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# How Political Parties Respond to Pariah Street Protest: The Case of Anti-Corona Mobilisation in Germany

ANNA-SOPHIE HEINZE  and MANÈS WEISSKIRCHER 

How do political parties respond to street protest by political outsiders widely considered to be ‘pariahs’ (i.e. radical or extremist actors)? Bridging the literature on responses to ‘populist’ radical right parties with insights from social movement studies, we propose a theoretical model that conceptualises potential party responses to pariah protest. Innovatively, our typology distinguishes between a set of formal and substantive responses to street mobilisation. Empirically, we apply this model by providing the first systematic study of how political parties have responded to the ‘anti-Corona’ protests of *Querdenken*, contributing to social science research on the politics of the COVID-19 pandemic. Analysing the critical case of Germany, we underline the stark difference between how the populist radical right AfD and all other Bundestag parties respond to anti-Corona mobilisation, showing how political protest may sharpen the polarisation of party politics. Moreover, we highlight the more nuanced but still important differences in responses by established German parties. Theoretically, the article provides an analytical framework valuable in times of increasing street mobilisation by radical and extremist actors. Methodologically, our analysis relies on a systematic media analysis of articles from two major German newspapers. Empirically, it contributes to our understanding of the difficult but crucial relationship between the German protest and party arena during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Introduction

For social movements, both the ‘nature’ of the COVID-19 pandemic and most government’s policy responses have strongly constrained the opportunities for expressing public discontent, reflecting the dilemma between public health protection and the safeguarding of civil rights that has widely shaped the public and political debate. Nevertheless, in several European states, non-violent and at times even violent street protest against the politics of the pandemic emerged (e.g. against the early and strict lockdown policies). Among the countries where such ‘anti-Corona’ protests could draw

on a significant level of followers was Germany. There, a heterogeneous mass of individuals and groups has regularly gathered to question government action (e.g. public health measures such as social distancing and wearing masks or the closing of schools and day-care centres). Some of the protestors also denied the existence of the pandemic altogether. The sharp attacks on the institutions of real-existing democracy, the spread of (racist) conspiracy theories, and the risk for further infections caused by the non-compliance to public health measures by parts of the protestors quickly triggered public attention and made them a particular controversial actor in German politics. Accordingly, German political science and sociology has quickly shown an interest in the motivation and attitudes of ‘anti-Corona’ protestors (Grande et al. 2021; Koos 2021; Nachtwey, Schäfer, and Frei 2020). The question posed by Grande et al. (2021) – ‘Everyone a Covidiot?’<sup>1</sup> – underlines the widespread public assessment of anti-Corona mobilisation as illegitimate social movement activism and ‘pariahs’ in the protest arena and public sphere more generally.

Research on social movements and party politics, however, has been rather silent on responses to *street protest* by political outsiders widely considered to be pariahs, i.e. radical or extremist actors. When discussing response options to pariahs, scholars have strongly focused on the arena of *party politics*, conceptualising some challenger parties as pariahs, defined as ‘someone or some group that is an outcast, despised and avoided by the majority’; ‘ostensibly an untouchable, beyond the pale of political acceptability’ (Downs 2012, 14). As it does not make strong assumptions about the precise ideology of the described actor, the concept serves as a useful label for anti-Corona mobilisation, which includes a quite diverse group of organisers and followers (Grande et al. 2021; Koos 2021; Nachtwey, Schäfer, and Frei 2020). In general, the pariah concept can be applied to various far-left and far-right actors (e.g. anti-immigration, anti-establishment, or anti-EU actors). Sometimes, protestors consider themselves as excluded outsiders, depending on the context (e.g. the LGBT movement in Russia or the early civil rights movements in the United States). The pariah concept, however, has mainly been used to study how established political parties in western Europe deal with ‘populist’ radical right parties (PRRPs) (e.g. Akkerman and Rooduijn 2015; Bale et al. 2010; Downs 2001; Meguid 2005; Van Spanje 2010) rather than street protest.

This article proposes a theoretical model that conceptualises party responses to pariah protest, thus bridging the literature on party responses to PRRPs with insights from social movement studies. The first strand of research has shown how mainstream parties have attempted a variety of approaches of disengagement or exclusion rather than engagement or inclusion (e.g. Downs 2001; Heinze 2018). More generally, mainstream parties’ responses to PRRPs have been marked by trial and error instead of

well-conceived long-term strategies (Heinze 2020, 2022) and have often failed to curb their electoral success (e.g. Fallend and Heinisch 2016). Beyond party competition, another strand of literature has shown a strong interest in whether political parties respond to protest at all (e.g. Hutter and Vliegthart 2018). Only a few scholars, however, have analysed party politicians' responses to radical or extreme social movements (Allchorn 2020). Instead, the focus of scholarly attention has been on countermobilisation by activists (Art 2007; Lundberg 2021; Pedahzur 2003). For a better understanding of party responses to the increasingly important pariah protests, however, it is necessary to combine these two strands of literature. This approach takes the specificities of political parties' interactions with actors in the protest arena, as highlighted in this special issue (Hutter and Weisskircher 2022), into account.

Therefore, our article asks: How have German political parties responded to anti-Corona street protests? In studying the question, we contribute to the literature in two ways: (1) Theoretically, we propose a model that conceptualises potential party responses to pariah protest. Innovatively, our model distinguishes between a set of formal and substantive responses to street mobilisation. (2) Empirically, we apply this model by providing the first systematic study of how political parties have responded to the anti-Corona protests of the *Querdenken* movement, contributing to social movement research on the politics of the COVID-19 pandemic (Borbáth et al. 2021; Pleyers 2020). While *Querdenken* was not the only protest form against the federal governments' COVID measures, it was the street protest with the greatest mobilisation success by far – albeit including a great heterogeneity of positions and attitudes (Grande et al. 2021). Analysing the case of Germany, we underline the stark difference between the responses of all 'established' Bundestag parties and the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD, Alternative for Germany), which is part of the PRRP family (Arzheimer 2019) and itself a pariah in the country's political system (Heinze 2020). In doing so, we demonstrate how protest may further sharpen the polarisation of party politics. Moreover, we highlight the more nuanced, but still important differences in the responses by established German parties. More generally, the question of party responses to anti-Corona protests also matters for our understanding of far-right party-movement interactions, which are particularly important in the case of AfD (Heinze and Weisskircher 2021, see Schroeder et al. 2022 and Weisskircher, Hutter, and Borbáth, 2022, in this special issue).

Methodologically, this article relies on a systematic media analysis. We analyse all articles from the centre-left newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* and from the centre-right newspaper *Die Welt* that cover Bundestag party's responses to *Querdenken* from the emergence of protest in May 2020 to April 2021, the month when the Federal Office for the Protection of the

Constitution started to ‘observe’ the protests. In our empirical analysis, we apply our theoretical model to each party.

Next, we introduce our theoretical model, building on existing literature which we discuss in detail. Then we explain our case selection and outline our methodological approach. Our empirical analysis studies how political parties in Germany have responded to *Querdenken* protests. In the conclusion, we highlight the broader potential of our theoretical model and the implications of our findings more generally.

## How Political Parties Respond to ‘Pariah’ Protest

Developing our typology of how parties respond to pariah protest, we can build on important insights from existing research. So far, scholars of party politics have mainly focused on responses towards PRRPs (Mudde 2007). In general, mainstream party responses are particularly relevant as they may influence PRRPs’ long-term electoral success, more precisely coalition markets, party organisations, political recruitment, and their perceived legitimacy (Art 2007; De Jonge 2021; Minkenberg 2001).

Moreover, research has distinguished, often only implicitly, between responses towards *substantive* demands, i.e. policy positions, and the *formal* treatment of the actors themselves. Scholars have widely studied substantive responses, i.e. how mainstream parties respond to PRRP’s policy positions. Prominently, Meguid (2005) distinguishes between dismissive, accommodative and adversarial strategies, and emphasises the importance of issue salience and ownership as decisive factors for mainstream party’s responses. Her framework has often been taken up and developed further, for example by Bale et al. (2010) differentiating between holding, defusing and adopting. Empirically, these concepts have been used to point to the ‘shift to the right’ of mainstream parties. For example, centre-left parties have been found to adopt more restrictive positions towards multiculturalism when the opinion of party supporters on immigrants becomes more negative or when they have lost more voters in the preceding election than their opponent centre-right party (Han 2015). Moreover, opposition parties have been found to be more likely to shift to more restrictive positions on immigration than government parties (Van Spanje 2010).

Scholars have also studied formal responses towards PRRPs, sometimes not differentiating clearly between substantive and formal ones. Downs’ (2001) well-known typology distinguishes engage and disengage strategies. Here, engagement includes not only the substantive co-optation of policies, but also formal collaboration in the legislative, executive and/or electoral arena. Disengagement includes ignorance and isolation, which is further subdivided into legal restrictions and blocking coalitions. Heinze (2020) differentiates between various response options on the formal level

(exclusion, ad hoc toleration, legislative and executive cooperation) and on the substantive level (ignore, demonise, defuse, debate, adopt). In doing so, she focuses on party responses in the parliamentary arena.

In contrast to responses to PRRPs, only a few scholars have examined responses to far-right street protest. On party responses to street protest in general, Hutter and Vliegthart (2018) study whether and why political parties respond to various media-covered street protests. Importantly, their findings highlight that parties indeed respond to street protests and that they are more likely to do so if they are in opposition and if their competitors have already responded. More specifically, Allchorn (2020) studies how and why UK party politicians and policymakers have responded to anti-Islamic protest. In doing so, he distinguishes between inclusionary and exclusionary responses. Inclusion can be short-term (e.g. adoption, defusing, principled and engagement), medium-term (e.g. intergroup contact, interaction) or long-term (e.g. immunisation), whereas exclusion can be soft (e.g. petitions, motions, media appearances) or hard (e.g. bans, cordon sanitaire, 'no platform' requests, direct action). His findings show that political responses have largely been exclusionary (e.g. calls for proscriptions, bans and protest restrictions), while only some have exhibited a more inclusionary character (engagement and interaction work).

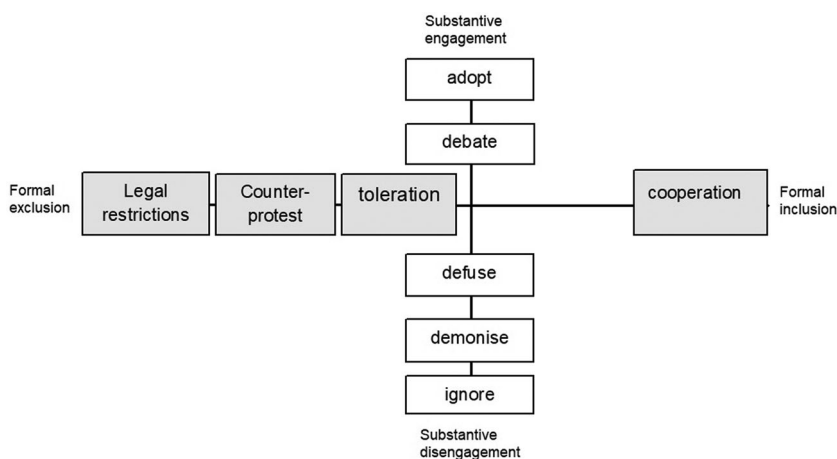
Beyond party responses, Lundberg (2021) studies how civil society organisations (CSOs) in the Swedish town of Ludvika have responded to the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM). He distinguishes between four response options, differing in their degrees of tolerance and political participation: bans (intolerant/passive), protest (intolerant/active), acceptance (tolerant/passive) and dialogue (tolerant/active). Lundberg's findings show that CSOs are generally intolerant of the NRM and have engaged in opposition to it. Notably, responses tend more towards the promotion of dialogue and the public discussion rather than using confrontational tactics. Pedahzur (2003) comes to similar results, examining CSO responses to far-right protestors in the German state of Brandenburg, where the former pushed for strengthening citizens' democratic values and the organisation of community activities.

None of the existing conceptualisations systematizes potential party responses to pariah street protest – even though some response options to parties do not apply to the protest arena (e.g. collaboration in the executive arena), while others are specific to it (e.g. counterprotest). Therefore, we propose a theoretical model that combines insights from the literature discussed to develop a novel typology: First, we incorporate the specificities of the protest arena, allowing for response options not conceptualised in studies focusing on party politics alone. Second, we explicitly distinguish between various formal and substantive response options to pariah protest (following Heinze 2020, 43–54). When political parties deal with protest, they can formally either call for legal restrictions, mobilise to counterprotest,

tolerate the protest, or cooperate with the activists (see [Figure 1](#)). On the substantive level, they can ignore their demands, demonise them, defuse their importance, debate them or adopt individual positions. In the following, we define and specify each response option.

On the formal dimension, calls or attempts for *legal restrictions* are the most exclusionary option available (Downs 2001, 27). Parties can demand the ban of the whole protest group or bans or restrictions of individual events. For example, in January 2020, the neo-Nazi group Combat 2018 was dissolved by the German Ministry of the Interior, which referred to the group's actions violating the constitution and criminal law. Moreover, there are regular debates about a potential ban of the annual February protests by neo-Nazis in Dresden (commemorating the city's destruction in 1945). Even the banning of individual protest events may contribute to the demise of a pariah protest group (Berntzen and Weisskircher 2016). However, banned organisations may not disappear but restructure: Instead of well-organised action groups, with formal membership and internal hierarchies, loosely organised 'circles of friends' may become active (Backes and Mudde 2000, 464). For parties, such non-transparent networks may be even more difficult to deal with (Pedahzur 2003, 66). Moreover, repressing a movement or single protests can also galvanise people to act (Lichbach 1987), for example when they see their protest as a fight for individual freedom (as is the case with many anti-Corona protestors).

*Counterprotest* is a more confrontative response option to pariah protest: Political parties can mobilise counterdemonstrations against pariah protest. Often, counterprotest has been the monopoly of left-wing parties or even



**Figure 1.** Theoretical response options. Legend: grey background = formal level, white = substantive level.

their youth organisations only. Sometimes, as in the case of persistent pariah protests such as the annual February neo-Nazi marches or PEGIDA in Dresden, centrist and centre-right actors also engage in countermobilisation after some time. Its effects, however, are unclear. Some authors argue that broad countermobilisation curtails the rise of pariahs (e.g. Art 2007), others find an opposing effect (Vüllers and Hellmeier 2022), and again others find no effect (Hager et al. 2021).

*Toleration* is the rather neutral acceptance of the right to protest, even for those that are regarded as pariahs. It is a rather passive formal response option that can be attributed to a variety of causes: ‘Silent acceptance’ may reflect a high degree of tolerance based on a missing will to take political action against far-right street protest (Lundberg 2021, 6–7). Toleration may also be based on politicians’ interpretation of ‘democratic responsibility’ (Downs 2001, 29): If they see tolerance towards political opponents as protection of democratic principles, political actors may emphasise the right to freedom of expression and assembly, which they do not want to interfere with (regardless of the demands put forward by the protestors and perhaps even their forms of action). In addition, they may take the view that non-extremist pariahs should be fought politically, that is, for example, through legal counter-protest or debating their claims. At the same time, formal toleration without substantive responses such as demonising or debating (see below) may also imply tacit acceptance or even approval.

A political party can also *cooperate* more actively with a protest group that others regard as pariahs. Such party-movement interactions may allow the party to develop ties into ‘civil society’ or mobilise a base (Borbáth and Hutter 2021; Heinze and Weisskircher 2021; Martin, de Lange, and van der Brug 2020). For example, AfD politicians have frequently sought cooperation with PEGIDA, either by attending protest events or even acting as guest speakers (Weisskircher and Berntzen 2019). Similarly, the Hungarian Jobbik party has been known for particularly close contacts to social movement actors (Pirro et al. 2021). Parties may not only join street protest, but they may also provide resources to pariah protestors such as technical equipment or funding.

Apart from formal responses, political parties can also react substantively to protestors’ claims. First, political parties may decide to *ignore* a pariah protest and not to discuss the protestors at all. At first sight, this ‘do nothing’ approach seems to be an easy way to keep ‘clean hands’ and to deprive the pariah of legitimacy or public attention (Downs 2001, 26). With regard to street protests, this option seems especially easy as parties hardly ever are institutionally required to discuss them. Nevertheless, by just ignoring a pariah, parties risk violating their ‘democratic duties’ in the eyes of their voters (Downs 2001, 26). This is especially the case when street protests gather a certain size and frequency and reach a large media



audience. Moreover, media-savvy pariah actors may shape public debate even when they are small-scale (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2019).

*Demonising* a pariah protest is the decision to portray the actor as extreme, dangerous, irrational, or beyond the pale (Heinze 2020, 51). The key motivation of this stigmatisation is to reduce the legitimacy of the protestors. This may be particularly easy at the beginning, as long as the pariah is not able to attract mass support, either on the streets or in public opinion. Moreover, anti-establishment actors in particular may even benefit from demonisation, in that they can credibly stage themselves as the only true representatives of the will of 'the people'. In addition, public defamation can help strengthen the pariah's issue ownership and thus its support (Meguid 2005).

Parties can also try to *defuse* the importance of an issue put forward by pariah protests, for example by not picking it up and/or actively trying to shift the attention to other issues (Meguid 2005, 349). They are likely to do so when they do not perceive a particular issue as important enough for party competition (Heinze 2020, 52). In the legislative arena, parties might also try to shift public attention away from the issue that dominates the pariah protests, for example, by not introducing motions or holding debates on it. In the extra-parliamentary arena, they may also try to downplay the importance of the protests and portray other issues as more relevant. In doing so, however, parties risk appearing unresponsive and conceding issue ownership to competing (pariah) parties (Bale et al. 2010, 413).

*Debating* is a response that acknowledges the importance of an issue put forward by the protestors, with parties discussing different policy positions. In doing so, they can try to actively counter the pariah by 'exposing' their demands as deficient (Heinze 2020, 53). In addition, they can emphasise the advantages of their own positions and thus try to 'win' the debate. In the extra-parliamentary arena, politicians may do so by simply taking the time to talk directly to protestors locally: The key merit of this kind of engagement is that it might counter anti-establishment sentiments essential for many pariah protestors (Allchorn 2020, 398). In doing so, however, parties risk presenting the issues raised by the protestors as legitimate, regardless of whether they agree with their positions or not. In the long term, debating a new issue can even strengthen its salience, also in electoral competition (Meguid 2005, 349–350).

Finally, political parties can *adopt* positions of the pariah protests. Usually, the goal of such an agenda shift is to focus on the issues that gave rise to protest in the first place (e.g. immigration, environment, COVID-19 policy) and thus win (back) support (Downs 2001, 27). For parties, adopting positions from the protest arena only becomes attractive if they consider a certain issue to be particularly relevant for party competition or hope to gain an electoral advantage from it. However, depending on the parties'

earlier demands, such a ‘policy U-turn’ may also cause them to lose credibility and thus indirectly even strengthen other parties’ issue ownership (Bale et al. 2010, 413; Heinze 2020, 54).

## Case Selection And Methodological Approach

In this study, we analyse the responses of all parties represented in the German Bundestag to the anti-Corona protests of *Querdenken* (lateral thinking). While Corona-related activism does not consist solely of *Querdenken* activities, their protest has had the greatest mobilisation success (Grande et al. 2021, 5–6). Their activities started in south-west Germany (especially in Baden-Württemberg) in spring 2020 and have had a major impact on the protest scene, peaking in large-scale demonstrations in Berlin on August 1 and 29, when protestors ‘stormed’ the steps of the Reichstag building. Due to extremist factions within the *Querdenken* protests, the Office for the Protection of the Constitution has observed regional parts of these since December 2020. Since April 2021, Germany’s secret service has observed these protestors nationwide. In the light of the great media attention as well as the quick and harsh responses by state institutions, it can be assumed that all parties felt pressure to position themselves in some way to *Querdenken*. Thus, unlike all other, looser, more temporary and more specific COVID-19-related protests (e.g. individual actions by artists), *Querdenken* is most likely to be considered a critical case (Snow 2004) allowing for theory development such as our typology.

*Querdenken* quickly developed into the dominant player behind the anti-Corona protests in Germany. Grande et al. (2021, 3–6) distinguish between three waves: Already the beginning of the first lockdown in mid-March 2020 saw different protest forms against the government measures. These included silent actions like setting up chairs in public places (as a protest against the closure of restaurants), online petitions, and street protest, which was initially banned and later allowed under restrictive conditions. Among these early street protestors were already the first *Querdenken* groups. This first wave peaked in mid-May. In summer, the first mass demonstration of the *Querdenken* started a second phase of mobilisation, peaking in August. In late fall, another lockdown triggered the third wave. In all these waves, a wide range of actors was mobilised. Especially in the second wave, when (protest) gatherings were no longer banned in principle, their activities dominated the protest arena.

Survey data shows that the Corona protest in Germany has a considerable, relatively stable ‘mobilisation potential’ that is socially heterogeneous and ideologically diffuse (Grande et al. 2021, 3; see also Nachtwey, Schäfer, and Frei 2020, 51–52). While Grande et al. (2021, 15) find that more than sixty per cent of sympathisers (not necessarily protestors) see themselves in the

political centre, the political extremes (especially on the right) are strongly represented. 12.5 per cent locate themselves on the extreme fringe, most of them (7.5 per cent) on the extreme right.<sup>2</sup> A large proportion does not feel represented by the established parties of the political centre and is generally suspicious of the state and its institutions. Since parts of this ‘distrustful middle’ is prone to conspiracy theories, Grande et al. (2021, 3) see ‘considerable potential for further political radicalisation’ (see also Nachtwey, Schäfer, and Frei 2020, 21–24, 54; and Koos 2021, 7–8).

Methodologically, our study of party responses to *Querdenken* relies on a systematic media analysis with the help of Factiva. We use articles from the centre-left newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* ( $N = 407$ , excluding duplicate articles) and from the centre-right newspaper *Die Welt* ( $N = 681$ ). A preliminary search showed that both newspapers were among those with the most intensive coverage of the protests. Our search query included the party name and ‘Querdenke\*’ as well as at least one of the terms ‘protest\*’ and ‘demonstra\*’. We included the Bundestag parties CDU ( $N = 203$ ), SPD ( $N = 299$ ), Greens ( $N = 128$ ), Die Linke ( $N = 188$ ), FDP ( $N = 64$ ) and AfD ( $N = 206$ ), but not the CSU, as the latter is only a regional party that forms a parliamentary group with the CDU in the Bundestag. The time span of our analysis was March 1st 2020 until April 30th 2021, two days after the Office for the Protection of the Constitution announced the nationwide observation of *Querdenken*.

In the empirical analysis, we apply our theoretical concepts to the responses reported and provide focused qualitative summaries for the responses of each party (similar to Heinze 2018, 2020). For our qualitative exploration of party responses to the protestors, we focus on the most important political actors of each party and their responses on key events, such as the August 2020 Berlin demonstration, and remain sensitive for overtime changes. To improve intercoder reliability, both authors analysed the articles independently, cross-checked afterwards, and discussed ambivalent cases. We have a database of all articles collected, marked with the key words from our queries, and those referred to in the empirical section available upon request.

## **Empirical Analysis: Party Responses to Anti-Corona Protests in Germany**

### ***Party Responses towards Querdenken: An Overview***

All Bundestag parties responded actively to the *Querdenken* protests, underlining the empirical importance of the case under study. In doing so, they significantly differed in their responses (see Tables 1 and 2). Our analysis reveals (1) stark differences between the responses of the dominant wing of AfD and all other Bundestag parties to the anti-Corona protestors,

**Table 1.** Summary of party responses towards *Querdenken* protests at the formal level.

	Legal restrictions	counterprotest	tolerate	cooperate
CDU	<b>Yes</b>	No	<b>Yes</b>	No
SPD	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	No
Greens	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	No
Left	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>	No
FDP	<b>Yes</b>	No	<b>Yes</b>	No
AfD (dominant wing)	No	No	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>

**Table 2.** Party responses towards *Querdenken* protests at the substantive level.

	ignore	demonise	Defuse	debate	adopt
CDU	No	<b>Yes</b>	No	<b>Yes</b>	No
SPD	No	<b>Yes</b>	No	<b>Yes</b>	No
Greens	No	<b>Yes</b>	No	<b>Yes</b>	No
Left	No	<b>Yes</b>	No	<b>Yes</b>	No
FDP	No	<b>Yes</b>	No	<b>Yes</b>	No
AfD (dominant wing)	No	<b>Yes</b>	No	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Yes</b>

underlining how political protest may sharpen the polarisation of party politics. All parties except AfD have engaged in *demonising* the *Querdenken* protests, emphasising in particular features such as right-wing extremism and the spread of conspiracy theory, but also the delegitimation of state institutions, (calls for) violence, and the risk of infection – pointing to these threats posed by the protestors quickly became a common response of all parties but the AfD. Moreover, they refused to *adopt* the claims made by the protestors, even if they differed in their willingness to *debate* them. Not so the most vocal parts of AfD, which *cooperated* with *Querdenken* and *adopted* their claims. In addition, we find (2) more nuanced but still important differences in the responses of the established German parties, for example in their willingness to support *counterprotest*. In the following, we present our findings in more detail.

### ***Individual Party Responses on the Formal and Substantive Level***

At the formal level, CDU, then senior government member, largely responded with *toleration* towards the *Querdenken* protestors, not in favour of banning demonstrations, especially in the early phase of the protests. After the first gross violations of public health measures, leading CDU politicians such as minister of health Jens Spahn emphasised the importance of the freedom of expression and the freedom of assembly, but also maintained that protestors had to respect public health measures (Die Welt, 01.08.2020, 09.08.2020). After the ‘storming’ of the steps of the Reichstag, such appeals continued: Bundestag President Wolfgang Schäuble, for example, emphasised the limits of the right to demonstrate when ‘legal

requirements are deliberately violated or, as at the Reichstag building, the state's monopoly on violence is attacked', hinting at the option of *legal restrictions* (Der Tagesspiegel, 30.08.2020). Correspondingly, as time went on, CDU increasingly emphasised that demonstrations should be broken up if public health measures were violated (Der Tagesspiegel, 17.03.2021; Die Welt, 08.12.2020).

At the substantive level, CDU mainly pursued a *debate* strategy, emphasising that citizens' concerns had to be taken seriously. Prominently, in May 2020, Saxony's minister president Michael Kretschmer visited a demonstration in Dresden to defend government's COVID-19 policies in front of hundreds of protestors (Die Welt, 16.05.2020). Months later, even when thirty demonstrators gathered in front of his private home, Kretschmer discussed their concerns for about twenty minutes (Der Tagesspiegel, 10.01.2021). In general, there were 'red lines' for the CDU's *debate* strategy, for example, when their politicians faced threats (e.g. Karin Maag, MP in the Bundestag and the party's spokesperson for health, was put on a 'death list') (Der Tagesspiegel, 28.04.2021). Given the increasing radicalisation of the *Querdenken* protests, CDU politicians did not only respond with *debating*, but also with *demonising* the protestors: already in the early stage of mobilisation, some of the party's key figures warned that right-wing extremists and conspiracy supporters were among the protestors and may instrumentalise the demonstrations (Der Tagesspiegel, 13.05.2020, 18.05.2020; Die Welt, 15.05.2020). Later, Baden-Württemberg's Interior Minister Thomas Strobl described extremist conspiracy myths at *Querdenken* as 'highly dangerous' (Der Tagesspiegel, 09.12.2020). After riots in Dresden in March 2021, Saxony's Secretary General Alexander Dierks claimed that the *Querdenken* protestors were showing their 'true colours', implying a general tendency of violence among the demonstrators (Der Tagesspiegel, 13.03.2021).

Unlike its grand coalition partner, SPD relied more heavily on *legal restrictions* at the formal level. For example, SPD politicians repeatedly emphasised the high value of freedom of assembly but *tolerated* the *Querdenken* protests only as long as they complied with public health measures (Die Welt, 31.07.2020). Some SPD politicians (e.g. federal party chair Saskia Esken and minister of justice Christine Lambrecht) even called for stricter measures against rule violations (Der Tagesspiegel, 30.08.2020; Die Welt, 03.08.2020, 19.11.2020). Others went further and attempted a ban on a demonstration in Berlin – a decision driven by mayor Michael Müller and the formally responsible state minister of the interior Andreas Geisel (Der Tagesspiegel, 26.08.2020). Geisel justified this stance with the infection risk, adding that he did not want to accept 'that Berlin is abused as a stage for Corona deniers, Reich citizens and right-wing extremists' (Die Welt, 26.08.2020). However, the ban was overturned by the administrative court. After repeated riots at *Querdenken* protests in various German cities, numerous SPD

politicians (e.g. Geisel and state minister for the interior in Lower Saxony Boris Pistorius) supported a surveillance of *Querdenken* by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution in early December 2020 (Der Tagesspiegel, 09.12.2020; Die Welt, 06.12.2020). In addition, the SPD also supported some *counterprotests*, especially at the local level: in Berlin, the party called for participation in a counterdemonstration (Die Welt, 01.08.2020) and in Düsseldorf, the mayor himself took part in one (Die Welt, 20.09.2020).

At the substantive level, the SPD pursued a mixture of *debate* and *demonise*. For example, Lambrecht emphasised that it was necessary to better explain why their actions were not a matter of taking away freedoms, but of valuing health and life (Die Welt, 10.05.2020). In addition, SPD politicians repeatedly emphasised that there were not only extremists or Reich citizens among the *Querdenken* protestors, and that politicians had to remain in dialogue (Die Welt, 16.11.2020, 27.11.2020). In practice, however, many SPD politicians also *demonised Querdenken* by using strong rhetoric. For example, Hamburg Senator of the Interior Andy Grote called the demonstrations a ‘pretty murky broth’ (Die Welt, 13.05.2020) and Foreign Minister Heiko Maas referred to Reich flags in front of the parliament as ‘shameful’ (Der Tagesspiegel, 30.08.2020). Most famously, Saskia Esken referred to the protestors in Berlin as ‘covidiot’ (Die Welt, 01.08.2020), coining a term that shaped public debate on the protests. Moreover, the Saxon Minister of Economics, Martin Dulig, thanked the counterprotestors ‘for peaceful protest against Corona deniers, egoists and democracy despisers’ (Die Welt, 22.11.2020).

Similar to the SPD, the Greens *tolerated* the *Querdenken* protests in principle, but mainly called for *legal restrictions* at the formal level. For example, party co-chair Robert Habeck called the freedom of assembly ‘a high good’ but stressed that the freedom of others and the functioning of the health care system must also be protected (Die Welt, 08.11.2020). Other Green politicians (e.g. Bundestag group co-leader Anton Hofreiter) expressed understanding for peaceful demonstrations in general, but not if they violated public health measures (Die Welt, 19.11.2020). After the riots at *Querdenken* demonstrations, numerous regional Green politicians (e.g. Uli Sckerl and Valentin Lippmann, both members of state parliaments) demanded a consistent crackdown on violations of public health rules (Die Welt, 22.11.2020, 25.11.2020). In addition, there were early calls for banning demonstrations, for example, by the Berlin member of parliament Benedikt Lux and, somewhat more cautiously, the party co-chair Annalena Baerbock, calling for ‘militant democracy’ (Die Welt, 27.08.2020). Baerbock argued: ‘When flags of the German Reich fly in front of the Reichstag, it is not an expression of the freedom of speech, but an attack on our democracy. And it must be able to defend itself’ (Der Tagesspiegel, 30.08.2020). Some Green politicians (e.g. Sckerl) were also early supporters of a potential

surveillance of *Querdenken* by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Die Welt, 03.12.2020). Therefore, similar to SPD, the Greens were particularly hostile to the protests. In some cases, Green politicians also called for *counterprotest* at the local level (Der Tagesspiegel, 04.11.2020; Die Welt, 04.03.2021).

At the substantive level, the Greens presented themselves as open to *debate*, but at the same time *demonised* the protestors. For example, local Munich politician Dominik Krause portrayed criticism of the Corona measures as legitimate but linked the protests already in their early stage to ‘extreme-right’ thought and conspiracy theory (Die Welt, 11.05.2020). More often, however, the Greens strongly condemned participation in *Querdenken* demonstrations, describing it already in May 2020 as an act ‘against responsibility for the health of all of us’ (Anja Siegesmund, minister for the environment in Thuringia; Die Welt, 10.05.2020) and the riots at the protests as ‘a slap in the face’ (Manne Lucha, minister of health in Baden-Württemberg; Die Welt, 04.04.2021).

Like the other parties in the left camp, the Left Party also pursued a combination of *legal restrictions* and *toleration* at the formal level, although it tended to focus on the latter. Thus, Left politicians repeatedly emphasised the fundamental right to freedom of assembly, the restriction of which must always be justified on a case-by-case basis (Der Tagesspiegel, 26.08.2020, 07.12.2020). At the same time, Left politicians stressed that protestors had to comply with public health measures and called for a police crackdown in cases of violations (Die Welt, 08.11.2020, 22.11.2020). Thuringia’s Prime Minister Bodo Ramelow strongly criticised *Querdenken* protestors for not wearing masks, pointing at the high risk of infection (Die Welt, 13.12.2020). In addition, Left politicians emphasised that the right of assembly and public health were ‘compatible’, also referring to previous cases of left-wing demonstrations (Die Welt, 30.04.2021). In some cases, they also called for *counterprotest* ‘within sight and sound’ against *Querdenken* (Der Tagesspiegel, 26.08.2020).

At the substantive level, the Left mainly *demonised* the *Querdenken* protests, but partly also showed itself open to *debate*. For example, party co-leader Katja Kipping referred to the demonstration in Berlin as a ‘call for ruthlessness’ (Die Welt, 02.08.2020). Ulla Jelpke, a member of the Bundestag, spoke of ‘ticking time bombs’ with regard to the *Querdenken* movement, highlighting the participation of Reich citizens (Die Welt, 13.10.2020). Ramelow also portrayed the increasingly radical Corona protests as a ‘threat to domestic affairs’ and even a precursor to terrorism (Der Tagesspiegel, 29.10.2020). According to him, many of the protestors were ‘very dangerous’ and their actions ‘simply merciless’. Despite all this, some Left politicians spoke out in favour of a *debate* strategy, such as Sahra Wagenknecht, who is disputed inside the party. She warned: ‘There are millions



of people who quite rightly criticise the government's mismanagement and feel abandoned by it. [...] Many participants in the big demonstrations were not conspiracy ideologues or right-wing extremists, but ordinary citizens whose concerns should be taken seriously' (Die Welt, 31.01.2021).

Compared to the previous parties, FDP has discussed the *Querdenken* demonstrations slightly differently. At the formal level, FDP has long been a strong proponent of *toleration*. During the controversy over the major Berlin protest in August 2020, leading FDP figures rejected efforts of banning *Querdenken* protests. Sebastian Czaja, leader of the FDP parliamentary group in Berlin, argued that 'As much as I am opposed to the content, I do not see sufficient justification for the ban', which is a 'very tough interference with basic rights' (Die Welt, 27.08.2020). Instead, the party has argued for the importance of both the freedom to assemble and public health measures (Der Tagesspiegel, 28.08.2020). After the Berlin government's planned ban was reversed by the Higher Administrative Court, FDP politicians welcomed the decision to allow the protests. Wolfgang Kubicki argued that Germany's 'liberal-democratic basis order also endures extremist positions, without agreeing to them' (Der Tagesspiegel, 28.08.2020). However, the party's toleration had one important limit: after the large-scale non-compliance to public health measures, FDP politicians frequently called for a dissolution of ongoing protests in case masks are not worn and minimum distance is not maintained (Die Welt, 08.11.2020, 15.11.2020, 21.03.2021). At the same time, despite its *toleration*, FDP leadership has clearly rejected *cooperation* with the protests: when Thomas Kemmerich attended an anti-Corona demonstration in May 2020, he received strong criticism by fellow party members, including calls for his resignation (Der Tagesspiegel, 10.05.2021, 12.05.2021).

At the substantive level, the FDP has mostly responded with *demonisation* of anti-Corona mobilisation. Benjamin Strasser, Member of the Bundestag, expressed this clearly: 'The obvious radicalisation spiral of *Querdenken* has no longer anything to do with normal, democratic protest. From the ranks of this group calls for a storm on freely elected parliaments, threats and violence against state institutions were made' (Die Welt, 09.12.2020). Nico Weinmann was among the FDP politicians who called for a 'careful eye' of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution on the protest (Die Welt, 03.12.2020). However, FDP have also maintained that there are non-extremists among the protestors (Die Welt, 25.11.2020, 03.12.2020). At some points, FDP politicians also indicated their willingness to *debate* the demonstrators. Karoline Preisler, a local politician, became particularly prominent in this regard: after a harsh COVID-19 infection, she started to visit *Querdenken* demonstrations, trying to convince participants of the potential danger of a virus infection, while highlighting her rejection of the ideological stances of many protestors (Der Tagesspiegel, 30.05.2021).



Crucially, AfD stands out: The party includes the most vocal sympathisers of the *Querdenken* protestors. At the formal level, parts of AfD have *cooperated* with them in various ways: AfD politicians have not only called for participation at *Querdenken* protests (Der Tagesspiegel, 30.04.2021), including recommendations by Tino Chrupalla or Björn Höcke (Der Tagesspiegel, 24.08.2020, 28.12.2020), but have attended demonstrations themselves (Der Tagesspiegel, 02.08.2020; Die Welt, 16.05.2020, 11.02.2021). This has included MPs such as Stephan Brandner (Die Welt, 21.04.2021) and Karsten Hilse (Der Tagesspiegel, 23.11.2020). Some AfD politicians have even acted as guest speakers (Der Tagesspiegel, 20.04.2021). Correspondingly, AfD politicians also strongly criticised an intended ban of demonstrations (Der Tagesspiegel, 26.08.2020) and restrictions to the freedom of assembly (Die Welt, 11.11.2020). Moreover, in November 2020, individual AfD MPs also invited *Querdenken* activists to the Bundestag, where the latter harassed MPs from other parties (Die Welt, 19.11.2020). Public gestures have further symbolised a cooperative stance towards *Querdenken*: For example, MP Karsten Hilse wore a *Querdenken* shirt in the Bundestag (Der Tagesspiegel, 15.11.2020). However, some parts of AfD have been very rejective of these forms of cooperation: Co-spokesperson Jörg Meuthen, who has increasingly lost internal support, dismissed ‘movement-party’ strategies and cooperation with *Querdenken* (Die Welt, 10.01.2021).

These differences become clearest at the substantive level: Substantively, many AfD politicians have identified their party as ‘parliamentary arm’ of the protests, *adopting* claims of the protestors. When AfD called for an immediate end of the third lockdown and merely voluntary health measures, Jörg Urban emphasised that ‘[E]very demonstrator, every government critic is a potential AfD voter. AfD also belongs to the demonstrators on the streets’ (Die Welt, 10.04.2021). At the same time, AfD politicians have been quite critical of government responses to the pandemic right from the start, organising their own protests, especially in the early stage of the pandemic, parallel to the rise of *Querdenken* (Der Tagesspiegel, 10.05.2020, 12.05.2020, 15.05.2020). AfD has thus not only adopted *Querdenken* claims, but at the same time moved in a similar direction. However, parts of the party also responded with *demonisation* in their assessments of *Querdenken*: Meuthen referred to them as ‘bizarre’, holding ‘partially openly anti-systematic positions’ (Die Welt, 29.11.2020).

## Discussion

Importantly, and not a matter of course when it comes to political protest, all parties felt the need to respond to *Querdenken*: *ignoring* and *defusing* were not part of the variety of responses shown by Bundestag parties. Given the

high public attention to the protestors, mobilising on the dominant political issue, German parties did not consider it feasible to *ignore Querdenken* mobilisation.

The striking differences between the dominant flank of AfD and all other parties show that party responses to pariah protest reflect the polarisation of party politics. Moreover, protest may further sharpen polarisation in German party competition: The *cooperation* of parts of AfD with *Querdenken* has been strongly criticised by all other parties, including accusations of extremism and calls for (further) surveillance by German intelligence services. The November 2020 incident in the Bundestag, when some AfD MPs invited *Querdenken* activists to the facilities, who then harassed MPs from other parties, serves as a symbol for how *Querdenken* further increased polarisation. In addition, it fuels the anti-elitist ‘populist’ logic of AfD mobilisation, which has thus again found an issue that distinguishes it in the arena of party competition.

At the same time, the *Querdenken* protests also reflected and intensified the differences within the AfD over its own goals and strategies. From the beginning, party figures held different views over party-movement cooperation: Movement-oriented figures see the AfD as the voice of other far-right organisations and regularly stage demonstrations; institutionalists are interested in legislative work, also to prepare the party to become a potential coalition partner (Heinze and Weisskircher 2021; Schroeder et al. 2017). This internal divide, which runs through the entire party, is crucial for understanding its controversies over the extent of cooperation with street protests, as already seen with PEGIDA (see Weisskircher et al. 2022 in this special issue). The responses to *Querdenken* show once again that parts of the AfD are willing not only to support protestors who delegitimise democratic institutions, but also to march with them – and that they constitute particular vocal voices inside the party.

Beyond AfD, however, we also emphasise the more nuanced but still important differences in the responses of the established parties. Importantly, this relates primarily to the question of demands for *legal restrictions* – which were raised most loudly by the SPD and the Greens. The Left, FDP and CDU were more cautious, placing greater emphasis on the freedom of assembly and calling for bans only in cases of violations of public health measures. The centre-left parties were most inclined to *ban* protests and to mobilise for *counterprotests*.

As our discussion of established party responses indicates, there were also differences in prioritisation *within* them. For example, as mentioned, Saxon minister president Kretschmer saw the need for a temporary *debate* approach in the context of relatively strong *Querdenken* mobilisation in his state, leading SPD Berlin figures called for *legal restrictions* because the city was a hotspot of protest, and an individual FDP politician regularly

attended *counterprotest*. This variation must be understood in the context of their heterogeneity, also because of Germany's federalism: Parties are not homogenous actors, but consist of different positions, wings and subunits that face quite different subnational contexts or may have, to some extent, different political preferences. Also, events over time matter: After the August 2020 protest at the steps of the Reichstag, calls for *legal restrictions* became louder. Therefore, even if not strongly internally divided such as AfD, also mainstream parties never pursue uniform 'strategies' towards new pariahs (Heinze 2020, 2022).

## Conclusion

In this article, we contributed to the literature in two ways: Theoretically, we proposed a model that conceptualises party responses to pariah protest. Empirically, we applied this model by providing the first systematic study of how German Bundestag parties have responded to the *Querdenken* protests.

First, we proposed a theoretical model to classify party responses to pariah protest on a formal and a substantive dimension, building on the literature on party responses to the populist radical right and on insights from social movement studies. This framework has proven to be a powerful one for analysing the different response options available. By differentiating between more than just a limited number of alternatives (e.g. inclusion and exclusion), it is possible to identify the nuanced and important differences between party responses.

When analysing the case of *Querdenken* in Germany, we have found the strongest differences between AfD and all other parties: It was only AfD politicians that cooperated with *Querdenken* and adopted their demands. This behaviour alone has further increased the hostility between AfD and its competitors, boosting polarisation in the Bundestag. Mainstream parties could now refer to AfD support for *Querdenken* to argue why they did not consider the AfD as a legitimate political actor.

Our study also hints at the increasing importance of (far-right) party-movement interactions more generally (see Gheyle and Rone 2022, Schroeder et al. 2022, and Weisskircher et al. 2022 in this special issue). While AfD has not been able to increase electoral support because of its proximity to *Querdenken*, the perhaps more important long-term question is to what extent such an approach is contributing to the party's radicalisation. It remains to be seen whether anti-Corona protests reinforce existing strategies of populist radical right parties to cooperate with street actors. This relationship is also important beyond German politics. In Austria, for example, leading FPÖ politicians have also strongly cooperated with anti-Corona protestors and adopted some of their claims.

Future studies should study the effectiveness of party responses to *Querdenken* and pariah protests more generally. Which responses curb or boost the mobilisation success of pariah protestors or their impact on the public debate? Moreover, we need to investigate the motivations of party politicians: What explains their responses to protestors? To what extent do ideological proximity, government participation, and long-term strategies about interactions which civil society matter? Ultimately, while we introduce our conceptual framework in the context of extensive debates on responses to pariahs, it may also prove useful for systematising party responses to protests more generally. Given the importance of street protest in contemporary Europe, from pariahs to moderate actors (e.g. Giugni and Grasso 2019; Caiani and Císař 2019), it is a crucial task to further study party responses to them.

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## Notes

1. Most prominently, SPD co-leader Saskia Esken brought the term into the national public debate.

2. In terms of party identification, a quarter (25.8 per cent) of protest supporters count themselves as AfD supporters. This share has risen over time, while it has fallen for the CDU (from 14 per cent in July to 7.8 per cent in November 2020). Thus, Grande et al. find significantly higher values for the AfD than Koos (2021, 8) and Nachtwey, Schäfer, and Frei (2020, 10) who have surveyed *Querdenken* street protestors. However, they also note that more than one-third (34.5 per cent) would not vote for any of the parties represented in the Bundestag. In another survey of the parties' electorates, Grande et al. (2021, 17–18) find the greatest understanding for the Corona protests among AfD (51.5 per cent in November 2020), but also the FDP voters (24.1 per cent). Among sympathisers of other parties, understanding of anti-Corona mobilisation is relatively low and tends to decline over time (especially for the CDU).

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