses the framing efforts by the AfD after the pandemic. The timeslot covers the period after the 2021 Federal Election until the beginning of 2022. In the period, a total of 226 posts were published on the AfD main Facebook page. Within the period, the AfD posted about 1.9 posts per day, a marginal increase from the period before the pandemic.

For the overarching frame-analysis, 309 frames were diagnostic, 182 were prognostic and 264 were motivational. Of this total, 40.9% were diagnostic, 24.1% of were prognostic, and 25.9 were motivational.

7.1 Diagnostic framing

Of the three main framing categories, the most attention is paid by the AfD to diagnostic framing. The category, during the pandemic, makes up a smaller percentage of the total framing than before the pandemic, moving from 59% to 41%. Despite the reduction of diagnostic framing as part of the total, diagnostic framing is still the task they focused on the most, following the same logic as before, where the main focus revolves problems and blame-attribution, as it resonates with the voter-base to a larger extent than the other core framing strategies. In addition, there is a shift in various diagnostic frames, increasing from 13 categories to about 19, covering a wider array of issues than before.

7.1.1 Diagnoses

The AfD points to various problems as part of its diagnostic framing, as shown in figure 10. Two of the top three issues remains the same as before the pandemic, namely the focus on economy and immigration. The top issue reflects the presence of the pandemic, diagnosing it a total of 111 times within the realm of the diagnostic frames.

The significant focus directed towards the pandemic, is, arguably, a natural development of frames given the presence of the crisis and its effects on political and social life, as discussed in the background-chapter. Because of the significance of the issue, outweighing the other diagnoses, the focus is divided into various sub-categories, shown in figure 11.
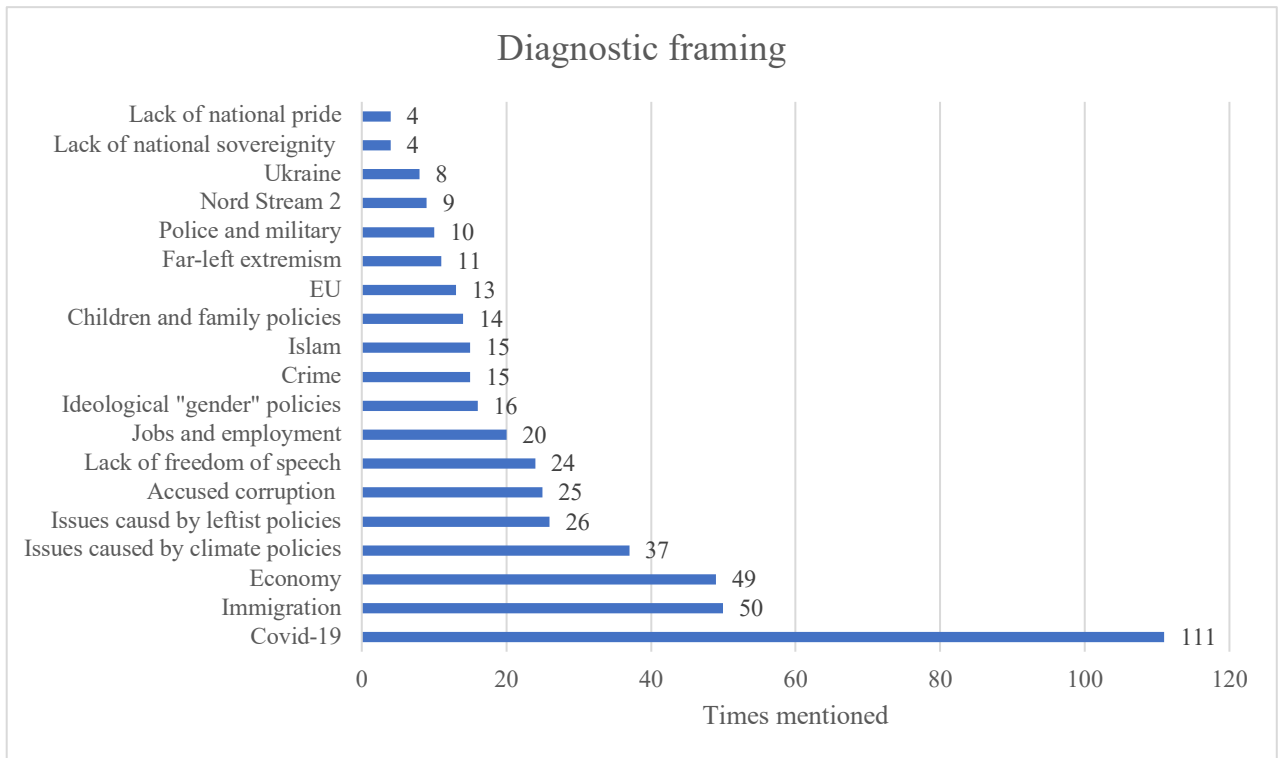
Figure 10: Diagnostic framing

In total, the framing of the pandemic revolves around the "unlawfulness" of the measures put in place to counter and limit the pandemic, as well as the various negative consequences of said measures to the German economy, state and most importantly, people. This is done through slogans and campaigns such as "healthy without compulsion", "control the borders, not the citizens" and "Germany, but normal". The danger of the virus is rarely addressed and is only discussed a handful of times within the period of framing. In one of the rare instances where it is addressed, the AfD writes: "To not be misunderstood: COVID-19 can be a serious illness and even fatal, however, it must remain the personal decision of each individual citizen whether they want to be vaccinated or not" (17/12-21). This highlights the most important focus of the COVID-related diagnostic framing, namely the proposed vaccination mandates (57) and its potential effects, which they label the
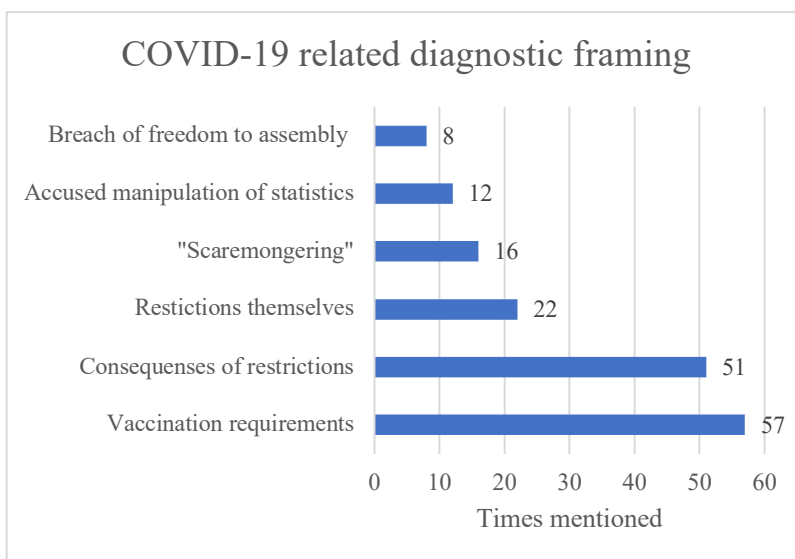
Figure 11: COVID-19 related diagnostic framing

"vaccination experiment". Mandatory vaccination is argued to be an "unspeakable harassment" that both "splits society" and "creates an inhumane society that puts the novel 1984 in the shade" (2/11-21). The AfD highlights the right to choose, the possible discrimination unvaccinated might be subjected to, as well as the possible health-consequences of vaccinating children. In one post, they argue: "While vaccinated people are allowed to move freely, unvaccinated people should be harassed with distance rules, masks, and partitions. Where does the madness end?" (2/11-21). In particular, they are highly critical of the possible mandatory vaccination for doctors and nurses, arguing that many want to quit because of the possible mandate, asking: "How can the old parties talk about wanting to avoid overloading the healthcare system and at the same time scare away thousands of employees?" (20/2-22). They also critique the alternative measures for those that do not wish to get vaccinated, such as routine testing, arguing: "If they do not undergo tests they will lose their jobs, but what if they can't afford the tests? This is an attack on the jobs and social security of countless people" (4/11-21). Accordingly, the diagnostic framing related to vaccination highlights both its unlawfulness and its possible consequences.

The same logic is applied when they discuss the consequences of measures (51), focusing on lockdowns, social distancing, and the restriction of the freedom of assembly, which is labelled as "orgies of bans" or "mania of locking down". This is done, in some instances, by questioning the legitimacy of the statistics (12) used to formulate the "disproportionate" measures, the lawfulness of the measures (22) and the negative impacts the measures have had on the population. In terms of general consequences, the AfD points to a wide variety, focusing on the economy, jobs, manufacturing, exports, businesses, homelessness, poverty, mental health, children's development, and socializing. They underpin these arguments with statistics, when they can, through arguments such as: "The number of homeless has risen massively. In 2020, 45 000 even lived on the streets" (22/12-21). These statistics are used as a counter-frame to the official statistics used to justify the measures, which the AfD questions with great scrutiny. This scrutiny is, in particular, reflected in various posts that welcomes the reader to reflect on the issue, by asking questions such as "Why should one trust a political media that stigmatizes its critics as Nazis, racists, or sexist?", "Where does trust come from when the introduction of compulsory vaccination is initially labelled as an absurd conspiracy and is now introduced without an apology?" or "who should trust them when numerous corona numbers are falsified or reproduced with manipulative interpretation for the purpose of scaremongering?" (26/1-22). In particular, the AfD frames the rights of people as endangered, focusing both on freedom of

assembly (8), arguing that the old parties express themselves "contemptuously and hatefully" towards "peaceful demonstrators", arguing that they "feel more threatened by people going for walks than organized crime and illegal immigration". In total, The AfDs framing of the pandemic focuses on the unlawfulness of the measures put in place to limit its spread, as well as the negative consequences of these measures on the German economy, state, and people.

The second-largest category, as reflected in the quote above to contrast the "peaceful demonstrators", is the focus on immigration (50). This category is similar to the focus before the pandemic, as they highlight the security, economic insecurity, and the incompatibility of foreign cultures with German values. As before the pandemic, statistics are enlisted to highlight the consequences of immigration, such as crime, "miserable professional aspects" and cultural incompatibility. The only major difference in the period is the outrage expressed by the AfD at the government for prioritizing the pandemic and not immigration. This is expressed by referencing the crisis in 2015 to highlight the importance of not neglecting the issue of immigration. As such, they threaten that increased immigration may have an "effect similar to the loss of control in 2015" (11/12-21). In one post, they argue that "the media and federal government are lulling us to sleep, but the federal police union is sounding the alarm" (1/11-21). In particular, they regularly focus on the immigrants on the German-Polish border, even arranging their own press conference in late October 2021 to shed light on the gravity of the issue.

The third-largest category, the economy (49), is affected largely by the presence of the pandemic and the worsening economic conditions for people as a result. They highlight inflation, loss of jobs, energy prices and struggling German industries. In comparison to the focus before the pandemic, there is a higher degree of references to statistics. This might be a result of the increased negative statistics overall, which offer fruitful framing opportunities, as they can rightfully state that: "inflation has skyrocketed", "Germans are losing an average of 1400 euros this year" or "young Germans have fewer assets than almost any other EU country, ranking 19th of 21 for the 16- to 34-year-old median income" (29/1-22). The economic diagnostic framing also differs from before the pandemic in that there is an increase in the attributional component; Instead of saying "the government is to blame", as the diagnostic framing before the pandemic often did, they instead reference specific policies which have caused the economic issues. This becomes evident through statements such as "the exploding energy prices can be traced back to an ideologized green energy policy!" (1/11-21) or "the

bureaucracy, the eco-planned economy, and taxes are making it difficult for young people" (29/1-22). The same tactic is evident in the focus on job losses (20), which is attributed mostly to policies, as in a post from October 21st, 2021, where the AfD discusses the "gloomy" prospects in the car-manufacturing industry, arguing that: "around 30 000 jobs are at risk, as other companies are becoming dependent on China (…) The reasons for the decline are manifold: The tax burden, the ideological green campaign against engines, and the corona measures from the federal government."

A main scapegoat throughout the attributional diagnostic framing is the focus on consequences caused by climate policies (37) and leftist policies (26), categories which have significantly increased from before the pandemic. I argue that this increase is a counter-framing tactic as a result of the success of the Greens and the SPD, making the negative framing of them crucial. The policies are blamed for their consequences on costs, pandemic-measures, taxes as well as a general ideological shifts towards the left. Consequently, they Greens and the SPD are labelled as "hippies" and "Green-ideologues". In one instance, the AfD points to their CO2 "rip-off" and the phase-out of coal and nuclear power – which they warned about – as the reason for "heating costs exploding up to 99%" (8/1-22). They argue that people must decide between "eating decent or living in a warm apartment, and still the Green party leader wants to increase heating costs" (8/1-22). To underpin these arguments, they introduce terms such as "Greenflation", a portmanteau of "Green inflation". They are also argued to have "both eyes closed to the problems associated with immigration" and are critiqued for their suggestions to increase allowances for refugees and for their suggestion to publish statistics in more languages than German, a choice the AfD argues is "censorship and ideology that takes precedence of over problem-solving" (23/1-22). The policies are also criticized on grounds of being the wrong ones, which becomes evident in discussions surrounding the implementation of Nord Stream 2 (9), which the AfD argues is a solution to high energy prices, something the Greens and SPD worked against in the period.

The strategy of pointing to values is also evident in the newfound focus on diagnosing ideological issues, which is visible both in the focus on Islam (15), "gendered" ideology (16) as well as lack of national pride (4). The focus on values may be seen as a counter-framing to the left-leaning successful political parties and the lack of representation that the far-right, according to the AfD, has in the media, culminating in an overall diagnosis of German values, overall, as under attack. This, in turn, is utilized to frame a German identity, which the AfD

frames itself as a protector of. They regularly reference Christian legacies, which they did not do before the pandemic, and they are increasingly critical of the consequences of political correctness of the "left wing". This becomes evident in various posts. In one instance, from the 22nd of February 2022, the AfD discusses a proposed democracy-class in kindergartens, arguing that it would be a "one-sided education, listing on the left-wing extremist spectrum". In another instance, they critique decisions made on addressing people with their preferred pronouns, arguing that "a man is a man, even if he wears a skirt, lipstick, and heels" (27/2-22). They also argue that freedom of speech (24) is under attack by the leftist political correctness, claiming there is censorship "based on the Chinese model" and an "authoritarian no-culture". This is reflected in a post from January 3rd, 2022, where they discuss a current debate regarding the app Telegram being called a "hate platform", which they argue "shows a climate in which critique of the government is stigmatized and denigrated and critics of the corona, migration, climate, and gender policies are permanently stigmatized and silenced". On the other side of the spectrum, Islam is also framed as a culprit in damaging German values, which they highlight through a focus on rights, similarly to the discussions on the pandemic itself. This is argued for in posts where they write: "three-quarters of Germans are against an everyday muezzin call. It is already controversial among women's rights activists and is seen by critics as a demonstration of Islamic power and should NOT belong in Germany as naturally as church bells" (23/10-21). The ideological focus also becomes evident when examining two new categorizations within the diagnostic framing, namely "country sovereignty" (4) and "lack of national pride" (4). Albeit small, these categories point to a development toward more distinct nationalist sentiment. For instance, the AfD avidly criticises politicians that do not wish to use the German flag or support the military troops, and they critique politicians who, in their view, look down upon former East Germany.

Less attention is paid to categories relating to police and military (11), as well as crime (15), the latter reducing from 47 to 15 mentions. I argue this change reflects the shift in issue salience because of the pandemic, which caused a knock-on effect of crime falling by 5% between 2021 and 2021 and the number of crimes solves increasing to 58% (BKA, 2021). As such, the issue salience of crime, arguably, decreased. This is also reflected in the reduced focus on far-left extremism (11) and its consequences, as it also reduced in scope and severity. The AfD did maintain, however, its focus on accused corruption (25), following the same logic as before the pandemic.

7.1.2 Us and them: Framing of the opposition and framing of identity.

Framing of others

The diagnostic frames in the period after the pandemic sheds particular light on the importance of the framing others as responsible for the various diagnoses. The period is, arguably, characterized by the shift in government, and the framing of the opposition is undertaken as such. In the period, the focus on who is to blame is increasingly intertwined with the diagnostic framing than before the pandemic, making up a substantial part of the diagnostic framing itself.
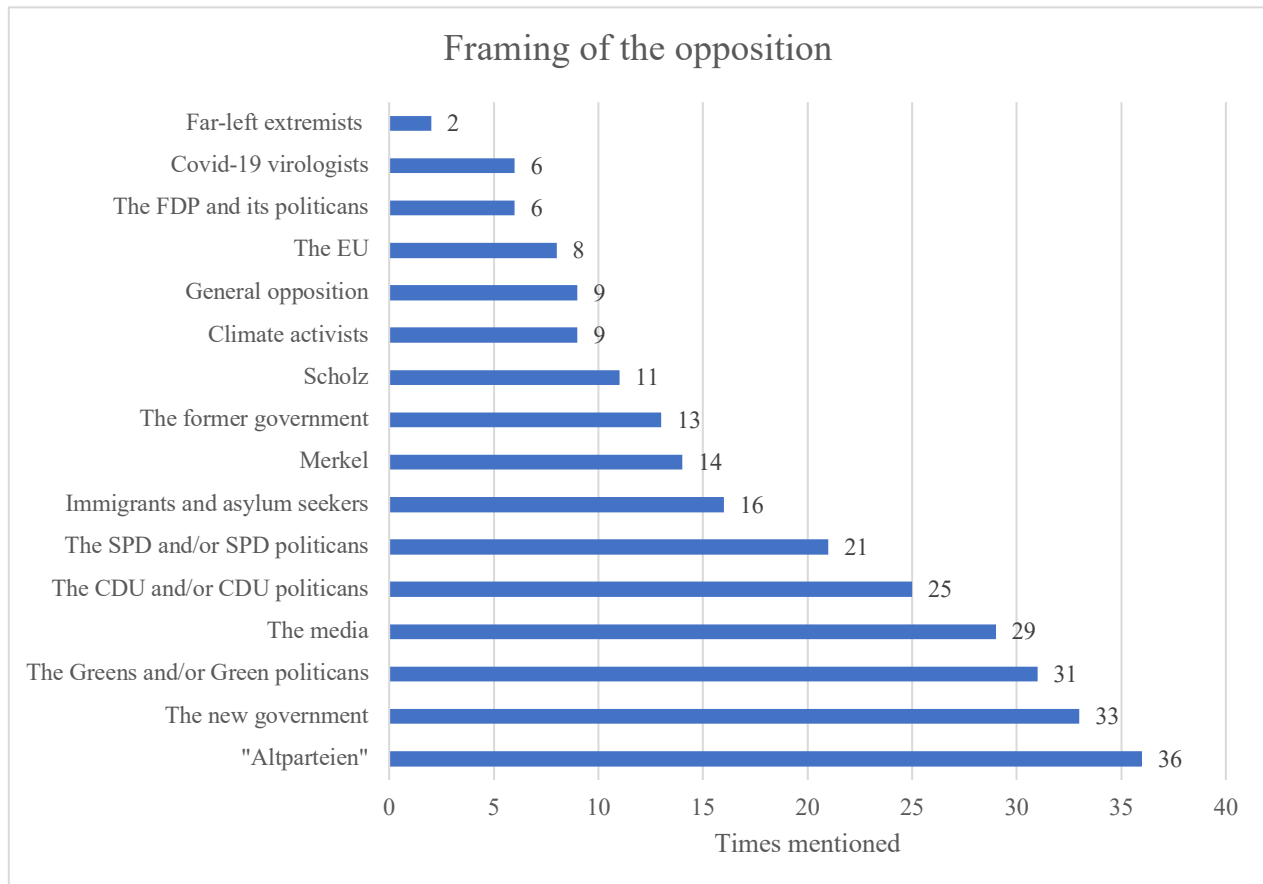
Figure 12: Framing of the opposition

The most attention is paid to the "Altparteien"[9] (36), the "old parties" which are often framed in conjunction with the new government (33), the Greens (31), the SPD (21), Chancellor Scholz (11) and the general opposition (9). The increased framing of them as "the old parties", entails a rhetorical focus towards their "incompetence". They are also frequently referred to as "traffic-light-men" referring to the traffic-light colouring of the SPD, Greens, and FDP. The new government, in particular the Greens, are framed as "inadequate", "cheaters", "clowns", "extremists" and "ideologists", and the traffic-light government are categorized as a "left-wing

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[9]Reference to the oldest parties in German with a long parliamentary history. Pejorative terminology when used by the far right, entailing that the party is part of a corrupt system, supporting the status quo (Kasparick, 2015).

swamp". This, arguably, entails an increase both in scope but also in the intensity of the frames, designed to discredit the policies as well as the government itself.

The old government (13) is still framed alongside Merkel (14) and the CDU (25), as they are still argued to be responsible for various consequences, as reflected in the discussion on the old parties. The arguments are visible when examining the post published on Merkel's last day as chancellor, where the AfD writes: "She leaves behind a spiritual, moral and mental shamble: The level of education has been destroyed, the demographic bomb is ticking, electricity prices are exploding, mass immigration is undermining the foundations of our society and the energy supply is in jeopardy." They label her reign as "16 horrible years" and argues that she "eroded our fundamental rights" (8/12-21). As such, they establish a continuum of populist critique, bridging the critique of the old government to the new government.

Thirdly, representing a significant increase from before the pandemic is the focus on the media (29). The category is made up of individual journalists, newspapers, news channels, and "the media" as a general phenomenon. Accordingly, the media is framed as a biased propaganda tool for the left and the Greens, and is therefore accused of both falsehoods and censorship, as became evident in the diagnostic framing on freedom of speech. The "media" as a phenomenon, is often framed widely, through argument such as: "Many media like to keep quiet about the downsides of the supposedly solidarity-based COVID-measures" (22/12-21). In other instances, they are more specific, such as the focus on Wikipedia, accusing it of being a propaganda tool, writing: "as soon as it comes to ideological questions, the alleged "encyclopaedia" hardly differs from the propaganda pamphlets of the Green Youth" (15/1-22). The framing of the media as biased is, therefore, often done in conjunction with arguments in favour of alternative media such as the AfD podcasts and channels.

The framing of immigrants (16) follows the same pattern as before the pandemic, but the AfD, refences specific events less frequently than the pandemic, which may reflect the reduction in crime. The EU (8) and climate activists (9) are also framed, similarly to before the pandemic, where activists are framed as illegitimate fanatics and the EU as greedy and self-centred.

There is only one new category in the period, which is the focus on virologists (6). Despite the high focus on the pandemic and its various consequences, virologists are only mentioned six times. In on post, the Robert Koch institute is mentioned, but that is in conjunction with a focus

on statistics, where the AfD claims that "only 32 percent of Germans still trust the official corona infection figures" (4/1-22). However, the AfD does not dispute the numbers, they dispute how the numbers are interpreted and used, which is why they discuss scaremongering in the diagnostic framing. Accordingly, I argue that the lack of negative framing of scientists may be a strategy of avoiding discussing the dangers of the pandemic itself, as they recognize it but instead highlight the negative consequences of the measures.

Framing of the self

Following the framing of the opposition, the framing of the AfD itself is made to contrast it, as shown in Figure 13.
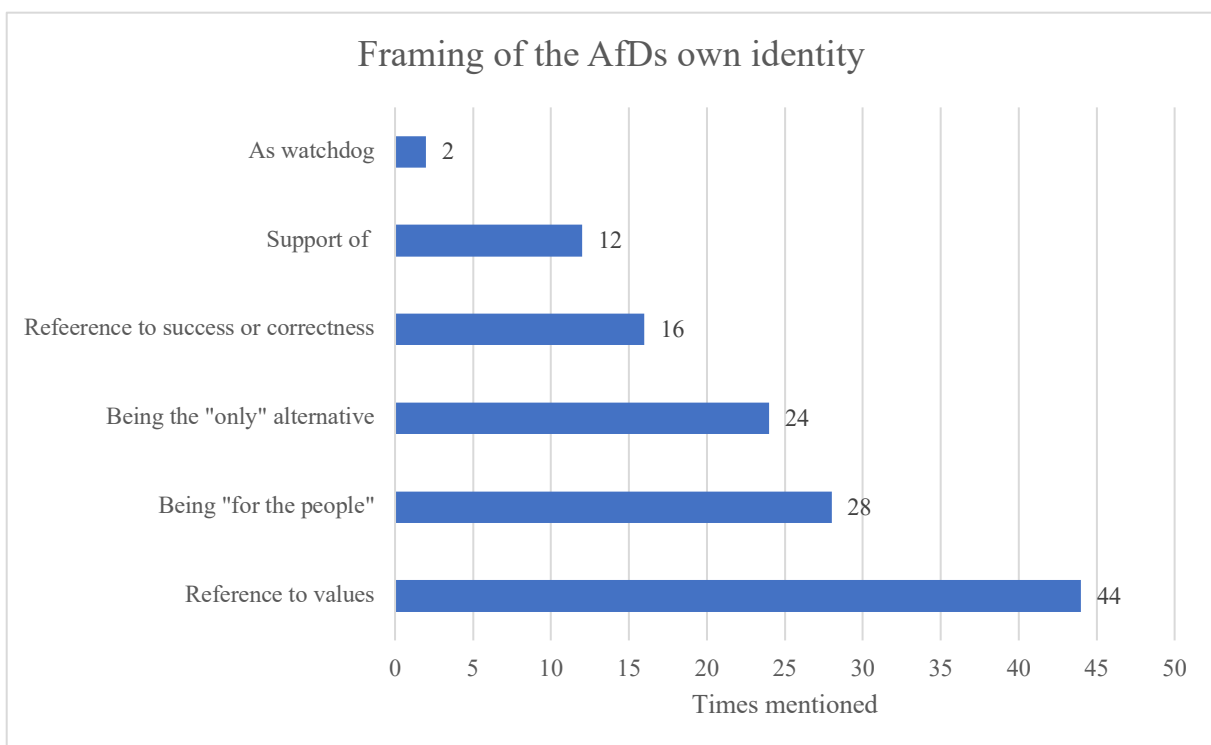
Figure 13: Framing of identity

As before the pandemic, the most significant focus is values (44). Because of the increased diagnostic framing of "lack of values", the AfD frames itself as possessing the values other parties lack, both directly and indirectly. They reference both Christianity, charity, marriage, freedom of speech and label themselves as a humble, "friend to freedom". They also, increasingly, frame their own values in contrast to others, such as in the following post from the Holocaust Day of remembrance, where they write: "We commemorate all the victims (of the Holocaust) who urge us to continue to defend the free and democratic basic order against any form of extremism and totalitarianism." (27/1-22). I argue that this framing of values is more direct than before the pandemic, as they in essence, draw a parallel between the

totalitarianism during Nazi-Germany and the alleged "totalitarianism" in the contemporary crisis. They also, inherently, frame the government as extremist and totalitarian. They also in this regard, frame themselves as a supporter of Israel, and Israel as a supporter of them. Through the focus on values the AfD, as before the pandemic, frames itself as "being for the people" (28), arguing that they are "the only party of freedom and civil rights", and that they "stand firmly by the sides of all citizens". In particular, the framing of itself as a defender of freedom and rights is the most important focus, following the strong diagnoses of rights under attack. In addition, they utilize the contrast to the government and former government, to point out how they are a party for the people, arguing in one post that: "Merkel made a significant contribution to the establishment of the AfD, even if she didn't intend it" because citizens had their eyes opened "once the consequences of their policies are properly seen!" (8/12-21).

As before the pandemic, they reference their success (16), but they highlight mostly their correctness, often in conjunction with their use of facts in the diagnostic framing. They have abandoned the focus on scientist agreement altogether, as well as the focus on their allies, consequentially narrowing their focus to values and its role for the people.

This narrowing, arguably, becomes evident in the new and significant category, namely the framing of themselves as the only alternative (24) – with an emphasis on "only". I argue this newfound focus stems from the increased diagnostic counter-framing of the opposition, invigorating their framing of themselves, correspondingly. Thus, they argue that that if you share their love for freedom; "you can ONLY support and vote for the AfD" (15/12-21). Or they argue that: "Anyone who wants a change in policy only has the AfD as an ally (15/1-22). The focus also goes back in time, through arguments such as "Only the AfD has been warning of energy prices for a long time" (28/2-22). The focus on themselves as the only viable alternative becomes evident, in particular, in the prognostic frames.

7.2 Prognostic framing

The prognostic framing, as an extension of diagnostic framing, has shifted significantly from before the pandemic. There is a total of 182 prognostic frames, which entails a reduction in framing, yet there is a wider variety of policy suggestions.
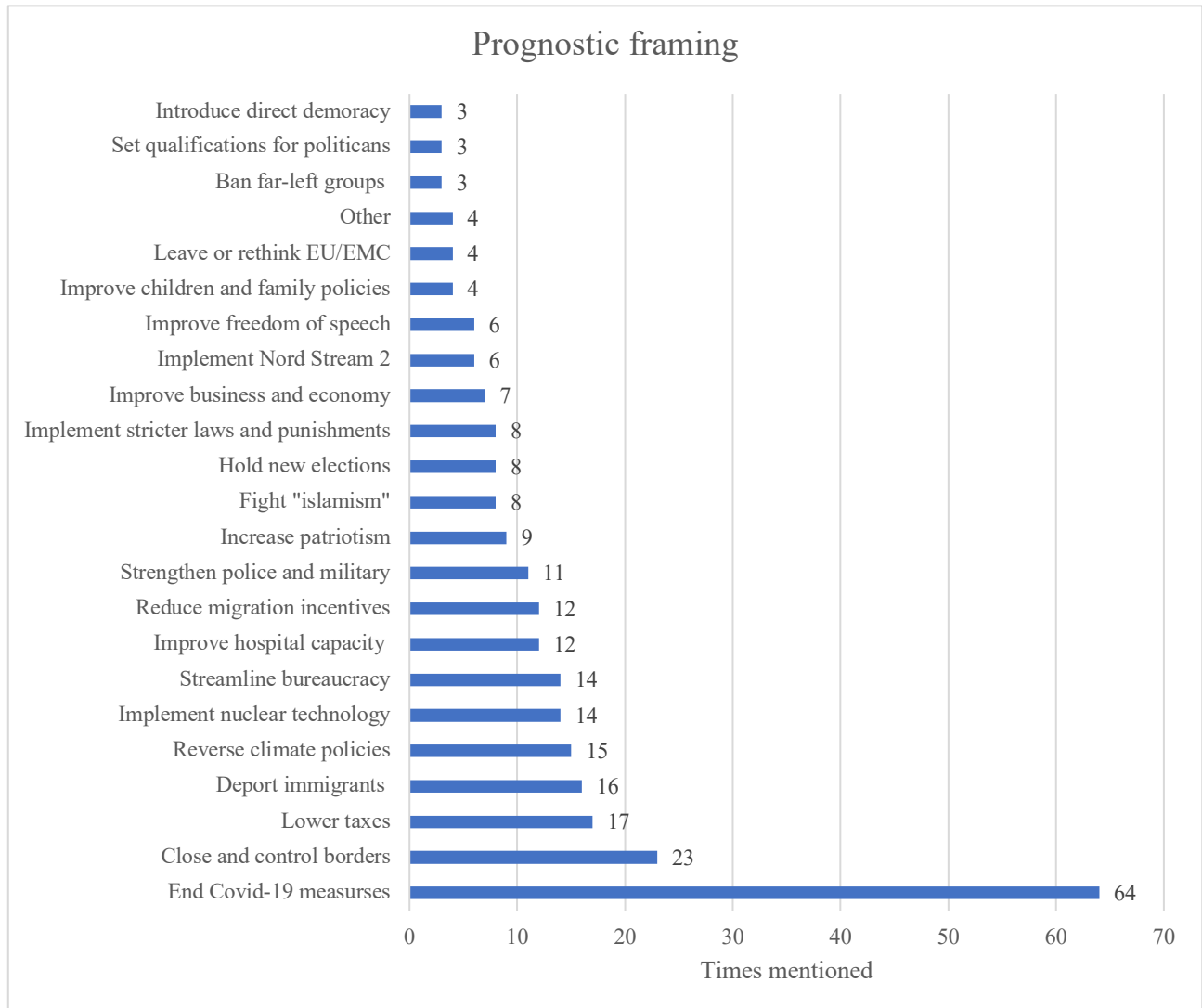
Figure 14: Prognostic framing

As discussed in the period before the pandemic, diagnostic framing requires more nuance for it to be successful. Arguably, the increase in nuance becomes evident in the period, as there is an increase in the concreteness of the suggestions, as well as an increased focus on how the AfD will go about several of the policies.

Firstly, the focus on ending the measures taken because of COVID-19 (64) is a natural extension of the diagnostic framing of the negative consequences of the pandemic. The AfD suggests making vaccination not mandatory and ending the suggested requirements, arguing that "it is time to take action against the scaremongering and coercive measures" and that "there should

be no direct or indirect obligation to vaccinate". The AfD emphasizes the need to terminate or re-evaluate the measures, deeming them disproportionate and misguided. They also highlight citizens' rights, claiming that the immediate cessation of political arbitrariness and rule chaos is imperative.

However, as the AfD recognizes that the pandemic is dangerous, they do present alternative measures for handling the pandemic. They highlight re-reading statistics through statements such as "We need an end to the scaremongering and a clear statical view by focusing on hospital admissions and not on questionable incidence numbers" (7/12-21), as well as focusing on improving hospital capacity, arguing that "The crisis can only be overcome through cohesion and freedom - with a real strengthening of our healthcare system" (10/12-21). The focus on strengthening the hospital system (12) is a long-standing policy of the AfD, framing nurses as undervalued and underpaid. Aa result of the pandemic, they highlight intensive care and equipping hospitals. They argue that nurses should have "performance-related payment via a collective agreement with tax-free night, Sunday, and public holiday bonuses" (22/12-21) and that training of staff should be financed and promoted. Additionally, they point to the forced vaccination as a "horrible" strategy to end staff shortages.

Secondly, as a continuation of the diagnosis before the pandemic, the AfD argues for reducing immigration by closing the borders (23) and deporting immigrants (16). The focus on both tasks, in particular the deportation, is somewhat reduced, which may be attributed both the fewer refugees because of the pandemic, as well as to the arrival of a new suggestion, namely reducing incentives for migration (12). This new suggestion is geared towards the long-term with a forward-looking approach. I argue that this is derived both from the lessening of issue salience as there was, in the time of framing, significantly reduced immigration than before the pandemic. As the diagnostic framing showed, they express their worries about future immigration, which the prognostic framing then holds the answer to, arguing that "Instead of promoting this exaggerated "welcome culture", we must significantly reduce financial incentives for migration" (2/11-21).

Thirdly, the focus on lowering taxes (17) increased significantly from before the pandemic, becoming one of the main suggestions. I argue the increase may be attributed to the pandemic and the deteriorating economic conditions, as the AfD attempts to address the weakened purchasing power of the people. In this regard, they argue both for an "active wealth

accumulation policy" as well as a "significant tax relief for the middle class". Similarly, the AfD highlights the importance of improving business and economy (7) in Germany, which they argue has been reduced by the pandemic and the new government. Additionally, they also suggest cutting specific taxes, in particular, gas prices and the Green CO2 tax. In a post from the 11th of January 2022, they "demand the abolition of the CO2 tax and the significant reduction in the mineral oil tax" arguing that drivers should be relived.

As became evident in the diagnostic frames, the Greens are to blame for various issues as they are argued to "do everything in their power to put German energy supply on as many shaky feet as possible" (16/10-21). Thus, the AfD suggested reversing climate policies (15) as a result. They argue that the "energy-transition" should be stopped, and that Germany needs a "balanced mix including electricity from coal and the safe use of modern nuclear technology to make electricity affordable" (8/1-22). This is important, as they in the period highlight alternative solutions. In particular, the AfD is a big supporter of nuclear technology (14), arguing that phasing it out was a "huge mistake not covered by any rational scientific facts". Accordingly, nuclear technology should be implemented on grounds of it being a "safe and inexpensive, environmentally friendly energy supply" (26/10-21). In addition to nuclear technology, they argue for the "logical" implementation Nord Stream 2 (6), the 1234-kilometer natural gas pipeline from Russia to Germany, a project long affected by political controversies regarding Russian geopolitics in Europe. The AfD argues that "higher supply would eventually lead to a reduction in prices" referencing Putin, writing that "one can only agree with him at this point", and that "the construction and operation of Nord Stream 2 is in Germanys interest" (16/10-21). The push for the gas-pipeline increased throughout the fall and in January 2022, they argue that the supply-issues highlight "how important a positive relationship with Russia is".

The AfD also provides several solutions, both old and new, to do away with the opposition, including streamlining the bureaucracy (14), holding new elections (8), introducing direct democracy (3) as well as qualifications for politicians (3). Streamlining is suggested both in Germany and in the EU, arguing that "instead of burdening the citizens with more taxes and duties, the cutbacks should be applied to the EU Waterhead" (15/12-21). The new, specified policy points also highlight the clearer articulations of suggestions, linking again to statistics. For direct democracy, for instance, they refer to a survey where 71% of German want direct democracy and then argue that "the position of the AfD is in line with this trend in sentiment" (16/12-21). The policies, such as introducing qualifications for politicians, are framed by

referencing a loss of trust, arguing "Only 32% have trust in the Bundestag, only 30% trust the federal government, 27% trust the media, and 20% trust the parties". These statements are factually correct, as the "in Democracy in Times of Crisis," survey, finds that 47% are in favour of more direct democracy through referendums, and 19% would like a "expertocracy" where experts from science, business and other fields play a role in guiding policy (Fürstenau, 2023). Accordingly, the solution of the AfD is to introduce professionalization of politicians as well as "enabling people to have a say, because if people may decide they can be persuaded to participate in politics" (16/12-21). In some cases, they also argue that new elections should be held as a response to what they argue to be corruption.

Following the diagnostic focus on lack of values and ideology, as becomes evident through suggestions such as increasing patriotism (9), fighting Islamism (8), improving freedom of speech (6), improving policy for children (4), and banning far-left groups (3). These arguments are similar to before the pandemic, revolving around improvement of the current situation.

In contrast to the period before the pandemic, the AfD spends less time focusing on suggestions related to the police and strengthening laws (11), as an extension of the diagnostic frame. As a result of the more indistinct diagnoses, however, the suggestions to amend the lack of values are of a vaguer nature. There are several reasons for this. On one hand, it is difficult to create articulated policies to amend "lack of patriotism" – both theoretically and practically. Additionally, the readers perceive the policies as clear, as the hinting between the lines is evident. However, articulating that "Islamism is bad" is potentially negative when taking into consideration the discursive opportunity structures, as the AfD struggled with legitimacy. The prognostic statements are therefore not clear-cut policies, but rather a pointer for readers to make their own conclusions. For instance, in response to the EU implementing a neutral terminology, labelling Christmas as "the holiday season" the AfD argues that they are "discriminating against our Christian culture!" and that "Anyone who has a problem with this should not collect tax money in a Christian country and instead go to countries where their pathological hatred of Christians is welcome" (5/12-21). As such, the more general arguments points, in the most extreme, to foreigners leaving Germany. The same logic is also applied to the framing of "Islamism", where the AfD argues that "Sharia does not belong in Germany" and that "Islamism must be fought relentlessly" (4/2-22).

7.3 Motivational framing

The last core framing task is the focus on appealing to the values of the constituents, encouraging them to take active part in achieving the goals set out in the diagnostic frames. In this period, the motivational framing changes significantly, increasing from 38 to 264 frames. Furthermore, the calls to arms themselves have also shifted away from a focus on votes towards to main motivational frames, namely following the AfD on telegram and donating. As discussed in the frame analysis before the pandemic, motivational framing is often the core framing task that far-right parties spend the least time on, as the optimistic nature of motivational framing is less effective than the negative. This period, however, represents a significant shift. There are several possible reasons for this. On one hand, this may be because the AfD experiences the success of others as a threat, consequently putting more effort into the motivational frames. On the other hand, it might be that they have taken into consideration the need for motivational framing, as there is a loss in issue salience, and so the focus on diagnostic framing – as before the pandemic – is not sufficient to engage the basis of support.
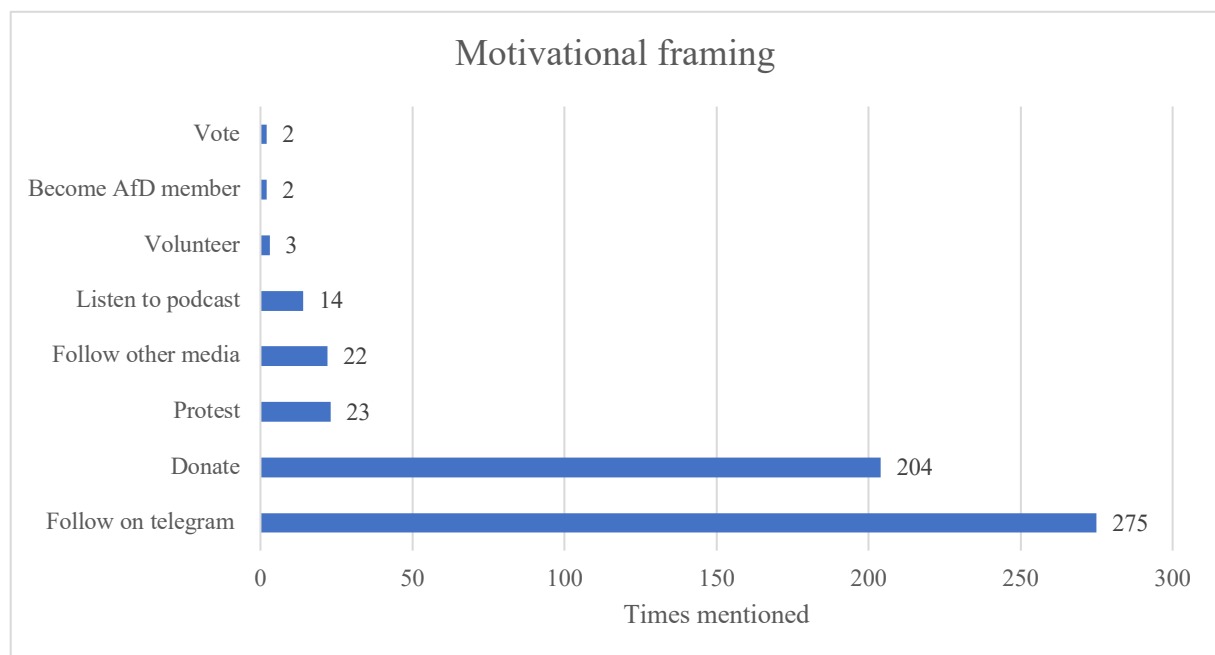
Figure 15: Motivational framing

The AfD, firstly, argues that people should follow them on telegram (275), through arguments such as "Do you already know about our Telegram channel? Subscribe now!", or "Healthy without compulsion! Follow our channel on Telegram NOW!". The increased push for Telegram, arguably, stems from the new opportunities the platform serves, as it allows for a dimension of privacy in communication with followers that does not exist on Twitter or Facebook (Muñoz, García, Ripollés, 2022, p. 72). This is also reflected in posts from the AfD,

where they argue that "The popularity that the AfD receives from alternative social networks such as Telegram is increasing – you too can support us by subscribing to our channels so that counter-publicity is strengthened, and we can defy censorship" (20/2-22). Arguably, the shift is both a culmination of the negative focus on the media, lack of freedom of speech and values discussed in the diagnostic frames. As the AfD has previously realized the potential of social-media platforms, the argument for Telegram might be a strategic shift towards an effective new channel of communication. This may stem from the privacy that allows for avoidance of the negative focus discussed in the discursive opportunities. Furthermore, they do not have to take on a moderating role in comment sections, given the laissez-faire nature of the platform in contrast to Facebook. However, upon investigation of the groups the AfD advertises, it becomes clear that the content is the same as on Facebook, and so the platform, in essence, is another channel for distributing the same framing strategies. Telegram has, however, gained notoriety because of its use of it by fringe groups, and has unofficially taken on the label "Anti-Facebook" (Loucaides, 2022). As result, many have limited the app, including Germany which on February 11th, 2022, announced that 64 channels - violating hate-speech laws - had been deleted (Balser, 2022). Thus, the AfD no longer promotes its Telegram, but the channels are still in use.

The second-largest focus is on people donating (204), which is often added as an endnote to posts where the AfD asks: "Please support our work with a donation". When following the link to the donation-site, they write: "Donate today so you can have a real choice tomorrow". The calls, in total, are frequent but also humble, pointing to the importance of grassroots funding and the role of the AfD as a challenger party to the big, established "old parties". Arguably, the increased calls for donations may be a sign that the party is experiencing financial difficulties and needs funds. I argue, however, this is unlikely. When examining the frames, the calls for donations are almost always made in conjunctions with calls for people to follow them on Telegram. This, in essence, comes across as a deliberate strategy to builds a close relationship, foster community among the members as well as increasing visibility, arguing that they are part of a movement working towards a larger goal. This becomes clear when examining the arguments for donating, where they write: "You will be part of our citizen movement, fighting for a better, normal Germany. Everyone contributes as one can, and as a donor, you make a particularly valuable contribution. Campaigns and elections cost money, and only with the support of you can we expand our success" (AfD Spenden, 2023).

The third largest category are calls to join protests (23), which is targeted in particular towards a specific protest the AfD arranged on March 5th, 2022, in accordance with the campaign "Healthy without compulsion", protesting mandatory vaccinations and COVID-measures. The arguments made for joining protests becomes evident in the following post from February 2022, where they argue "On March 5th, 2022, we will bring the peaceful protest against the Corona policy to the streets throughout Germany!", which they state is against "defamation and division" and "for freedom, solidarity for our children and for normality". The focus on joining protests appeal directly to people through statements such as "Please support and spread the word!", "We invite you to join our protest so the voices of reason cannot be overheard" or "Please support us at these demonstrations and mobilize your families, friends, work colleagues, and acquaintances - if possible." Accordingly, the directness of the motivational framing is underpinned by the diagnostic frames of the breech of rights.

Some focus in the motivational frames is on making people follow their other medias (22), such as YouTube as well as listening to their bi-weekly podcasts (14). The podcasts, named "7 days Germany" invites various speakers from inside and outside the party, discussing issues both big and small, local, and international. The podcast, arguably, is another important realm of framing which they, consequently, advertise for whenever they post a new one, with various links for people to follow to listen to the podcast.

Lastly, the AfD spends significantly less time at focusing on voting, but there are still some mentions of acts such as voting (2), volunteering (3), or becoming a member (2). The lack of focus on voting, arguably, may be a result of the lack of an election in the period. Becoming a member and volunteering is also encouraged, although sparsely, which may be attributed to the presence of the pandemic making physical contributions difficult, as well as the increased focus on alterative platforms such as Telegram.

8. Discussion of frame analysis

With the framing before and after the pandemic now accounted for, the following chapter summarizes and discusses the changes in frames using the theory of frame alignment (Snow and Benford, 1986). The concept of aligning frames entails that frames are positioned in accordance with the context, and that the AfD may use various strategies to align their frames with the electorate in hopes of achieving mobilization. This allows, accordingly, for a discussion on the deliberate shift in frames and the rationale behind the changes.

8.1 Summary of findings

Far-right parties and politicians often use social media to bypass traditional media, which they argue to be biased. The frame-analysis, arguably, sheds light on the indispensable nature of Facebook for framing effort (Schroeder, 2018, pp. 60-6), which is evident both in their continued negative framing of the media, and their continuous and stable pattern of framing on Facebook.

The average AfD post is long, comprised of 150-300 words, with a sensationalist headline that summarizes, usually, the main diagnostic frame. The posts are also accompanied by various slogans and logos, underpinning the AfD as the sender of the message. Furthermore, throughout both periods, the AfD exhibits a strategy of utilizing the algorithm of Facebook by frequent engagement with readers through emotionally loaded statements and rhetorical questions, as well as photographs with bright colouring, all-caps writing and unflattering photos of the opposition. This, arguably, points to the AfD using the algorithm of Facebook to increase the likelihood of appearing on people's timelines, centring the framing on scandalous and emotionally loaded statements that both engages people and provides journalists with many opportunities to discuss their statements (Maurer et al. 2022, pg. 7-15).

When comparing them, there are notable changes and similarities in the primary framing tasks, as depicted in Figure 16. Firstly, a noteworthy observation is the increased prominence of motivational framing following the pandemic. This shift can be attributed to the limited discursive opportunities available during a pandemic, requiring more concerted efforts for mobilization and subsequently placing greater emphasis on encouraging supporter action.
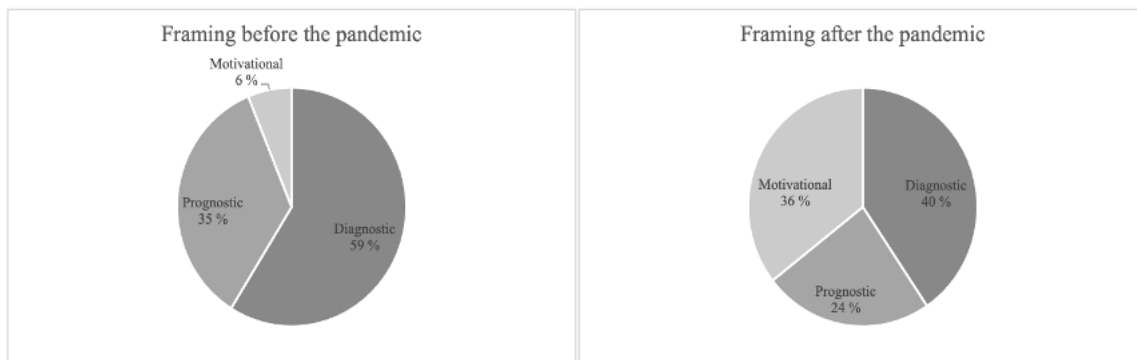
Figure 16: Framing before and after the pandemic

Secondly, despite this significant shift, I argue that diagnostic framing remains a crucial and heavily emphasized core framing task. This highlights the continued importance placed by the AfD on framing grievances and underscores their persistent emphasis on evoking emotional responses. In summary, these findings shed light on the perceived effectiveness by the AfD of sustained framing of grievances.

However, as previously discussed, the effectiveness of framing during a crisis is contingent upon the specific context and intricacies of the crisis itself. This becomes evident when closely examining the frames. As hypothesized in the background-chapter, the pandemic presented a challenging framing scenario for far-right parties. The public health crisis shifted the focus of public attention away from their core issues, and they were ill-prepared, both practically and politically, to address this new issue (Falkenbach and Greer, 2018). Consequently, the subsequent subsections delve into the changes in framing for each core framing task, exploring the attempted frame alignment at hand.

8.1.1 Shifts in diagnostic framing

The diagnostic framing before the pandemic was shaped largely by the nature of the AfD as a far-right party, rooted in their nativist, populist, and authoritarian core as well as the favourable discursive opportunities from the aftermath of the so-called refugee crisis. This, in short, contributed to the focus on the negative consequences of immigration as well as a general spectacularizing of the failure of the government. Thus, the main focus before the pandemic was on diagnostic framing, which the AfD may have believed to resonate with people as they focused less on the prognostic and motivational framing tasks. Furthermore, given the strong and clear diagnostic frames, suggested policies are, arguably, hinted at between the lines. Accordingly, the AfD framed itself in proportion to the diagnostic frame, as a "truth-teller" in

opposition, working tirelessly against the oppressive, out-of-touch establishment by invoking feelings of anger and resentment. This, as the frame-analysis shed light on, was done by emphasizing the various consequences of immigration, and the events which both the government and the immigrants, according to the AfD, were responsible for. Arguably, the high levels of nativism and populism that the frame analysis shed light on is part of a trend in far-right discourses, which researchers have linked the economic crisis and the influx of refugees in the period, to identity-building of far-right organizations (Kriesi and Pappas, 2015), which is evident in the case of the AfD before the pandemic.

The diagnostic framing after the pandemic shifted, as anticipated, in response to the presence of the pandemic and the transformed discursive opportunities. As discussed, crises generally have two theoretical effects on demand: They shift both the salience of individual issues as well as attitudes in the population, which may generate favourable DOS if the crisis allows for framing of anti-elite stances and spontaneous grievances (Chadi, Cohen, and Wagner, 2022, pp. 372-3).

The analysis of frames following the pandemic provides insights into the AfDs attempts to frame grievances stemming from the crisis and their anti-elite positions. Specifically, they framed the consequences of the crisis by highlighting the limitations on freedom and rights, as well as the economic and social impacts of the measures implemented. The AfD consistently blamed the government for the scale and severity of the crisis, pointing to the perceived unlawful measures and the neglect of other important issues like immigration. Furthermore, with the election of the new "traffic-light" government, the AfD intensified their anti-establishment framing, focusing not only on the negative outcomes of their policies but also on their ideology and its potential implications for Germany. This aligns with a common logic seen in other far-right organizations, asserting that "the elite" prioritizes immigrants over the native population (Wodak, 2015).

Consequently, the AfD increasingly positioned itself not just as an alternative but as the sole alternative for citizens, emphasizing their role in safeguarding the freedoms and rights of the German population. This emphasis aligns with the nature of the far right, as the AfD expresses a desire to defend the national community, characterized by its homogenous culture and ethno-nationalistic terms (Caiani and Kröll, 2017, p. 350). The intensified focus on German culture can be attributed to the historical context of Germany, which has traditionally emphasized an

"ethnic-cultural conception" of national identity (Wodak and Richardson, 2012, p. 9). This shift in framing illustrates the challenges of framing new grievances related to the pandemic, given the nature of the crisis and the core of the far right, which are inherently complex to frame within the context of a pandemic. Overall, the diagnostic framing evolves to place greater emphasis on both populist and nativist notions, as evidenced by the strategies of frame alignment, including bridging, frame-extension, and transformation in the analysis.

Frame-bridging is an alignment strategy that entails mobilizing un-mobilized pools of sentiment and becomes visible in the attempted bridging of the pre-pandemic frames to discourses on the COVID-19 crisis. Firstly, the framing of themselves a defender of citizens vis-à-vis an oppressive government is bridged from the refugee crisis context to fit the pandemic, using the same discourses to attempt to mobilize those that potentially agree with their pandemic-related diagnostic framing. The analysis reveals that the AfD consistently draws parallels between the consequences of the refugee crisis and the pandemic, suggesting the existence of an "authoritarian escalation screw" being turned. Consequently, the pandemic measures are framed as a continuation of policy mishandling rather than a recent development. This is regularly echoed through statements such as: "Scholz stands for the continuation and consolidation of the Merkel course: Mass immigration, discrimination against the unvaccinated and gender-stars"[10], or "politicians from the old parties are more worried about peaceful demonstrators going for walks than organized crime and illegal immigration". In line with the populist and nativist core of the far right, these frames are bridged to align with the pandemic context. The AfD seeks to connect the anti-lockdown and anti-vaccination sentiments in the population with their populist and nativist sentiment, a dynamic that has previously been observed within the German extreme right, as they have consistently bridged their populist and nativist frames (Caiani and della Porta, 2011, p. 198).

Secondly, the frame-amplification strategy may further explain the diagnostic framing of freedoms and values under attack by a "leftist elite". This is evident in the intensified and clarified emphasis on values following the pandemic, particularly in discussions concerning gender, Christianity, marriage, and "German virtues." The diagnostic framing, portraying themselves as a counteragent to the diagnosis, mirrors a tactic employed prior to the pandemic.

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[10] Translated from "Das Gendersternchen", referring to the use of * to address all genders at the same time in written German, creating linguistic equality between the sexes.

This amplification of values appears to be a deliberate response to the DOS and what they perceive as a "biased, leftist media." Accordingly, they actively differentiate themselves from their competition, seeking to align its diagnostic frames with untapped sentiments. Arguably, the focus on values reflects a specific untapped sentiment that the AfD has managed to read, namely right-wing or centre-right conservatives. This becomes evident when examining their competitor, the CDU, which claims to represent "Christian-social, liberal, and conservative elements." However, the CDU has increasingly avoided addressing conservative values, instead prioritizing the promotion of a "dominant German culture of tolerance" (Delcker, 2017). The CDU's abandonment of conservative elements has been found to negatively impact its support (Eisel, 2005). This sentiment became noticeable, for instance, with the election of Kramp-Karrenbauer as Merkel's successor. Kramp-Karrenbauer represented a conservative alternative, specifically opposing same-sex marriage. Following her election, support for the CDU increased (Ehni, 2019). This dynamic has also been highlighted in other far-right research, where parties are found to be more successful when the moderate right occupies a more centrist position on the general left-right scale, which creates a space in which far-right parties may position themselves (Van der Brug et. Al. 2005). It is important to note that there are various other factors contributing to the decline in CDU support, but this dynamic sheds light on an untapped sentiment pool that the AfD attempted to mobilize through the amplification of diagnostic frames.

There is an argument to be made that the AfD extends some of its diagnostic frames, which entails encompassing a broader audience within the frame that was originally intended for a specific group. Frame-extension, however, shares several similarities with frame-bridging. Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that the AfD seldom extends their frames to attract entirely new supporters; instead, they predominantly employ bridging. This approach is consistent both before and after the pandemic, as the AfD frames primarily for their existing supporters, who form a cohesive base driven by cultural and economic right-wing policy preferences, as well as long-standing regional legacies of cultural conservatism and anti-immigration sentiments (Goerres et al., 2018, pp. 261-2). This dynamic is also evident in the frame-analysis, pointing to the coherent and established basis of support, and their pointing out of not extension frames, of which there are several reasons for. Firstly, as a far-right party, the nature of the AfD explains their limited frame extension, as their frames typically target their established support base, which is a common characteristic of far-right parties. This is closely tied to their core issues of nativism and populism, which effectively mobilize individuals who

prioritize these matters. Consequently, it requires significant effort to make the populist and nativist diagnostic frames resonate with other segments of the electorate. The AfD itself asserts that its party program is standardized and does not discriminate among Germans, as their main objective is to "address those that feel falsely represented by other parties and educate people on the damage they do" (Knight, 2022). However, two caveats must be considered. Firstly, the frame analysis reveals negative framing of immigrants and Muslims, despite many of them being fully integrated German citizens. Secondly, their notion of not discriminating among Germans is based on a nativist understanding of "German-ness," a concept that many ethnic Germans do not align with, as a significant portion of Germans embrace multiculturalism. Consequently, extending the diagnostic frames beyond their intended target audience risks diluting and alienating their established base, an aspect that the AfD has capitalized on, particularly as other political parties have been accused of undervaluing Eastern German voters. Instead, the AfD employs frame-bridging to align with the existing sentiment within their support base in the context of the pandemic.

Lastly, there is some transformation of diagnostic frames in the period. As previously discussed, introducing new policy frames is a challenging task for all political parties and requires a situation that necessitates it. Firstly, the AfD abandons one diagnostic frame, namely technology and development. This shift can be attributed to the pandemic's prominence, as framing future struggles becomes less relevant in the face of an all-encompassing crisis. On the other hand, new frames emerge, such as national pride, sovereignty, gender ideology, and the portrayal of themselves as the "only" alternative. Two noteworthy elements within the diagnostic frames are the focus on Ukraine and Nord Stream 2. This reflects the AfDs prognostic framing of supporting the completion of Nord Stream 2 and the heightened tensions on the Russia-Ukraine border during this period. The AfD views this escalation as potentially detrimental to Germany, and thus incorporates it into their diagnostic framing.

8.1.2 Shifts in prognostic framing

Before the pandemic, the prognostic framing revolved around limiting immigration and its consequences, suggesting deporting immigrants, stricter laws, strengthening the police, and closing the borders. These policy-stances, in particular, anti-immigrant policies, have aroused both the blue-collar workers and the unemployed, becoming core supporters of the party (Kim, 2018, p. 21). Additionally, the frame analysis before the pandemic sheds light on their highlighting of themselves as a "formidable adversary" underpinning that their most relevant

policy, generally, was to hinder the policies undertaken by the government. Thus, the prognostic framing followed the diagnoses and were, overall, of a more general nature.

After the pandemic, the policies suggested in the prognostic frames shifted significantly, becoming both more specific and encompassing. Suggested policies, firstly, revolve around ending the measures related to COVID-19, such as lockdowns and vaccination, pointing out their own alternatives to the established policies as an extension of the avid criticism of the measures. Additionally, the AfD maintained their prognostic frames related to immigration in line with their maintenance of the diagnostic frames. Overall, the prognostic framing shifted both towards new suggestions, more concrete suggestions, and future-oriented policies. In particular, they maintain their focus on resisting the government, but increasingly focuses on articulating alternatives to their policies, which reflects their increased emphasis of themselves an alternative. This, arguably, represents a shift away from what scholars expected to be a convergence between nativist and culturally liberal policies (Backlund and Jungar, 2019, p. 13).

The prognostic frames shift, firstly, through a significant degree of frame-transformation, both by removing redundant frames and adding new ones. The decision to abandon or adopt policies is influenced by various factors, such as salience, circumstances, and societal dynamics – and as discussed, abandoning policies requires careful consideration as one risks alienating former supporters. This dynamic is also evident in the prognostic framing. The AfD, in the period, removes several diagnostic frames, such as banning short-term contracting, improving technology and teaching self-defence. The removal of these policies within the framing, arguably, is a result of the pandemic, as unemployment is a larger issue than short-term contracting, and social distancing reduces, to an extent, the need for self-defence. Furthermore, as the policies are not central to the policy-platform of the AfD, they can safely be removed from the prognostic frames articulated on Facebook. This may also explain the maintenance of the prognostic framing related to immigration, as they – despite the loss of salience regarding the issue – maintain the framing because of its centrality to the original mobilization of the basis of support. Accordingly, they have amended the immigration-related prognostic framing with future-forward policies, highlighting the likelihood of immigration-related issues returning because of the new government's policies as well as the eventual end of the pandemic. Furthermore, the prognostic framing increasingly revolves around alternative suggestions, such as direct democracy, nuclear energy, hospital capacity and improving business.

This clarification of frames provides insight into the most frequently used alignment strategy in the prognostic frames, which is amplification. I argue that the clarification, in the case of the AfD, is geared towards increasing their accessibility, aiming to enhance their appeal, credibility, and demonstrate competence. These dynamics are reflected in their post-pandemic clarification of prognostic frames. They increasingly communicated their intentions by moving from general statements to specific suggestions. These specific suggestions align with their increased emphasis on values and accused infringements on freedom, as discussed in the diagnostic framing. Consequently, they support their policy proposals by referencing statistics and polls to bolster their legitimacy. This shift can be seen as a departure from the typical far-right policy suggestions that often reject expert advice and rely on populist and sometimes unrealistic notions. The rationale for this shift can perhaps be understood through a statement made by an AfD deputy leader, who emphasized the need for the AfD to "bind" voters in the long term by presenting new leaders with strong presence and ideas (Knight, 2022). I argue that the move towards forward-facing, clear policies reflects the AfDs recognition that the salience of their diagnostic framing has diminished since the pandemic. Furthermore, it is also a sign of their mainstreaming, becoming an embedded political party with a well-articulated agenda. However, this does not imply that they have completely abandoned their populist and somewhat unrealistic suggestions, as they still remain an important component of their prognostic framing.

8.1.3 Shifts in motivational framing

The motivational framing of the AfD before the pandemic was understated and indirect, which may be attributed to the nature of them as a far-right party and the low likelihood of governmental responsibility in the period. Accordingly, the indirectness was mitigated by the continued endeavour to establish itself, focusing mostly on diagnostic framing but pointing to themselves regularly as part of the diagnosis, thus making excessive motivational framing redundant.

After the pandemic, there was a noticeable and substantial shift in the motivational framing employed by the AfD, both in terms of its quantity and tactics. An increase in motivational framing generally indicates a greater emphasis on encouraging supporter action, mobilizing their supporters by highlighting the urgency of the diagnostic and prognostic frames. In my analysis, I contend that the AfDs heightened focus on presenting themselves as the "defenders of freedom" against the "oppressive establishment" is particularly evident in their motivational framing. This increased emphasis on motivation is accompanied by more confrontational tactics

in their framing strategies. They emphasize the urgency and significance of individuals relying on alternative media sources, given their view of biased mainstream media, and encourage protests as a means to assert their rights.

During the period under examination, there are indications of frame-bridging employed by the AfD, as they encourage their supporters to mobilize untapped pools of sentiment on their behalf. For example, they call on individuals to bring their "families, co-workers, and neighbours" to protests. This aligns with the classical social movement theory that suggests people engage in collective action when their expectations are not met (Gurney and Tierney, 1982). However, research on far-right protests has yielded varied results, with some arguing that successful far-right parties tend to abstain from protest activities (Hutter, 2014). Flipping this argument, one could suggest that the AfDs focus on protests may be a response to their recognition of the lack of issue salience among the population. Consequently, they make greater efforts to engage their supporters, as the occurrence and effectiveness of protests are influenced by the political context in which they take place (Kriesi, 2015). On the other hand, the motivational framing employed by the AfD might be coincidental and a reflection of the extreme circumstances of the pandemic, emphasizing the importance of following them on social media due to limitations on other channels of engagement caused by lockdowns.

The emphasis on protest by the AfD, an established political party, can be seen as challenging the traditional distinction between social movements and political parties (Gattinara et al., 2021, p. 1035). This shift towards highlighting protests is a notable trend that provides insights into their attempt to capitalize on public mistrust towards the government. Here, the AfD, adopts strategies typically associated with social movements, aiming to mobilize their supporters through collective action and channelling discontent into street demonstrations. Thus, going back to its movement-party origin, the AfD embraces protest as a means of expressing dissatisfaction and fostering a sense of solidarity among their supporters, positioning itself as a champion against the established political order.

Moreover, the AfD employs frame-transformation to introduce several new motivational frames. Their insistence on urging people to follow them on Telegram and alternative media channels can be interpreted as a response to their belief that the government and mainstream media exhibit bias against the AfD. By directly appealing for support, the party reinforces the notion that the measures discussed in the diagnostic framing are unlawful. Through frame-

transformation and the strategic deployment of populist rhetoric, the AfD accordingly attempt to mobilize and galvanize their supporters, framing themselves as the true defenders of people's rights and freedoms in the face of perceived institutional bias and oppression.

8.2 Discussion of findings

The research question in this thesis probes how the AfD changes its frames in response to the pandemic, and the following sections discusses these findings at large. As is now evident, the AfD prior to the outbreak adeptly leveraged grievances to mobilize support, but the nature of the pandemic made it challenging to effectively capitalize on grievances, making them position themselves accordingly.

Despite the difficulty of positioning during the pandemic, the AfD adapted their frames in several ways. First and foremost, the analysis shows that the AfD acted in line with how far-right parties act in crises, reading the discursive opportunities to frame grievances and anti-establishment sentiment. Furthermore, they stayed consistent to their far-right ideology, maintaining their populist, authoritarian, and nativist policies. In particular, the frame analysis reveals that the AfD adapted to the pandemic by bridging the spontaneous grievances arising from their pandemic to their pre-existing frames, drawing parallels between the failure of the government in the so-called refugee crisis to the government's failure in the current crisis. As such, they build on the anti-immigration as well as cultural and economic frames from before the pandemic and attempt to shape the new grievances. Additionally, the AfD points to the infringements on the rights and freedoms of the citizens, in various frames, highlighting the consequences which the measures had on the population, framing it primarily as a domestic issue, in line with other far-right parties (Schwörer and Fernández-García, 2022).

Most importantly, despite maintaining their core, the AfD shifts towards placing greater emphasis on a specific aspect of its core ideology, namely populism, more prominently than before the pandemic. In contrast to the pre-pandemic period, the AfD now frames itself within the context of the crisis, presenting itself as "the party of freedom." They consistently highlight themselves as the sole alternative for citizens, positioning themselves as the party that champions individual rights, which marks a notable departure from their previous focus on serving as a watchdog and truth-teller. This emphasis on their populist core is evident in image

2, a Facebook banner featuring the AfDs slogan, which may be translated to "The freedom-party", accompanied by a German flag and a peace dove. This framing of themselves, therefore, is consistently reiterated across various messaging tasks. Therefore, while the AfD remains aligned with its core issues, it places greater emphasis on its populist core, which resonates more strongly with the current context compared to nativism and authoritarianism, which offer fewer framing opportunities.

Image 2: Variant of AfD Facebook Banner

The AfDs framing of itself as "the freedom party" aligns with the messaging of other far-right organizations, including their close ally PEGIDA. During the framing period, PEGIDA also adjusted its frames related to immigration, bridging anti-elitist sentiment, presenting itself as a "defender of democracy" (Volk and Weisskircher, 2023, pp. 10). Similarly, to the AfD, PEGIDA accused the government of establishing a corona dictatorship (ibid, p. 14), asserting that Germans should no longer tolerate "ideological nonsense" imposed upon them (ibid, p. 11).

The proximity between the AfD and PEGIDA, along with the increased emphasis on protest, underscores the significance of using the umbrella concept of the far-right, as discussed in the theoretical framework. Within this thesis, the umbrella concept provides insights into the volatility of far-right organizations like the AfD. This is evident in the heightened framing of the AfD urging people to join their protests, as well as the classification of the AfD by the BfV as a potential extremist organization. This thesis reveals the blurring of conceptual boundaries in practice, highlighting the need for future research to explore the new patterns of action adopted by far-right parties, including their involvement in platforms like Telegram and engagement in protests. Importantly, as Pirro argues, we should not mistake anti-democratic collective actors for illiberal democrats, nor should we whitewash nativism as populism (2022, p. 108).

Importantly, the findings in the analysis reveals an important finding that diverges from previous research, which has suggested that crises are advantageous for far-right parties

(Moffit, 2015; Pappas and Kriesi, 2016). This contradiction becomes apparent in both the frame analysis and the decline in votes for the AfD during the COVID-19 pandemic. While there are several potential reasons for the party's lack of success, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to delve into them in detail. One possibility is that the loss of support can be attributed to the nature of the crisis, aligning with the theoretical proposition that far-right parties need to effectively frame all the core aspects of their ideology to thrive (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). As demonstrated in this thesis, the nativist and authoritarian cores of the AfD became less relevant during the pandemic due to reduced migration and the accusations of the government not maintaining freedom, and the AfD consequently highlighted the populist core. The reasons for the frames not resonating and the decline in success offer a promising avenue for future research to explore.

The findings regarding the loss of support for the AfD present a challenge to the Integrative Model of far-right support discussed in the theoretical framework. According to this model, when far-right parties experience increased support through successful framing of grievances, they tend to move further towards the right on the political spectrum. Conversely, if there is reduced support for the far-right party and fewer framing opportunities, they are expected to position themselves towards the centre of politics (Mols and Jetten, 2020). However, the AfD, arguably, did not succeed in capitalizing on the pandemic as they had in previous crises. This is evident in their loss of votes in the 2021 election and the limited endorsement for their protests, despite their frequent framing of themselves as the "defender of freedom" (Schumacher, 2022). According to the logic of the Integrative Model, the AfD should have moderated their frames and policies, relaxed their suggestions and moved towards the centre. However, as revealed in the frame analysis, the AfD did the opposite. They, arguably, moved further towards the right ideologically, and amplified their frames while intensifying their calls for protest and engaging in various other extreme right dynamics. This discrepancy between the expected moderation and the actual rightward shift of the AfD challenges the predictions of the Integrative Model. It highlights, accordingly, the need for further exploration to understand the factors influencing the party's strategic choices and ideological positioning in the context of declining support and limited framing opportunities.

It is clear from the analysis that the AfD remained committed to its core issues despite the limited opportunities for discourse, which presents a challenge to the Integrative Model. However, this finding aligns with Mudde's proposition regarding the mainstreaming of the far-

right and the concept of the far-right as a "normal pathology." The normal pathology thesis suggests that far-right parties can be integrated into mainstream politics without altering their core values and agenda. This integration involves the perception of the party as legitimate by its constituents, without necessarily changing its fundamental principles and objectives (Mudde, 2010, p. 1178). In the case of the AfD, the frame analysis indicates a degree of mainstreaming as they move away from their original image as a single-issue movement party by clarifying their policies and confronting the crisis directly. However, despite this integration into German mainstream politics, the AfD faces challenges to its legitimacy during the period and does not moderate its discourse. In fact, the opposite is true. One could argue that this reflects the process of far-right parties fully establishing themselves as legitimate political actors, even if their positions and values remain extreme. In summary, the findings suggest that the AfD maintains its core issues despite limited discursive opportunities, challenging the Integrative Model. Simultaneously, it aligns with Mudde's notion of the far-right as a normal pathology, as the AfD engages in mainstream politics without significant moderation.

There are many potential reasons as to why the AfD did not shift their policies in the face of less support and unfavourable discursive opportunities. One potential reason may be the specific course they had set out before the pandemic, and the difficulty of shifting policy at risk of alienating their basis of support. Additionally, the magnitude of the pandemic's impact on public health shifting focus towards health on a grand level that, despite having sufficient agency, the AfD would not be able to counter-frame. It is also possible that the lack of policy shift is unrelated to the pandemic itself, but rather influenced by other issues, such as the climate-crisis that the AfD set out to counter-frame. Another consideration is the potential backlash of abruptly changing policy positions, as seen with the criticism faced by the Merkel government when they made significant adjustments to German monetary policy in response to the pandemic. Within the scope of this thesis, it is not possible to reach a definitive conclusion on why the AfD maintained their course instead of moderating themselves, but it is worth noting the observation of their rightward shift, which raises an important point for theory. It underscores, importantly, the need to account for both supply-side and demand-side approaches, as understanding the nature of the crisis and the available discursive opportunities sheds light on the framing choices made by the AfD Furthermore, it is unclear why this shift towards the right occurred, but one possibility is a general rightward trend observed across Europe.

While the immediate consequences of the pandemic may have resulted in decreased support for the AfD, the long-term effects have taken a different trajectory. In 2020, AfD spokesman Christian Lüth famously stated that: "The worse things are for Germany, the better things are for the AfD". This focus on crises and grievances as a source of far-right party success has also been echoed by several authors who argue that the far-right will gain from the pandemic as they will be able to capitalize on its consequences (Wondreys and Mudde, 2020, p. 98). Others even argue that Europe will get an "extreme right" that employs tactics such as red scare and right-wing authoritarianism to intimidate opponents and protect its interests. (Gerbaudo, 2020). The AfD has, since the period of framing discussed in this thesis, largely re-mobilized its support base, by capitalizing on grievances that stem from the economic issues in Europe following new developments such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Schultheis, 2023). This aligns with the argument put forth by Wondreys and Mudde, who posit that the overall crisis may not have a long-term effect on the success of far-right parties. Instead, the pandemic may serve as a temporary challenge and obstacle in the inevitable mainstreaming of the far right. As the AfD Dresden newspaper (Aufrecht) bridged, asking: "From the Corona-lockdown into the climate-lockdown. A rapid loss of our basic rights and liberties on a permanent base?" (AfD Dresden, 2021). As such, despite the initial struggles and losses, this thesis sheds light on a strategy of framing that may be utilized in other contexts, weighing themselves as a defender of freedom alongside the core of the far right. Overall, the findings highlight the perseverance of the AfD and contribute to our understanding of their political trajectory. This strategy and its potential applicability in other contexts warrant further research.

9. Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has been to answer the research question: *How did the AfD change its framing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?* This was done to investigate their agency in framing the pandemic and how the chosen frames shifted with the presence of a new crisis. To achieve this, a comprehensive examination of Facebook posts was conducted, encompassing both pre-pandemic and the post-pandemic periods. The obtained results and findings not only provide insights into the AfDs core issues and their response to the pandemic, but also offer valuable understanding of the role and positioning of the AfD within the broader context of far-right political parties.

Prior to the pandemic, the AfDs framing approach was predominantly centred around the core elements of the far-right ideology and the aftermath of the so-called Syrian refugee crisis. This was characterized by a predominant use of diagnostic framing, which aimed to identify and highlight perceived problems related to nativism, populism, and authoritarianism. The framing strategy focused on assigning blame and responsibility to specific groups or entities, particularly the immigrants and the government. Because of the emphasis on diagnostic framing, prognostic frames, and motivational frames, that is, proposed solutions and calls to action, took second order. This, arguably, is indicative of the favourable discursive opportunities available to the AfD in the period. The grievances stemming from the refugee crisis provided a conductive environment for the AfD to capitalize on the discontent and frustrations of certain segments of the population. The attribution of blame served as a rallying point for their supporters, as it reinforced their core messaging and generated a sense of urgency in addressing the identified issues. Overall, the framing strategy employed by the AfD before the pandemic showcased the party's ability to leverage grievances and capitalize on the public sentiment surrounding the refugee crisis.

The presence of the pandemic brought about significant changes in the framing strategies of the AfD, primarily driven by the fact that the crisis was outside the traditional scope of the party's focus. The AfD responded to this new context by adapting its framing in two main ways. Firstly, the AfD continued to emphasize its nativist, populist, and authoritarian core, employing frame alignment strategies to connect the established frames to the challenges posed by the pandemic. They bridged their pre-pandemic anti-immigration and anti-establishment frames with a diagnostic framing approach that highlighted the negative consequences of the COVID-19

measures. This alignment allowed the AfD to maintain continuity in their messaging while addressing the specific issues related to the pandemic. Additionally, the AfD amplified their proposed policies, making them more explicit and calling on their supporters to act, such as participating in protests and engaging with alternative media channels. They particularly emphasized their anti-establishment frame, focusing on values and criticizing the government's handling of the crisis. Through these framing strategies, the AfD portrayed itself not just as an alternative for the German people, but as the sole alternative and the protector of freedom, rights, and values. Their framing increasingly revolved around populist anti-elitism, as other core issues of the far right proved challenging to frame effectively in the context of the pandemic. The frame analysis revealed that the AfD exhibited agency in responding to the pandemic, utilizing framing tactics to capitalize on the grievances associated with the crisis while staying true to their core issues. Overall, the AfD demonstrated its ability to navigate and frame the pandemic in a way that aligned with their core ideology, leveraging the grievances and challenges presented by the crisis to further their political agenda.

The analysis presented in this thesis sheds light on significant changes in frame strategies and carries empirical implications for understanding the far-right and their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, despite the agency displayed by the AfD in shifting to the pandemic without betraying its core issues, they still suffered a vote loss in the 2021 election. This challenges the established notion that far-right parties benefit from crises, as it highlights the difficulty of framing the core issues of the far-right, particularly nativism, in the period. Consequentially, the nature of the pandemic as an extreme case reveals the challenge for the far-right in framing a crisis falling outside their established repertoire, and how they rise to meet this challenge. The thesis emphasizes that the AfD chose to frame their populist core, focusing, arguably, on the themes that they believed would resonate most strongly with their constituency. Importantly, despite the struggles and shifts in framing, the far-right did not undergo a complete policy turnaround. Instead, they bridged their previous successful policies, remaining consistent with their core ideology and previous positions.

This thesis carries several theoretical implications alongside its empirical findings. Firstly, it underscores the importance of considering the interaction between supply and demand in the context of framing. The thesis highlights the significance of discursive opportunities when analysing the strategies of far-right parties and that party adaption to context is a crucial element of analysis. Secondly, this thesis challenges the expectations set by the Integrative Model of

far-right support. Contrary to the model's assumption that far-right parties moderate themselves in situations with less support or limited framing opportunities, the findings reveal that the AfD frames both its opposition and policies in more radical and explicit terms. This contradiction suggests that far-right parties may employ more assertive and extreme framing strategies to compensate for challenges they face. Thirdly, as a result of the aforementioned point, the thesis contributes to the understanding of the mainstreaming of the far right. It demonstrates that far-right parties can integrate into the political landscape without compromising their core ideologies. This integration allows them to exert influence and become entrenched within the party system. Despite facing significant opposition, the mainstreaming entails, arguably, a normalization of far-right ideologies as they manage to influence public discourse. In summary, this thesis offers theoretical implications by emphasising the interplay between supply and demand in framing, challenging the assumptions of the integrative model, and shedding light on the mainstreaming of the far right.

Based on the theoretical and empirical implications discussed above, there are several avenues for future research. Firstly, this thesis demonstrates the framing and context in one specific country and as such, future research should probe the various contexts in which far-right framing is undertaken. Thus, variations and similarities between contexts should be investigated, considering in particular the influence of discursive and political opportunities that either constrain or empower these parties. Furthermore, future research should explore how the severity of the pandemic and the resulting discursive opportunities influenced the framing of other far-right parties, as the extent to which different countries were affected by the pandemic could potentially enable far-right parties to shape their framing strategies in various ways.

In addition to the pandemic, future research should investigate framing in new realms and across platforms. As discussed in this thesis, the AfD regularly highlights the alternative-media platform Telegram as a way of avoiding the bias of traditional media. The AfD podcast "7 days Germany", which takes a scientific approach, is also a fruitful alleyway for framing that should be investigated. Understanding how far-right parties frame across channels may provide insights into differences and similarities across platforms, the implications of new platforms on the broader media landscape and political discourse and understanding of how far-right parties shape their messages in contemporary digital spaces.

Future research should also broaden its scope to encompass other crises and their discursive opportunities. In particular, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as touched upon in the frame analysis, and its various consequences for Europe through the energy crisis is a fruitful path of analysis. In particular, the geopolitical and socio-economic crisis is of a similar nature to the crises before the pandemic, and a comparative approach may, accordingly, enhance our understanding of agency and adaptability.

Lastly, as this thesis highlights, the rationale and strategic decision-making behind frame alignment and policy choices of far-right parties remains elusive due to their reluctance to disclose their potentially successful strategies. Consequently, the inner workings of their decision-making processes are closely guarded and difficult to probe. Future research should therefore make efforts to delve into the "black box" of far-right party decision-making, particularly in response to crises. Researchers should aim to develop theories and conceptual frameworks that shed light on the decision-making processes, thereby enhancing our understanding of their agency. Unravelling the decision-making mechanisms can have significant implications in terms of democratic developments. As this thesis demonstrates, the AfD on various occasions challenges several democratic principles, and have been put under surveillance as a suspected extremist organization. Furthermore, the strong anti-establishment rhetoric highlighted in this thesis, has, arguably, contributed to further polarization of the German political environment. Thus, analysing the degree to which these strategies are deliberate, and how they are undertaken in practice will, accordingly, allow policymakers to safeguard against further polarization. Ultimately, insights into decision-making can help ensure that the democratic system stays robust in the face of the negative implications of far-right challengers.

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Figure 4: Diagnostic framing (AfD Facebook posts between June 2019-January 2020)

Figure 5: Immigration-related diagnostic framing (AfD Facebook posts between June 2019-January 2020)

Figure 6: Diagnostic framing of opposition (AfD Facebook posts between June 2019-January 2020)

Figure 7: Diagnostic framing of identity (AfD Facebook posts between June 2019-January 2020)

Figure 8: Prognostic framing (AfD Facebook posts between June 2019-January 2020)

Figure 9: Motivational framing (AfD Facebook posts between June 2019-January 2020

Figure 10: Diagnostic framing (AfD Facebook posts between October 2021-February 2022)

Figure 11: COVID-19 related diagnostic framing (AfD Facebook posts between October 2021-February 2022)

Figure 12: Diagnostic framing of opposition (AfD Facebook posts between October 2021-February 2022)

Figure 13: Diagnostic framing of identity (AfD Facebook posts between October 2021-February 2022)

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Appendix 1: Codebook

Codes for period 1

Name	Description	Files	References
Diagnostic frame	*What is the problem?*	5	362
Children and family policy		4	23
Climate skepticism		5	21
Corruption		5	29
Crime		5	47
Economy		5	71
EU		4	13
Far-left violence		4	19
Freedom of speech		5	29
Immigration		5	138
Cultural and social issues		5	23
Economic insecurity		5	34
Security		5	81
Issues caused by Greens		3	19
Jobs and employment		5	35
Police and military		4	12
Technology and development		3	16
Identity frame	*Why should you support us?*	5	173
As supporter of		4	27
As watchdog		5	11
Being for the people		5	44
Reference to allies		5	24
Reference to scientist agreement		4	9
Reference to success		5	24
Reference to values		5	46
Motivational frame	*What can you do?*	5	38

Name	Description	Files	References
Become party member		3	5
Follow (other) social media		3	3
Protest		3	3
Vote		5	32
Oppositional frame	*Who is to blame for the problem?*	5	426
Academics		3	3
CDU and CDU politicans		5	33
Climate activists		3	16
Erdogan		3	11
General opposition		5	31
Immigrants and refugees		5	88
Merkel		5	20
Muslims		5	37
Refugee activists		5	19
SPD and SPD politicians		5	33
The EU		4	30
The Government, GroKO		5	51
The Greens and Green politicians		4	32
The left		5	29
The media		4	12
The UN		4	5
Unions		1	2
Prognostic frame	*How can we solve the problem?*	5	215
Change short-term contracting		3	5
Close and control borders		5	33
Improve freedom of speech		3	9
Improve policy for children and infants		4	13
Improve technology		3	12
Leave or rethink the EMU		3	8
Lower taxes		5	22

Name	Description	Files	References
Resist the opposition		5	30
Return or deport immigrants		5	33
Reverse climate policy		3	7
Streamline bureaucracy		4	16
Strengthen police and military		5	23
Stricter laws		5	44
Teach self-defense		1	5

Codes for period 2

Name	Description	Files	References
Diagnostic framing	*What is the problem?*	5	309
Children and family policy		4	14
Corruption (accused)		5	25
Country sovereignty		3	4
COVID-19		5	111
Consequences of restrictions		5	51
Covid measurements		4	22
Freedom of assembly and protests		2	8
Manipulation of statistics (accused)		3	12
Scaremongering		5	16
Vaccination requirements		5	57
Crime		4	15
Economy		5	49
Far-left extremism		2	11
Freedom of speech		4	24
Ideological gender policy		5	16
Immigration		5	50
Culture and values		5	17
Economic insecurity		5	23
Security		5	31

Name	Description	Files	References
Islam		5	15
Issues caused by climate policy		5	37
Issues caused by socialist, leftist agenda		5	26
Jobs and employment		5	20
National pride (lack thereof)		3	4
Nord Stream 2		4	9
Police and military		5	10
The EU		5	13
Ukraine		1	8
Identity frame	*Why should you support us?*	5	116
AfD support of		4	12
As the only alternative		4	24
As watchdog		1	2
Being for the people		5	28
Reference to the AfD being correct		5	16
Reference to values		5	44
Motivational frame	*What can you do?*	5	264
Become AfD member		1	2
Donate		2	204
Follow other media		5	22
Follow telegram		3	275
Listen to podcast		5	14
Protest		3	23
Volunteer		2	3
Vote		2	2
Oppositional frame	*Who is to blame for the problem?*	5	219
Climate activists		3	9
EU		3	8
Far-left extremists		2	2
FDP and FDP politicians		3	6
General opposition		3	9

Name	Description	Files	References
Immigrants and asylum seekers		2	16
Merkel		4	14
Scholz		3	11
SPD and SPD politicians		5	21
The (former) government		4	13
The CDU and CDU politicians		5	25
The Greens and Green politicians		5	31
The media		5	29
The new government		5	33
The old parties		5	36
Virologists (COVID)		3	6
Prognostic frame	*What is the problem?*	5	182
Banning far-left groups		1	3
Be patriotic		4	9
Close and control borders		4	23
Deport immigrants		4	16
End COVID-measures		5	64
Fight so-called Islamism		4	8
Give Assange asylum		1	1
Have politicians qualify or be professional		2	3
Holding new elections		4	8
Implement Nord Stream 2		4	6
Improve children and family policy		3	4
Improve economy and business		4	7
Improve freedom of speech		3	6
Improve hospital capacity		3	12
Introduce direct democracy		2	3
Leave or rethink EMU		3	4
Lower taxes		5	17
Nuclear technology		4	14

Name	Description	Files	References
Reduce migration incentives		4	12
Reverse climate policy		4	15
Stay neutral in Ukraine conflict		1	3
Streamline bureaucracy		5	14
Strengthen police and military		4	11
Stricter laws and punishments		4	8

Appendix 2: NSD/Sikt approval

Vurdering av behandling av personopplysninger

Referansenummer
966634

Vurderingstype
Standard

Dato
13.12.2022

Prosjekttittel
Masteroppgave

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon
Universitetet i Oslo / Det samfunnsvitenskapelige fakultet / Institutt for statsvitenskap

Prosjektansvarlig
Tamta Gelashvili

Student
Amanda Mylius Krause

Prosjektperiode
03.01.2023 - 23.05.2023

Kategorier personopplysninger

- Alminnelige
- Særlige

Lovlig grunnlag

- Allmenn interesse eller offentlig myndighet (Personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav e)
- Personopplysninger som det er åpenbart at den registrerte har offentliggjort (Personvernforordningen art. 9 nr. 2 bokstav e)

Behandlingen av personopplysningene er lovlig så fremt den gjennomføres som oppgitt i meldeskjemaet. Det lovlige grunnlaget gjelder til 23.05.2023.

OM VURDERINGEN

Personverntjenester har en avtale med institusjonen du forsker eller studerer ved. Denne avtalen innebærer at vi skal gi deg råd slik at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet ditt er lovlig etter personvernregelverket.   Personverntjenester har nå vurdert den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at behandlingen er lovlig, hvis den gjennomføres slik den er beskrevet i meldeskjemaet med dialog og vedlegg.

TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET

Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige personopplysninger, særlige kategorier av personopplysninger om politisk oppfatning og religion frem til 23.05.2023.

LOVLIG GRUNNLAG

Prosjektet vil behandle overnevnte kategorier av personopplysninger med grunnlag i at oppgaven er nødvendig for å utføre en oppgave i allmennhetens interesse og for formål knyttet til vitenskapelig forskning.   Behandlingen av personopplysninger er nødvendig for allmennhetens interesse (forskning), jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 e), jf. personopplysningsloven § 8. Prosjektet gjør nødvendige tiltak for å ivareta de registrertes rettigheter og friheter, jf. art. 89 nr. 1.   Behandlingen av særlige kategorier av personopplysninger er nødvendig for allmennhetens interesse (forskning), jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 e) og art. 9 nr. 2 j, jf. personopplysningsloven §§ 8 og 9. Samfunnsnytten vil klart overstige ulempene for den enkelte. Prosjektet gjør nødvendige tiltak for å ivareta de registrertes rettigheter og friheter, jf. art. 89 nr. 1.

 PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER

Personverntjenester vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen: om lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at den registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon/ved at prosjektet oppfyller kravet om nødvendige garantier – Vurder informasjonen.   formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke viderebehandles til nye uforenlige formål dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

Utvalget er offentlige politikere og kun utsagn av offentlig karakter vil samles inn. Da disse opplysningene har en høy grad av forventet offentlighet vurderer vi at ulempen med å fremskaffe kontaktopplysninger og informere utvalget er høyere enn nytten de registrerte har av informasjonen. På dette grunnlaget finner vi at det kan gjøres unntak fra den individuelle informasjonsplikten til tredjepersonene fordi det vil innebære uforholdsmessig stor innsats å

informere de registrerte, jf. personvernforordningen art. 14 nr. 5 b)   Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18) og protest (art. 21).   Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

Personverntjenester legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1. f) og sikkerhet (art. 32). Ved bruk av databehandler (spørreskjemaleverandør, skylagring, videosamtale o.l.) må behandlingen oppfylle kravene til bruk av databehandler, jf. art 28 og 29. Bruk leverandører som din institusjon har avtale med.   For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og/eller rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER

 Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til oss ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde: https://www.nsd.no/personverntjenester/fylle-ut-meldeskjema-for-personopplysninger/melde-endringer-i-meldeskjema   Du må vente på svar fra oss før endringen gjennomføres.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

Personverntjenester vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.   Kontaktperson hos oss: Anne Lene L. Nymoen Lykke til med prosjektet!