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Beyond anti-elitism and out-group attacks: how concerns shape the AfD's populist representation on German TikTok during the 2024 European elections

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ABSTRACT



TikTok is a pivotal platform for political communication, especially among younger users. This study examines how the German rightwing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) used TikTok to disseminate populist messages and engage users during the 2024 European elections. By analyzing videos posted by AfD politicians in the three months leading up to the elections, we identified the main populist messages and assessed their impact on user engagement compared to other parties. Applying LLM-enhanced topic modeling of video transcriptions, we identified twelve themes, grouped into three types of populist discursive strategies: (1) *Protectionism against Horizontal Threats*, with imagined enemies on the 'eye level' (e.g., migrants and 'wokeists'), (2) *Protectionism against Vertical Threats*, with imagined enemies being in positions of structural power (e.g., anti-elitism), and (3) *Concerns of the People*, with diffuse and abstract roots of the problem (e.g., fears of inflation, security, or loss of individual rights). While horizontal out-group attacks and vertical anti-elitism garnered higher average engagement, most content focused solely on anti-elite and concern-related themes. Thus, going beyond theories of right-wing populism that emphasize identity-based exclusionary rhetoric, we show that the AfD also focused on users' concerns. This suggests a strategy aimed at resonating with voters by combining divisive messaging with relatable issues, or even prioritizing such concerns. By mainly promoting anti-elitism alongside real-world concerns – thus obscuring the extremism of its agenda and key figures – the AfD generates significantly more engagement, outperforming all other German parties combined. Our findings raise questions about right-wing populist rhetoric in online campaigning amid growing voter insecurity.


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Introduction

TikTok has rapidly become one of the most influential social media platforms, with a monthly active user base exceeding 1 billion globally (Curry, 2025). Its short-video format and algorithmic distribution made it especially popular among younger users. More than 50 percent of users are 25 years old or younger (ibid.). As the platform continues to grow, political actors across the ideological spectrum have been trying to leverage TikTok's reach and virality (Cervi et al., 2023; Eriksson Krutrök & Åkerlund, 2023; Medina Serrano et al., 2020; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). In Germany, while TikTok surpassed 20 million users in 2023, the right-wing party Alternative for Germany (AfD) reached new heights by crossing the 20% mark in national polls in the same year. The party has been enormously successful since its modest beginnings as a Euro-skeptic party amid the European financial crisis in 2013 and its turn towards ethnonationalism during the 2015 'refugee crisis.' In the 2024 EU Parliamentary elections, 16% of first-time voters (aged 16–24) voted for the AfD, making it the second strongest party, only one percentage point behind the strongest party, the Christian Democrats (CDU) at 17%.

The AfD's success is attributed to its strong social media presence, most recently on TikTok, a popular news source among young audiences traditionally inclined to vote left (Newman et al., 2024). Following a well-established narrative among journalistic and political observers, the AfD reached this audience through viral, polarizing political content. Anecdotal claims about the AfD's dominance on TikTok make it essential to examine both their engagement and the content of their videos, including claims, provocations, and, more broadly, populist elements. How do they communicate to and engage their supporters? How is this engagement linked to populist themes within their communication?

Our overarching research interest, therefore, focuses on how the populist communication style of the German right-wing (extremist) party AfD drives engagement rates on TikTok during the campaign for the 2024 European elections. We begin by examining the AfD's social media strategies, then broaden the focus to populist communication, engagement-driven messaging on TikTok, and the ways in which the platform's affordances favor the amplification of right-wing content.

Literature review

AfD's right-wing populism online: playing the algorithm and fighting the elites

Initially established as a Eurosceptic party, the AfD was founded in 2013. It has since shifted its focus to issues such as immigration and national identity and shaped associated debates in German politics. Parts of the party are under surveillance by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution because of extremist views. The AfD has been linked to a range of racial and extremist movements and actors, including ethnonationalist groups and supporters of the National Socialist Underground, with leading figures attending Neo-Nazi rallies and contributing to far-right publications (Klikauer, 2019). The party has established itself as a social media pioneer among German parties, allocating substantial resources to its online presence (Hillje, 2024). On platforms like TikTok, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and X, the AfD consistently achieves the largest reach on average (Hillje, 2024). This success stems from its strategic occupation of social

media to bypass journalistic gatekeeping (Bösch, 2023) and establish alternative media channels (Hillje, 2024). These channels provide the party with the opportunity to spread its populist rhetoric online without filtering, contextualization, or deconstruction by external actors, making it essential to examine what this populism is composed of.

While the AfD's communication follows right-wing populist discourse in form (see next section), its online content is shaped by Germany's specific cultural and historical context. Its anti-elitist rhetoric is directed at European but especially national elites that are supposedly corrupt and out of touch with the people (Humprecht et al., 2024; Vaughan & Heft, 2023), with former Chancellor Angela Merkel symbolizing the party's opposition to permissive immigration policies during her tenure and beyond. The AfD's EU criticism blends national sovereignty with cultural preservation, mirroring the broader populist 'people vs. elite' narrative of European radical right parties (Vaughan & Heft, 2023).

This type of rhetoric is the basis of many calculated provocations – a strategy to attract mainstream attention and to energize political supporters through the outrage of political opponents (Revers, 2023). Thus, we expect the AfD's rhetoric to employ a wide range of attributes to trigger online engagement – both by targeting the oppositional out-group and by appealing to potential supporters who are supposedly disadvantaged by elites and democratic institutions. All these tactics reflect broader patterns of transnational populism.

The themes and types of right-wing populism

In its widest conception, populism is understood as a common political strategy which constructs and mobilizes an underdog to change the status quo (Laclau, 2005). More narrowly, populism has been construed as a 'thin-centred ideology' (Mudde, 2004). What distinguishes *right-wing nationalist* populist discourse is a combination of *anti-establishment* and exclusionary discourse, also described as *thick populism* (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). It combines (1) the customary *invocation of a 'people'* which populists claim to represent and defend against depraved elites with (2) *attacks against 'outsiders'* (typically immigrants and ethnic minorities) who are held responsible for 'the people's' plights. In this constellation, the homogenous 'people' of nationalist populism are native-born citizens united by common values and traditions and inherently committed to an anti-pluralist worldview (Müller, 2016). This inevitably excludes not only immigrants and ethnic minorities but also any identity group that deviates from dominant cultural norms.

Empirical studies confirm that this dual targeting of vertical and horizontal enemies is especially pronounced in the AfD's online communication. The party emphasizes people-centrism, anti-elitism, and sovereignty (Ernst et al., 2019). They strategically deploy emotionally charged and outrage-oriented messaging to provoke negative affect, especially anger, thereby maximizing user engagement online (Humprecht et al., 2024). These emotionalized narratives construct 'the people' as a virtuous in-group under siege from both corrupt elites and culturally threatening outsiders, particularly migrants (ibid.). Crucially, the AfD's identity-driven messaging gains additional traction through amplification by a broader far-right media ecosystem and intermediary networks of extra-parliamentary movements, facilitating its normalization and mainstreaming (Klinger et al., 2023; Rothut et al., 2024; Völker & Saldivia Gonzatti, 2024).

Protectionism against economic, cultural and security threats represents another feature of the populist discursive repertoire (Brubaker, 2017). Alongside constructing various threats, the populist (party) acts as protector of the people against them – especially from ‘outsiders’ and from above. We therefore expect exclusionary and stigmatizing claims against migrant and ethnic minority groups, viewing them as economic burdens, cultural threats to German identity, and security risks associated with Islamist terrorism. In populist communication, all of this would likely be accompanied by discursive constructions of crises and fear at the expense of these groups (Wodak, 2015). Aside from other political parties and institutions of the state, the news media (and particularly public broadcasting) are likely targets of populist anti-institutionalism (Brubaker, 2017; Vaughan & Heft, 2023) of the AfD.

Initially, we examine the types of populist concepts present in the AfD’s online communication during campaigning:

RQ1: What are the main (populist) themes employed by AfD politicians on TikTok prior to the EU elections 2024?

Political parties and TikTok engagement

It is crucial to then examine how this populist messaging spreads and engages TikTok users. In the hybrid media system, leading politicians exploit the chance to address their voters directly and without journalistic gatekeepers. Despite the dominance of younger users (Zeng & Abidin, 2021), many established politicians recently adopted TikTok, though unequally across countries and with varying strategies (Cervi et al., 2023).

The success of populist political actors on TikTok has garnered public attention and evoked research interest (e.g., Cervi et al., 2023; Eriksson Krutrök & Åkerlund, 2023; Medina Serrano et al., 2020): Widholm et al. (2024) analyzed TikTok during the 2022 Swedish election campaign and showed that content was skewed towards rightwing perspectives, receiving more praise and less criticism compared to other parties. They suggest that right-wing content on TikTok was more effective in generating engagement. Nonetheless, it would be early to conclude that right-wing politics overall dominates TikTok as there are context-specific idiosyncrasies. In Canada, a left-wing populist politician (Jagmeet Singh) has demonstrated that messages of social justice can also resonate successfully on TikTok (Moir, 2023). Therefore, evidence is mixed and shows that TikTok is still in its early stages of professional political communication, with political actors still searching for effective ways to use it.

TikTok differs significantly from other social media platforms in ways that may facilitate the dissemination of right-wing populist content. Its short-video format, combined with a personalized algorithm, fosters high engagement through storytelling, emotional appeals, and trend-based participation mechanisms (Schellewald, 2023). These affordances, along with low-barrier content production and participatory remix culture, contribute to the rapid circulation of populist narratives, making TikTok an effective tool for digital propaganda used by right wing groups (Medina Serrano et al., 2020).

Thus, given the lack of knowledge about the structure of the (German) political TikTok sphere and right-wing populists’ engagement rates within it, we aim to examine how likes, views, shares and plays are distributed.

RQ2: How does the user engagement generated by AfD politicians differ from that of other party politicians on TikTok prior to the EU elections 2024?

Right-wing populist parties and TikTok engagement

These insights highlight the importance of examining how the findings from the first two research questions – on populist types and engagement – interact. Over the past decade, it has become almost a truism that populist communication thrives on social media, as these platforms have helped right-wing populists circumvent the predominantly negative attention from traditional news outlets. The online opportunity structure (Engesser et al., 2017) is particularly well-suited for populist communication, providing possibilities for direct engagement with ‘the people’ within ideologically-homophilic community networks (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023). Algorithmic recommendations promote ideological confirmation among recipients and aid the mobilization of supporters (Krämer, 2017), while triggering the out-group (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023). Through this emotionalized identity construction, the AfD antagonistically distinguishes itself from an imagined out-group and simultaneously generates attention (Hillje, 2024).

Therefore, algorithms favor polarizing content that triggers strong reactions from the in- or out-group (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023).

Following the different populist themes related to constructed out-groups (‘wokists’ and migrants), in-groups (‘the people’), and institutions (‘the elites’), we thus aim to examine how these categorizations may be related to user engagement online:

RQ3: How does the user engagement relate to the (populist) themes that are employed by AfD politicians on TikTok prior to the EU elections 2024?

In addressing these three research questions, we aim not only to present descriptive findings on themes and engagement but also to triangulate results to establish an overarching typology and determine how different types of claims contribute to right-wing populists’ success online.

Data and methods

As established in the literature review, there is growing evidence of the effectiveness of far-right communication on TikTok; however, there is less understanding of the content and discursive strategies employed. We focus on the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) as an exemplary successful right-wing populist European party to better assess how its politicians communicate and how users engage with this content compared to political competitors. We aim to investigate the AfD’s success on TikTok from several perspectives – examining populist themes, a more general typology of these themes, and how user engagement with posts is connected to these populist elements, asking how this content resonates with users compared to posts by other German politicians.

To uncover these processes, we analyzed the engagement metrics of 109 German politicians, posting 5,590 videos in total, with 3,399 disseminated by AfD politicians in the run-up to the 2024 European elections. Based on a comprehensive list of AfD members of parliament and candidates at state (AbgeordnetenWatch), federal and EU level, we identified the party members’ individual TikTok accounts. All videos from these

accounts were downloaded using the *Zeeschuimer* plugin (Peeters, 2024). The sample was limited to videos published in a timeframe of three months before the EU elections (March 9th to June 8th). We chose to include only videos of accounts that gained at least 100,000 likes during their lifetime to ensure that accounts have a relevant outreach and are well-established within the TikTok sphere. Thus, we can better understand the narratives that effectively generate public attention and shape discourse.

Initially, we analyzed the transcriptions of videos posted by AfD politicians through a Large Language Model-based, (semi-)automated topic modeling approach (see Methods section) in order to identify populist themes and types of populist discursive strategies (RQ1). In total, our content sample consists of 54 individual accounts posting 1,271 videos (transcripts with a minimum of 25 spoken words). We automatically transcribed the videos using *OpenAI's* Whisper model (Whisper large v3). The transcriptions were then analyzed using LLoM (Lam et al., 2024), a Large Language Model-based concept induction and classification approach. This method uses vector space embeddings and LLM-based summarization, resulting in clustered 'high-level concepts' of a given text corpus by distilling and synthesizing its elements (ibid.). The LLoM algorithm transforms unstructured text into high-level concepts, addressing the limitations of traditional topic modeling, which often relies on low-level keywords. It leverages LLMs (in our case, GPT-4o) to iteratively synthesize content patterns, progressing from raw text to increasingly abstract concepts. First, the algorithm summarizes the content into multiple elements per document. It then clusters the elements and subsequently describes the unique features of these clusters as coding categories. As a result, the algorithm inductively synthesizes a codebook containing coding category descriptions (see Appendix, Table 5). After human coders inspected and validated these categories (see the next paragraph), they were automatically coded across the dataset. All categories were coded independently for their presence in each transcript; therefore, multiple coding was possible.

Based on the number and content variety of documents, the model generated for a total of 14 concepts, of which we considered 12 to be relevant for our analysis. We omitted two redundant concepts: 'Campaigning/Advertising for AfD' was excluded due to its self-evident nature in the context of an election. Additionally, the concept 'Divine healing belief' was omitted because it was based on videos by one AfD politician who used esoteric language, was affected by occasional, well-known transcription model hallucinations, was rarely coded, and did not align with our theoretical perspective.

After automated classification, two expert coders (the authors) first validated the category definitions and intercoder reliability through coding a random sample of 40 documents that cover all categories multiple times (Krippendorff's Alpha = .75). After category refinement (see next paragraph), the coders then validated 140 documents in total to check for and prevent potential biases resulting from LLM-related distortions or misclassifications (average Krippendorff's Alpha = .81, F1 = .92, for more details see Appendix, Table 4).

The coders are experts in the field of communication studies, specializing in political communication and the analysis of political discourse. They have expertise in theory development and empirical analysis of populist and polarizing political communication. Through validation of these 12 concepts, 9 were found to be highly accurate and relevant, while three were mostly underrepresented in the data and – possibly due to its underrepresentation – vaguely defined by the model. To improve the quality of these three

categories and to execute an additional robustness-check that evaluates whether these concepts are in fact not to be found in the data, we manually improved the category definitions (see Appendix, Table 5). In this iteration, we drew on insights gained from the initial validation of a first sample and modified the model prompt accordingly, refining the category definition prior to the full validation. We then re-ran the classification using the same classification logics, employing GPT-4o via the *OpenAI* API (thus, using the same model that we applied with LLoM). This re-run significantly improved the reliability of these three concepts (see Table 4), although they were still under-represented in the data (see Findings RQ1). This semi-automated approach, combining automated classification with human re-evaluation, ensured that all relevant themes were identified and consistent with our theoretical understanding of populist elements. Through qualitative evaluation, we also collected examples illustrating the concepts (see Findings RQ1). In a final step, to identify overarching patterns, the expert coders established a set of three types of populist discursive strategies to which each theme could be assigned (*Protectionism against Horizontal Threats*; *Protectionism against Vertical Threats*; *Concerns of the People*). The typology was created using both deductive and inductive elements: while the initial themes emerged as concepts from the data, the typology (for more details, see Results RQ1) was primarily informed by existing theory and research (see Literature Review).

To measure overall party engagement on TikTok (RQ2), we conducted a metrics-based analysis of AfD videos in comparison to an overall corpus of posts by German politicians running for parties other than the AfD. We collected video metric data from politicians campaigning for all established German parties to compare it with the AfD. Overall, all videos by office-holding parliament members were analyzed (N = 5,590). Thereby, we contextualized engagement with right-wing populists on TikTok within the broader landscape of political interaction on the platform and tested the significance of differences between AfD metrics and those of other parties using a Mann–Whitney U test (see Appendix, Table 3). We used Standard Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that are well-established standard benchmarks (Rival IQ, 2024): We combined the views with other forms of engagement (commenting, liking, and sharing).

The general engagement rate is defined as:

$$\text{Engagement} = \frac{\text{Likes} + \text{Comments} + \text{Shares}}{\text{Views}}$$

To answer RQ3, our findings on user engagement (RQ2) were combined with insights that we gained from the initial content analysis (RQ1). Based on the populist themes and types of discursive strategies, we aimed to uncover which rhetorics drive right-wing populist engagement on TikTok. We conducted significance tests (negative binomial regression) to examine the interaction between engagement metrics and populist themes (see Appendix, Tables 6 and 7).

Findings RQ1: (Populist) themes of the AfD

We identified 12 key themes that dominated the AfD's TikTok campaign leading up to the European elections. In this section, we describe the specific populist themes, introduced within an overall populist typology (*Protectionism against Horizontal Threats*;

Protectionism against Vertical Threats; Concerns of the People), before discussing their overall distribution within the AfD videos.

Protectionism against horizontal threats: identity and outsiders

A first category of an overall typology of populist themes we found was identity-driven protectionism or securitarianism based on us-versus-them narratives. We defined the overall pattern of themes within this type as grounded in horizontal enemy images – perceived threats emerging from divisions of society between ‘equals.’ These threats operate at the observer’s eye level, such as challenges of cultural values posed by migrants or ‘woke’ protesters.

Migration discussion/critique

In this theme, AfD politicians construct various threats emanating from the migrant population. These are either pictured as vague threats, such as ‘asylum chaos’ or uncontrolled or illegal mass immigration as a destructive force, resulting in questions such as ‘Do you want uncontrolled immigration and political Islam to destroy your homeland?’ Videos constructing more specific threats focus on (1) securitarian threats, like rape or terrorism, which ‘all has to do with illegal mass migration. So we have a massive problem with crime committed by foreigners. [...] We need remigration, we need border controls, we need deportations.’ On the other hand, migrants are portrayed as (2) economic threats; either vague (‘social parasites’) or more specific regarding costs of social benefits and accommodation. Many videos with this theme particularly deal with the housing market, where migrants are not only competing with Germans in urban areas but are also held responsible for rising costs.

Gender ideology & wokeness

This theme is centered around strong opposition to progressive ideas about gender and sexuality, often mocking or exaggerating these positions and their supporters. A common tactic is to ridicule ‘woke’ claims, such as the possibility of men becoming pregnant. Policies like gender-neutral toilets are labeled as ‘left-green nonsense’. The contrast between traditional family and so-called ‘gender ideology’ is a recurring theme, with the ideal of ‘the family’ being elevated as crucial for society. Videos emphasize the need to protect children from ‘traumatizing, leftist’ sexual education. Simplistic, binary notions of gender are promoted, with the trans movement being described as a dangerous trend driven by ‘trans extremists’. Additionally, concerns are raised about men exploiting the recently passed gender self-identification law to harass women. National identity is emphasized as being ‘colorful enough’ without LGBTQ+ individuals, which are framed as anti-national and anti-traditional.

Protectionism against vertical threats: anti-elitism and anti-institutionalism

A second general type of populist themes we identified was protectionism or securitarianism, which was based on anti-elite sentiments. These themes followed a vertical logic of enemy construction, targeting not societal out-groups ‘on the eye level,’ but blaming ‘those in charge’ for the plights of common people.

Political integrity

Political Integrity is in part about criticizing ‘established parties’ and democratic institutions for their *lack of* integrity, but to a greater extent preoccupied with representing the AfD as the party that upholds integrity and transparency. The videos emphasize that the AfD introduces practical proposals and laws designed to help citizens in an unbureaucratic manner, unlike other parties, which are portrayed as hypocritical and manipulative. The AfD is presented as a watchdog against the entrenched, established parties, ensuring accountability and respect for the German Constitution. The AfD portrays itself as the sole defender of freedom, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, when it claims to have been the only party defending civil liberties.

Institutional & political party critique

This theme mainly targets political figures and institutions, spanning from general discontent to more particular points of criticism. Within this theme, specific politicians, like Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck (Green Party), are frequently mocked or criticized. Conservative parties are criticized for (insufficiently) adopting and copying AfD-like policies, while the government is portrayed as consistently failing in its governance. Criticism extends to specific actions, such as disapproval of legislative measures like the household budget law. Established politicians, in general, are framed as disconnected from the people, dismissed as politically weak, or are accused of pushing censorship, with the police and judges being criticized for their role in such processes.

EU skepticism

Videos containing the populist theme of EU Skepticism encompass numerous criticisms of the European Union. A central argument is the financial burden on citizens, while at the same time putting Germany at a disadvantage. Many critics portray the EU parliament as incapable of effectively defending German interests, especially in securing the borders against illegal migration, with institutions such as Frontex coming into focus. The EU is also criticized for its sprawling bureaucracy and administration, which is often seen as neglecting local and national interests. There are concerns that the EU is stripping nation states of their sovereignty. Videos featuring this populist theme emphasize anti-EU and anti-elite sentiments, demanding that ‘Brussels should stay out of our lives’.

Concerns of the people: serious threats and vague enemies

A final type we identified is not aimed directly at a particular imagined enemy. Rather, the actors who are being blamed are diffuse or not mentioned at all. The populist themes that fall under this category tend to focus on people’s fears, concerns and grievances in an ever-changing world of insecurities, from questions of security to issues of inflation or curtailed civil rights.

Energy & environment

The theme of Energy & Environment focuses on a critical view of current energy policies and environmental initiatives. Critics argue that the energy transition will lead to higher costs and impractical solutions such as expensive, nonsensical hydrogen imports. There

is a strong call to keep nuclear power stations open in order to protect the country from the risks of infrastructural and financial instability. Videos containing this theme also oppose the Green New Deal and the proposed ban on internal combustion engines, while promoting agricultural diesel and gas imports from Russia. Additionally, videos containing this theme frequently argue that the energy transition is destroying jobs.

Security concerns

A wide array of issues related to either global and external, or national and internal threats is discussed within this theme. Externally, there is a strong call to strengthen Europe's borders, with the aim of building 'a fortress against migration'. Other external factors include the threat of war, which videos attest to directly affect the security of citizens at home. Thus, videos claim that 'the German state can no longer fulfill its duty to protect its citizens,' linking uncertainties concerning rising cost of living with fear of conflict: 'You are afraid because you don't know how to cope with the ever-increasing cost of living. You are afraid of war'. There are also concerns about government overreach during crises, resulting in disruptive policies concerning climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic and its related protests, with Germany turning 'into an authoritarian state overnight'. Thus, the overarching implication is that the government's priorities lie elsewhere: 'The protection of guests in our country is more important to the government [...] than the protection of its own citizens.'

Economic concerns

Economic Concerns address the fears regarding the financial well-being of citizens, with a state failing to address their needs. At its core is the fear of inflation and the rising cost of essentials such as rent, food, electricity, and petrol, leading AfD politicians to ask: 'Who trusts a party that lets energy prices explode through the energy transition?'. Videos also state that government funds do not reach local communities in times of crisis, such as floods, because 'out-of-touch politicians spend money on ideological causes while the 'little guy' is neglected'. This leads to accusations of exploitation by the state, fueling a sense of injustice and competition, with resources being misallocated, with the 'Germans who work for it getting too little'. Thus, videos demand to prioritize national interests and protect domestic resources.

Peace advocacy

The theme of Peace Advocacy focuses on war, conflict, and fears that the population is at risk. This includes concerns about rising crime, war in Europe, and perceived 'war-mongering' by the government. Videos containing this theme oppose actions such as sending Taurus missiles to Ukraine, arguing that such measures unnecessarily escalate conflicts. The government is accused of 'talking war', while the AfD positions itself as the 'party of peace,' voting against war and crisis missions.

There are also calls for a 'new culture of dialogue' which aims to resolve social conflicts through conflict resolution. The AfD often presents itself as the party that 'does not send you to war' or enforces authority on its citizens, in contrast to other parties that are labeled as pro-conflict.

Removal of citizens' rights

This theme focuses on the perceived threat to citizens' rights and freedoms as guaranteed by the German constitution. Critics argue that national policies undermine these rights. The AfD positions itself as patriotic and firmly rooted in constitutional rights, often highlighting instances where it has fought for citizens' rights and won legal cases. Opposition to the gender self-identification law is prominent, with implicit suggestions that it contradicts the constitution, raising concerns about issues such as child welfare. Climate protection is questioned as a human right, with references to other fundamental rights used to challenge current climate policies. Generally, this theme attests the erosion of citizens' rights to out-of-touch elites imposing policies without regard for the constitutional freedoms of ordinary people. Thus, it is somewhat closely related to the following theme.

Freedom of speech

Within this theme, concerns about the perceived suppression of individual freedoms and censorship of 'what can be said' in Germany are discussed. Videos argue that the mainstream media oppose freedom of speech, leading to the suppression of alternative journalistic voices, raising questions such as 'Could criticism of the government one day become illegal?'. The AfD claims that certain issues are covered up and demands that these issues need to be discussed openly. They present themselves as the true democrats who 'fight for the people': 'Freedom of speech is in danger when almost every second German now believes that he can no longer express himself freely and without fear in public'. Thus, censorship is another major aspect discussed within this theme, particularly in relation to social media platforms. The AfD claims that mainstream parties want to 'ban and censor' them: 'This video may not be allowed to be published in a few months. Why? Because we are too successful.' Mostly, however, imaginations of 'the enemy' stay diffuse. Thus, they express concern that 'politics in our country is acting against freedom of speech,' asking the rhetorical question: 'Does this still have much to do with democracy?'.

Overall distribution of populist themes

Next, we analyzed the distribution of these populist themes in AfD videos. A total of 1,271 videos were categorized into the 12 themes and the three overarching types. [Table 1](#) shows the overall distribution. Furthermore, a correlation analysis was conducted to illustrate the co-occurrence and distinctiveness of themes within videos. In addition, a negative binomial regression analysis was performed to assess the significance of themes for video engagement.

Protectionism against Vertical Threats is the type that contains the most videos overall ($n = 1,159$). Also, the top three themes that occur most frequently all fall into this populist type: Institutional Critique (86%), Political Integrity (86%), and Political Party Critique (80%) cover over 95% of videos (see [Figure 1](#)). It can be concluded that these themes frequently co-occur within the same video and play a crucial role in AfD's TikTok communication.

The type *Concerns of the People* contains $n = 1,076$ videos. Its dominant topics are Security Concerns (38%), Removal of Citizens' Rights (37%) and Economic Concerns (34%) with Freedom of Speech (18%) and Energy and Environment (10%) on the low end.

Table 1. AfD TikTok metrics compared to other parties.

Summary of Tiktok Metrics by Party associated Creators with more than 100K likes during the 2024 EU Election Campaign											
	Engagement				Metrics						
	Likes per View	Comments per View	Shares per View	Total Engagement	Median Likes	Median Comments	Median Shares	Median Plays	Total Videos	Accounts	
AfD	8.74%	0.79%	0.71%	10.24%	361	33	8	3,586	3,399	59	
Other	6.38%	0.37%	0.46%	7.21%	434	78	10	7,013	2,191	50	
Difference	2.36%	0.43%	0.25%	3.03%	-73	-45	-2	-3,421	1,208	9	

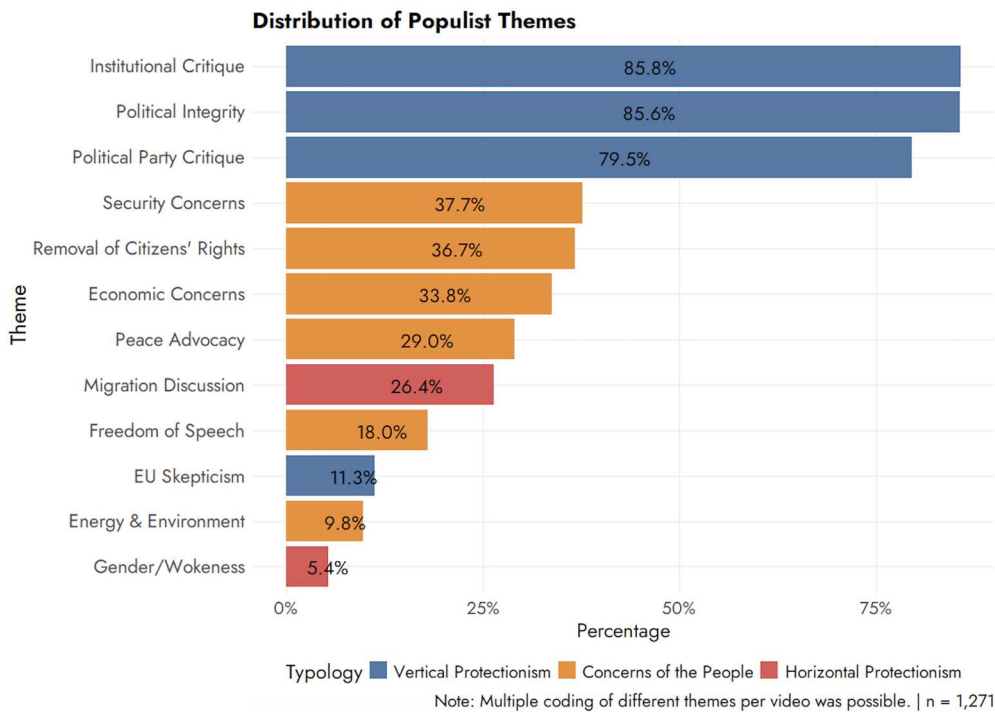


Figure 1. Distribution of populist themes within AfD videos.

The type *Protectionism against Horizontal Threats* contains the lowest total number of videos ($n = 390$), being composed of Migration Discussion/Critique (26%) and Gender Ideology/Wokeness Critique, only encompassing 5%.

In addition to frequency analysis, a correlation analysis was conducted to illustrate the co-occurrence of topics within videos (Appendix, Table 2). Cross-theme associations are generally weak, with only a few exceptions, indicating that our content analysis unveiled mostly unique concepts. The highest correlations are observed between the most frequent topics in Vertical Protectionism: All themes (*Institutional Critique*, *Political Party Critique*, and *Political Integrity*) are highly correlated and significant ($r > .56$, $p < .001$). This shows how the AfD intermingles different forms of anti-elite themes, blending narratives of ‘those in charge’ with political and institutional elites, resulting in a general anti-institutionalist logic that, however, appears to be distinct from the rarely used anti-EU theme: *EU Skepticism* correlates only weakly with the other three themes and appears to stand alone and be rarely discussed.

There are some notable medium correlations between the themes of the type *Concerns of the People* (see Appendix, Table 2): Firstly, *Economic Concerns* come together with *Energy and Environmental Concerns* ($r = .35$), indicating that green and climate-friendly policies are often framed as financially risky or burdensome. We also found a moderate positive correlation between Migration Discussion and Security Concerns ($r = .33$), suggesting these topics are often linked in populist discourse by portraying migrants as a threat to public safety.

Interestingly, while videos per category are lower for the *Concerns of the People* type compared to *Vertical Protectionism* (see Figure 1), the aggregate numbers uncover the

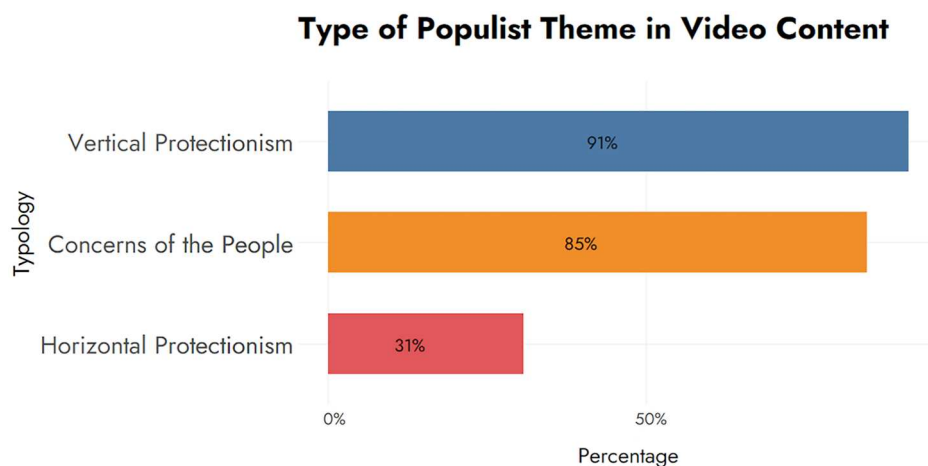
relevance of *Concerns of the People* (see [Figure 2](#)). It is important to note that the aggregation was conducted on a binary level, whereby the occurrence of a specific theme in a video could not result in an increase in the count if other themes of the same type were already present. This approach was taken to prevent potential distortions arising from the varying number of themes per type. Results from both the correlation analysis and the aggregated counts per type thus showcase a diverse range of *Concerns of the People* that are often highlighted by AfD posts – being almost equally important as anti-elite themes (85% compared to 91%). The use of *Horizontal Protectionism* is notably lower, appearing in about 30% of the videos.

In summary, the AfD predominantly emphasizes anti-institutionalism and purported concerns, whereas culture war and explicit migration themes play a comparatively minor role.

Findings RQ2: user engagement with the AfD compared to other parties

To measure the user engagement generated by the AfD, and to put the results into perspective with the broader German political landscape on TikTok, we collected data from the political accounts of all relevant parties (see Data and Methods). By professional standards, the AfD achieves an exceptionally high engagement rate of 10% (cf. Rival IQ, 2024), making its accounts among the most engaging content producers in the German TikTok sphere. Nevertheless, there are other political actors that are – on average – almost as effective in terms of engagement (see [Table 1](#)): The AfD may appear to stand out in terms of likes (8.7% vs. 6.4%) and shares (0.7% vs. 0.5%) per video; however, the differences are less pronounced than one might expect.

When considering not only the average engagement per video but also the number of accounts that surpassed our threshold of 100,000 likes since account creation, as



Note: While a single video could include multiple themes, only one instance per type was counted. That is, multiple themes within the same type did not increase its count beyond a single occurrence per video. | n = 1,271

Figure 2. Percentage of occurrence of at least one of the types of populist discursive strategies per video.

well as the overall volume of videos posted by these accounts, it becomes evident that the AfD has a significantly higher output of successful videos. In total, 59 AfD accounts exceeded the threshold and posted an average of 142 videos per week during the election period, compared to just 50 accounts and 92 weekly videos from all other parties combined – highlighting the AfD’s dominance on TikTok (see Figure 3). Throughout the study period, no other party could challenge these metrics, with the Social Democrats being the only exception for a limited period (due to Chancellor Olaf Scholz joining TikTok with a well-developed media strategy). All differences between AfD and other party accounts are statistically significant (see Appendix Table 3).

Thus, our initial analyses raise the question of how the populist themes used by AfD politicians maintain engagement on TikTok at such a consistent level across a strikingly high number of videos.

Findings RQ3: the interrelation of populist concepts and user engagement

When engagement is analyzed alongside content, view counts vary significantly across different populist themes (see Figure 4), with mean views ranging from 20.04 K (*Energy and Environment*) to 49.80 K (*Gender Ideology/Wokeness Critique*).

Despite having the fewest videos, the themes of *Horizontal Protectionism* (*Migration Discussion* and *Gender Ideology/Wokeness Critique*) show notably high and statistically significant engagement rates compared to other categories.

By moving beyond specific themes and observing the broader typology that spans across the videos (Figure 5), clearer patterns of engagement emerge: The highest

TikTok Metrics by Party

Engagement of Tiktok Videos by Party associated Creators with more than 100k likes during the 2024 EU Election Campaign

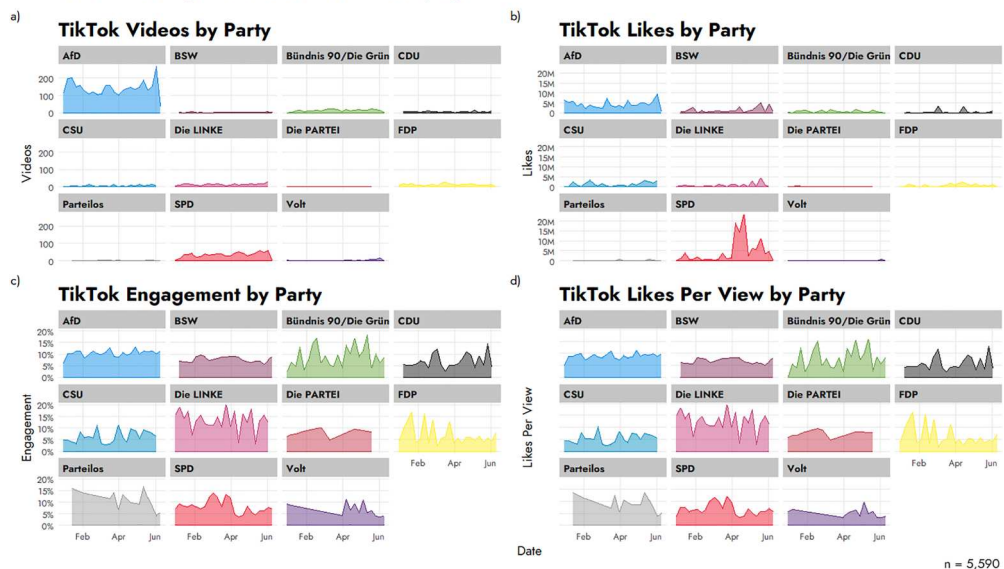
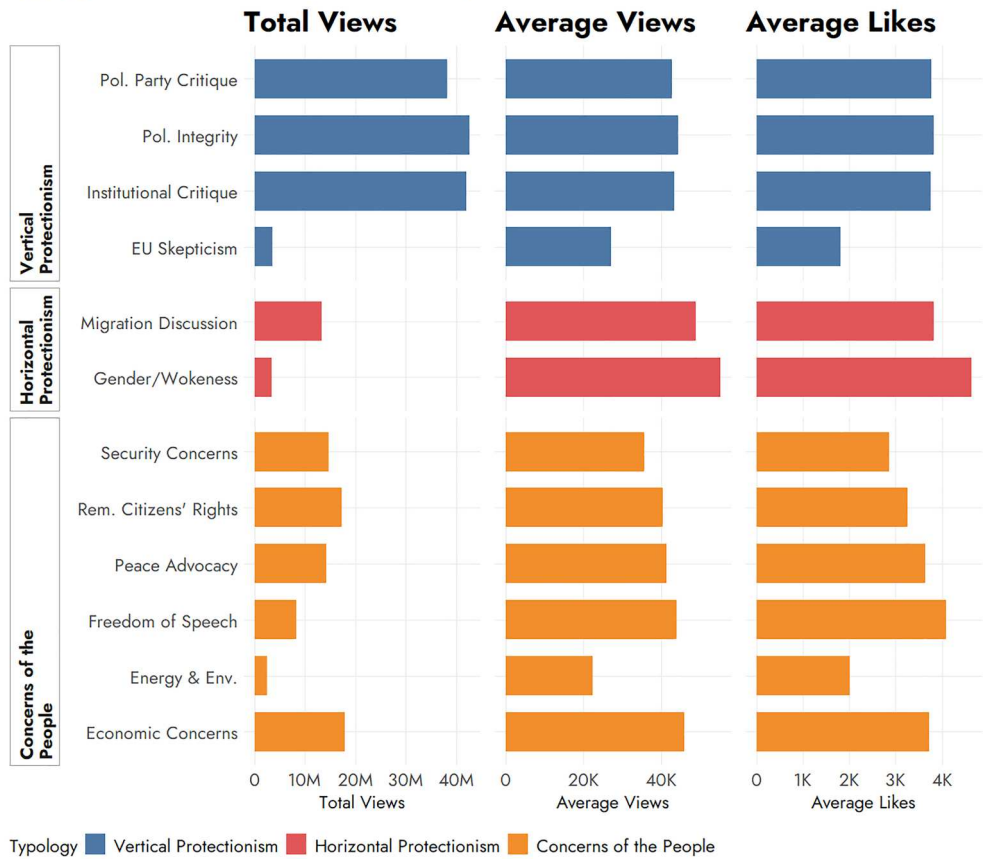


Figure 3. Engagement of TikTok videos per party account.

Engagement of TikTok Videos per Theme



Note: Multiple coding of different themes per video was possible. | n = 1,271

Figure 4. Engagement of TikTok videos per theme.

aggregate view counts are associated with the thematic types of *Vertical Protectionism* and *Concerns of the People*. The *Horizontal Protectionism* type of themes, despite its low representation, garners the most views per video. The AfD produces a high volume of *Concerns of the People* content, despite the statistically significant higher engagement levels of *Vertical* and *Horizontal* videos that target elites and out-groups.

The high view counts for *Horizontal* types of content, combined with their limited occurrence, presents a striking phenomenon. The AfD audience is focused on issues that address concerns, rather than solely ‘playing the platform’ (Bösch, 2023) by addressing typical populist, ideologically charged out-group narratives about migration, woke liberals, and elites.

Discussion: concerns of the populists

The present study sought to understand how the German right-wing (extremist) party Alternative for Germany (AfD) communicated on TikTok during the run-up to the 2024 European election, and the extent to which prevailing theories of right-wing

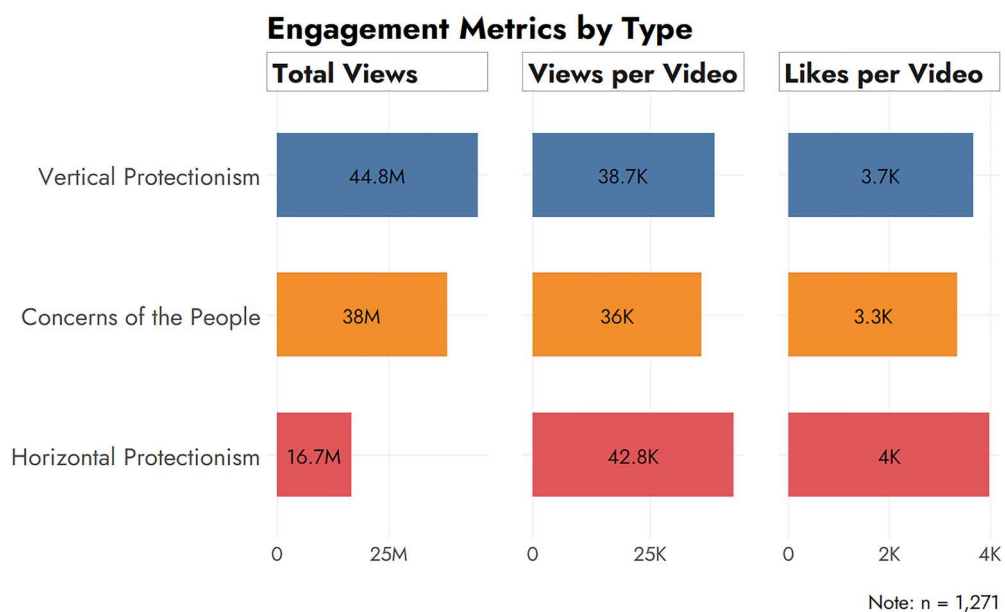


Figure 5. Engagement aggregated on the level of type of populist discursive strategy. Each video could only be assigned to each type once.

nationalist political discourse anticipate this communication. Using an automated approach to concept generation (Lam et al., 2024), we identified three primary types of populist themes in AfD’s TikTok content prior to the EU elections in 2024: (1) *Horizontal Protectionism*, with identity-based ‘us versus them’ narratives targeting migrants or ‘woke leftists’ as imagined enemies; (2) *Vertical Protectionism*, characterized by anti-elite narratives directed against established political actors and institutions, and, finally and somewhat surprisingly, a high volume of (3) *Concerns of the People*, reflecting fears and grievances of the population, such as inflation or questions of war and security.

Contrary to expectations derived from the literature on right-wing populist discourse, our findings reveal a more nuanced AfD communication strategy on TikTok: While anti-institutionalist themes slightly dominated the discourse, identity-based narratives were not as prevalent as expected. Instead, the supposed concerns of the people about economic issues, inflation, housing affordability, public safety, individual rights, and freedom of speech were prominent.

Thus, AfD politicians’ communication on TikTok during the EU campaign only partly aligns with the concept of ‘thick populism,’ which combines anti-establishment sentiments with exclusionary rhetoric in favor of a homogenous ‘the people’ (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). The AfD’s frequent attacks on political elites and its anti-institutionalist rhetoric reinforce one another, employing a characteristic populist strategy to delegitimize the dominant political order (Brubaker, 2017). This anti-elitism combines critiques of institutions with efforts to delegitimize political actors and parties, and previous research has shown that it plays a central role in the AfD’s online rhetoric (Vaughan & Heft, 2023; Humprecht et al., 2024). However, the relative absence of identity-based

and exclusionary ‘us versus them’ narratives deviates from the anti pluralist, exclusionary, and stigmatizing claims against ethnic minorities we would expect (Müller, 2016). This is particularly striking because we show that the videos that address these ideologically charged enemy images of *Horizontal Protectionism*, while being posted much less frequently than *Concerns of the People*, result in statistically significantly higher rates of engagement. This further indicates a strategic choice by the AfD to prioritize the concerns of potential voters.

This observation may be attributed to the AfD’s adaptation to TikTok’s audience during the run-up to the 2024 European elections, downplaying or avoiding the public representation of its extremist factions (Klikauer, 2019): AfD politicians not only addressed concerns – and populist ‘grievances’ (Wodak, 2015) – of potential voters but also intertwined these real-world issues with misleading solutions and fear-mongering – in accordance with prevalent populist discursive strategies (Wodak, 2015). The AfD links economic, social, and security concerns with anti-elitism and stigmatization as a populist solution – promoting protectionism against perceived economic, cultural, and securitarian threats (Brubaker, 2017). This is evident, for example, when economic concerns are tied to environmental transformation or when migrants are targeted while simultaneously emphasizing security concerns of ‘the people’ (see Findings RQ1). However, these grievances extend beyond the superficial discontent often targeted by populist rhetoric: Scholars widely recognize that populism involves linking (typically vague) social grievances to anti-elitist populist rhetoric (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). Our research offers a more precise analysis of the grievances as substantial real-world-concerns (e.g., rising costs of living, military and internal security threats).

The findings thus suggest that rhetorical provocation and taboo-breaking – usually couched in identity-based narratives targeting migrants or promoting culture war themes – play a minor role in the AfD’s campaigning, even though these themes seem to resonate with users (see Findings RQ3). The relatively low presence of retrograde, anti-woke, and explicitly anti-migrant content challenges expectations that online provocation serves rightwing populists as a primary means of generating attention (Bösch, 2023; Hillje, 2024). We believe this is a function of the audience addressed on TikTok: young voters, who may resonate with content that reflects their concerns. A Eurobarometer Youth Survey (European Parliament, 2025) revealed that 40% of respondents aged 16–30 identified rising prices and the cost of living as their primary concerns. Additionally, 31% highlighted the economic situation as a key priority, while 21% expressed concerns about the EU’s defense and security. These concerns may not only resonate online but also translate into direct engagement at the voting booths. Moreover, the fact that the German left-wing party *Die Linke* – having expanded its presence on TikTok after EU elections and emphasizing social and economic inequalities – was one of the winners of the German national elections in 2025, further supports this interpretation: Among voters aged 18–24, *Die Linke* and the AfD were by far the most popular parties, receiving 25% and 21% of the vote respectively (State Agency for Civic Education, 2025). Young voters appear to support non-mainstream parties, which are highly visible and – most importantly – address their concerns on social media. Our results may therefore indicate a broader trend extending beyond this election, as the AfD’s messaging remained overwhelmingly focused on national elites and domestic issues, with European elites playing only a marginal role (see Findings RQ1).

This is highly relevant for theoretical conceptualizations within populism research and opens new avenues for future inquiry. The prominence of concerns may be a function of our focus on the AfD party elites, who are more invested in mainstreaming. As Rothut et al. (2024) argue, the strategy of mainstreaming seeks to present far-right ideas in a way that makes them more palatable to the public and compatible with more moderate potential coalition parties. The AfD has built a digital network in which third-party accounts, influencers, and activists successfully form right-wing counterpublics (Hillje, 2024). Future research should account for these fringes of the right-wing (extremist) TikTok sphere, to see whether different types of actors play different roles and disseminate more radical and polarizing content. Additionally, drawing on broader European surveys and recent national elections in Germany, we have demonstrated the importance of broadening the scope of future research to examine other parties' online posts and strategies – particularly in relation to (populist) references to voter concerns – at both the national and European level.

In summary, our findings have important implications for research on the evolving online communication of right-wing populist parties. We find a strategic shift of the AfD towards issues that are more universally relatable to 'concerns of the people' rather than simply attacking national elites (Vaughan & Heft, 2023) or 'playing the algorithm' to polarize and attack imaginary out-groups (Brüggemann & Meyer, 2023). We argued that this temporary sidelining of more radical and anti-democratic positions, while focusing on grievances that are combined with anti-elitism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018), serves to make the AfD appear more palatable and electable to moderate voters (Rothut et al., 2024). However, while these appeals certainly evoke emotions, what we observe goes beyond mere 'victimization' or emotionalization rooted in 'anxiety or fear' (Rothut et al., 2024, p. 55); rather, it speaks to real-world insecurities that provide fertile ground for right-wing populists to capitalize on. We therefore interpret this as the emergence of a third layer of populist discourse, building on entrenched forms of thick populism: established discursive frames that can now be reactivated through subtle cues. Against the backdrop of well-established populist narratives, right-wing actors foreground 'concerns of the people' while omitting or indirectly invoking the exclusionary sentiments characteristic of thick populism. This rhetorical shift toward concern-based appeals warrants further theoretical attention, as it may obscure – but does not eliminate – the extremist tendencies of these actors.

Our results thus call for updated frameworks of a populist online rhetoric that merges anti-institutionalism and out-group attacks with the acknowledgement of real-world concerns of users in an increasingly complex and challenging world. This is particularly important because such populist approaches may allow the AfD to appear moderate and relatable to voters, obscuring its extremist elements. However, concealing extremist agendas during online campaigning does not prevent their implementation once party elites are in power.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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