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‘An unpredictable player’

Established parties are still struggling to deal with Germany's right-wing populists. A conversation with Wolfgang Schroeder

Read this interview in German.

In the state elections in Thuringia in late October, the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and its extreme right-wing state spokesperson Björn Höcke won 23 per cent of the vote. What happened?

The result shows that efforts to counteract the AfD have not yet made a difference in terms of the party’s attractiveness at the ballot box. In other words, we’re still looking for an effective way of winning back AfD voters.

Indeed, if anything, the arguments made by the other parties now appear to be alienating a large number of these voters. Others consider their vote for the AfD to be a reasonable way of expressing their dissatisfaction. Hence, they see the resulting public impact as confirming their convictions. In any case, the result in Thuringia was both because of and in spite of Björn Höcke.

In your book *Smarte Spalter* (“Smart Dividers”), you describe populist right-wing parties as a ‘phenomenon that represents the central unresolved issues of the globalising modern age’. Which issues do you mean by that? And is there still a chance for traditional parties to resolve them to thwart right-wing populism?

Not in the immediate future. In the medium term, yes, if they analyse the situation properly and take appropriate action. The recurring challenges for representative parliamentary democracy touch upon both socio-economic and socio-cultural problems.

Although we are often given the impression that everything can be explained by the cultural conflicts resulting from migration and climate change, this is simply not true. The causes are more deeply rooted and also involve a social dimension. In any case, the detachment of the populist to extreme right-wing world seems to be

consolidating. This complex situation is reflected in the juxtaposition of cosmopolitan and communitarian attitudes. However, the underlying causes are not only socio-cultural, but also socio-economic in nature.

To what extent is the political elite responsible for the upturn in support for right-wing populism in Germany?

It comes down to the promise of democracy to deliver the same freedom for all. This is an extremely ambitious aim, and one that often turns out to be less plausible in reality. This is already evident from the fact that the super-rich have only become richer in recent years, while low-wage earners have not seen any change for the better. Those who enjoy wealth seem to have little or no problem with this.

Another problem is migration, whose negative aspects typically impact the lower and middle classes to a larger extent, as they are the ones who have to deal with wage dumping, competition for jobs and conflicts in their immediate neighbourhood – while the upper classes tend to enjoy the positive aspects of migration, such as cheap labour and better restaurants.

The right wing is cleverly harnessing these contradictions by superficially taking the side of the "losers", pitting the people against the privileged few and talking about the elite's preferences and arrogance. Examples include the euro, savings accounts with zero interest rates, the negative consequences of a multi-ethnic society and not least the climate. The result is an orchestrated campaign of the people against the establishment.

This prompts the question of whether liberal democracy's elites are truly capable of integrating the full breadth of society with all its differences. We hear the protagonists of the modern age touting universal values and yet they frequently come across as decidedly self-referential and selective. And from this perspective, they can justifiably be accused of themselves putting social cohesion at risk.

What exactly do you mean when you say the elites are incapable of integrating different sectors of society?

The leading groups in parties and governments are responsible for more than just understanding and communicating the needs and sentiments of society. They also have to take concrete action, which means investment and recognition. But if they practise a kind of anaemic technocratism instead of seeking to adequately understand and sympathise with others, there's almost no hope of them addressing the real problems in society. People are noticing that this technocratic discourse – which is supposedly addressed to everybody

– is often extremely particular and self-referential, not just culturally but also economically. When politics becomes too self-referential, there's a high risk of disconnect with the weaker parts of society.

Does this mean the traditional parties should return to addressing the differing interests of social groups to a greater extent?

Absolutely. They need to be aware that the same measure can have different social and cultural effects. The universal values of equal freedom, justice and solidarity must be seen in the context of different life situations. And there is considerable work to be done in this respect.

What about the role of the nation state?

There's this idea that politicians no longer have control because they abandoned the nation state a long time ago. That they are not making sufficient use of the direct opportunities of territorial policy.

There's a grain of truth in this perspective, as the nation state is not only overloaded but also underutilised – take for instance the German balanced budget amendment, the "debt brake". At the same time, demands for a retreat to the nation state are also accompanied by disdain for the challenges brought about by globalisation in the area of the economy and the environment.

In your book, you argue that there's no single strategy for dealing with parties that transgress the boundaries of the democratic rule of law, but that exclusion must always form part of any such strategy. Right-wing populists enjoy painting themselves as the voice of the people on the one hand and victims who are not taken seriously on the other. Is there not a risk that a strategy of exclusion could lead to further polarisation within society?

When you take the time to reflect on how democracy works, then it's certainly plausible that democracy is impossible without a strategy of reasoned exclusion. In other words, the ability to impose sanctions and exclusions is necessary if we are to successfully walk the tightrope of civility within the democratic project. After all, this is also enshrined in the German constitution and its principle of a "fortified democracy".

In the public discourse, we have the problem that exclusion is the main topic of conversation, when it should be the last resort in a longer chain of responses using different means. The most common approach is to not take notice – in other words, to refuse to allow each and every infringement of values, however seriously it may be

intended, to be framed as some great scandal. Other approaches of course include exclusion, confrontation and containment. The success of right-wing populists is not only due to their demagoguery, but also to the fact that they've raised some issues that are being swept under the carpet by the consensus of the others.

Have the established parties become better at dealing with right-wing populists over the last four years?

My impression is that they were completely overwhelmed at first. They have now become more used to dealing with the AfD and right-wing populists. At the same time, our observations show that there's still a huge degree of uncertainty. We are a long way from seeing a confident approach to the AfD based on knowledge of the causes and the implications.

However, this is also because of the AfD itself, which is an unpredictable player – not least because of the constant struggles between radicals and moderates within the party, and the fact that outsiders can never be entirely sure what role these factions are playing in the party's current strategic positioning.

Right now, we have the problem that the radical wing is shaping public discourse, which is why everything is revolving around AfD state spokespersons Höcke and Kalbitz. However, the weakness of the pragmatic, parliament-oriented wing is the primary problem, as its members are incapable of effectively opposing the radical faction. In any case, the radicals are on the offensive and the moderates are on the defensive.

When you look at the election results in Saxony and Thuringia, where the AfD approached the 30 per cent mark, it's only natural to ask: How likely is it that the AfD will become a "Volkspartei", a new major party?

Being a "Volkspartei" or "people's party" means not only representing and reflecting members of every social class, but also representing the interests and values of these groups. To some extent, this representation always relates to a society's attitude to life and a party's responsiveness, its capacity for integration and its approach regarding minorities.

From a certain normative perspective, the AfD cannot be considered a democratic "Volkspartei" because it has yet to demonstrate that it's truly responsive and capable of integration and acting sensitively towards minorities. Instead, the party acts as an articulation of a kind of protest movement that cuts across all social strata.

At present, it doesn't look like this protest will evolve into anything more than a rejection of the liberal order. While the positive conception of a major, big-tent party requires an acceptance of pluralism and positive integration for all, the AfD is currently an anti-pluralistic, exclusionary, closed-off party for the discontented.

Researchers have long claimed there was no chance of a populist right-wing party gaining representation in the German parliament. They spoke of the German *Sonderweg*, or special path. The AfD has empirically refuted this idea. Does this mean that, conversely, the AfD is very similar to other populist right-wing European parties?

The German *Sonderweg* always involved an element of romanticising. In fact, in the 1950s we had extreme right-wing members of parliament, and in 1969 the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) fell just short of the five per cent threshold for parliamentary representation. Extreme right-wing parties have been represented in state parliaments since the 1970s. Looking at surveys from the 1950s onward, around 15 to 20 per cent of the German population has always been responsive to right-wing populism.

But unlike some countries, Germany has never had a situation in which populist right-wing parties enjoy long-term success. They have typically peaked relatively quickly before burning out as a result of internal conflicts – thwarted by their own contradictions, in other words.

For me, one of the clear differences is that most of the other successful right-wing parties have a culture of strong leadership: Le Pen in France, Wilders in the Netherlands, Salvini in Italy. Interestingly, this is not the case for the AfD.

It's unclear as to how this should be interpreted. Is it beneficial, as this is the only way for a coalition of heterogeneous forces to work in practice? Or is the absence of strong leadership more of a disadvantage because conflicts within the AfD will keep intensifying to the point of self-destruction? As things stand, there's a sense that the weak standing of the parliamentary group's leadership already represents a problem for the party as a whole.

I rather get the impression that the AfD is in a phase of institutional consolidation. It's in the process of establishing its own foundation, for instance.

Consolidation is a good word for it. On the one hand, the AfD is consolidating because of the resources provided by the state and society. It's making itself at home in the world of parliamentary democracy – with mandates, appointments, associations, foundations

and careers. On the other hand, it needs to find an internal mechanism for truly consolidating the party in the sense of accepting the context of parliamentary representation.

In other words, the extremely high proportion of right-wing extremists within the AfD – who have, at best, a tactical relationship with the rules of parliamentary democracy – must be assumed to hold the upper hand. After all, the AfD success story cannot be solely attributed to the rather drab, quiet, barely discernible policies of the more pragmatic faction of the party. The momentum enjoyed by the AfD comes from a mixture of the pragmatic and the radical.

To date, this momentum has led to equilibrium between these opposing forces. However, if the more radical elements were to take control of the political leadership, it would become harder for the project to continue. The AfD would risk butting heads with the German constitution and would most likely end up getting bogged down in its own internal contradictions, just as its predecessor parties ultimately destroyed themselves. In any case, however, the players and institutions operating within the "fortified democracy" must act to curb any such development and not simply let it go unchallenged.

This interview was conducted by Daniel Kopp.



Wolfgang Schroeder
Kassel

Dr. Wolfgang Schroeder is Professor specialising in the political system of the German Federal Republic at the University of Kassel. He is also WZB Fellow at the Berlin Science Center for Social Research, Democracy and Democratisation. From 2009 to 2014, he was State Secretary in the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs, Women and Family of the State of Brandenburg.