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the Alternative for Germany and its school policy positions

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This article analyses the school policy positions of the party Alternative for Germany (AfD). Using the federal state of Thuringia as an example, three election manifestos (2014, 2019, 2024) and one position paper are analysed through qualitative content analysis. The AfD Thuringia advocates in favour of maintaining and expanding a differentiated and structured school system, including the retention of special schools for pupils with special educational needs. Gender-appropriate language, Islamic education, and sexual education in nurseries and primary schools are rejected. The AfD Thuringia also promotes a strong focus on performance and elites within the school system. Considering various documents from the last 10 years, the AfD Thuringia has experienced a radicalisation of its school policy positions.

Keywords: Alternative for Germany, Germany, policy arguments, right-wing populism, school policy

The Alternative for Germany (AfD), founded as a party in 2013 and represented in the Bundestag, Germany's national parliament, since the 2017 election (re-elected in September 2021), is characterised as a right-wing populist party (e.g., Heinze, 2022; Lewandowsky, 2022; Pfahl-Traughber, 2019) and, in the research literature, also as an extreme right-wing party (Bauer & Fiedler, 2021; Tottmann, 2022). Additionally, the AfD and its youth organisation are being monitored by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (BfV, 2022). By summer 2024, the party is represented in the state parliaments of 14 out of 16 federal states, with the exceptions of Schleswig-Holstein (since the May 2022 election) and Bremen (since the May 2023 election). Thematic issues of the *British Educational Research Journal* (Hussain & Yunus, 2021), *Globalization, Societies and Education* (Nestore & Robertson, 2022), *European Educational Research Journal* (Piattoeva et al., 2023), and *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* (Giudici et al., 2024) address the influence of right-wing populist parties and movements on education policy. These thematic issues contain analyses of education policy in a wide range of countries, but do not include the AfD in Germany.[1] Even though the AfD remains in opposition in all federal states and is not a coalition partner in any government, it is not powerless as an opposition party. For instance, the AfD employs the instruments of minor and major interpellations in parliaments more frequently than other parties, which the governments must respond to (Bereswil et al., 2021). Furthermore, the AfD has chaired the education committees in some federal states, allowing it to influence which topics are placed on the agenda. For example, the AfD frequently submits motions aimed at cutting funding for youth work projects, particularly those focused on preventing extremism and providing sex education in schools (Hafeneger et al., 2021). The AfD has also repeatedly campaigned for a neutrality requirement in schools, which has led to uncertainty among teachers. Teachers are increasingly reluctant to critically examine right-wing extremism in the classroom (Hafeneger & Jestädt, 2022).

In the article, the AfD's school policy argumentation patterns are examined regarding their topics, strategies, and justifications on educational goals and school organisation (Helbig & Nikolai, 2015; Meyer, 2021). As the AfD is strongly represented in the parliaments of the eastern German states, we analyse the school policy positions in Thuringia as one eastern German state association of the AfD. Since school policy in Germany is not regulated at the national level but rather lies within the competencies of the federal states, the positions of the state associations must be considered when analysing the school policy positions of German parties. We have chosen the federal state of Thuringia for this purpose, as the Thuringian AfD has repeatedly attracted national attention in recent years. Two events are cited as examples: Firstly, in February 2020, FDP politician Thomas Kemmerich was elected as prime minister of Thuringia with the votes of the AfD (Debes, 2021). The AfD's electoral cooperation with the Christian conservative CDU and the liberal FDP was seen nationwide as a "breach of taboo" and caused a government crisis in Thuringia. As a result, Thomas Kemmerich resigned, and Bodo Ramelow from the Left Party was elected as the new prime minister of Thuringia. Secondly, in August 2023, a television interview with Björn Höcke, the leader of the AfD parliamentary group in Thuringia since 2014 (Tottmann, 2022), attracted nationwide attention. In the interview, he criticised inclusion in school policy as an "ideological product" and called for the retention of special schools for children with special educational needs (Feuser & Maschke, 2023). Within the AfD, the Thuringian parliamentary group leader Björn Höcke is considered one of the most powerful figures and as a member of the extreme far-right. He is regarded as a right-wing extremist because, to name but a few reasons, he trivialises Nazi crimes, maintains links to right-wing extremist groups and individuals, and makes xenophobic and racist statements (Tottmann, 2022). The AfD Thuringia won the 2019 elections with 23.4% of the votes and is the second-strongest parliamentary group in the Thuringian state parliament. The next elections for the Thuringian state parliament will take place on September 1, 2024. According to current election polls (as of June 2024), the AfD could even win the election in Thuringia (infratest dimap, 2024). In the European elections in June 2024, the AfD Thuringia already won the most votes with around a third of the Thuringian electoral votes (Die Bundeswahlleiterin, 2024).

We analyse the following political documents in this article: In addition to the AfD's election manifestos for the Thuringian state parliament (AfD TH, 2014, 2019, 2024), we examine an education policy position paper published in 2017 by the AfD parliamentary group in the Thuringian state parliament (AfD LT TH, 2017). By considering documents from the last 10 years, it is possible to determine whether the AfD Thuringia's positions on school policy have remained the same or changed. Our analyses are based on the following research question: *What are the AfD's school policy positions in Thuringia, and what are the arguments for these positions?* For many right-wing parties, education plays a central role in their narratives (Giudici et al., 2024) as they question the "Western consensus on liberal education" (Oelkers, 2018, p. 735, own translation). However, "educational researchers have relatively little knowledge about the educational ideas, intentions and strategies of this socially and politically relevant actor" (Giudici, 2021a, own translation; see also Giudici, 2021b, pp. 122–123). From an educational science perspective, it is necessary to be sensitive to the anti-liberal and democracy-threatening arguments of right-wing parties in school politics and to be familiar with their reasoning. Nevertheless, since there have been hardly any analyses of the AfD's education policy in Germany to date (with the exception of youth policy, Hafeneger et al., 2021), and certainly not of school policy, it is essential to first elucidate the AfD's positions on school policy. We do this in this article by analysing election programmes and education policy papers, which we evaluate using qualitative content analysis.

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, we explain our research dimensions and discuss policy

positions on school organisation (school structure, control of access, lesson content) and educational understanding. We then analyse the selected documents along these dimensions. The article concludes with a summary and an outlook on the need for further research.

Research Dimensions: Policy Ideas on School Organisation (School Structure, Control of Access, Lesson Content) and Educational Understanding

Election manifestos are a suitable source for analysing political positions on school policy. In these manifestos, parties describe their short- and medium-term substantive goals (based on their basic programmes). According to Hepp (2011), state parliament election programmes capture "the essence of education policy profile issues" (p. 68, own translation). The basic ideological patterns of parties are reflected in election manifestos to mobilise their members and associated milieus. According to Nikolai and Rothe (2013), "the parties' different values and images of humanity, which lead to diverging understandings of the state and society, are clearer in these programmes than in other party documents" (p. 550, own translation).

To understand the policy ideas in school politics, we consider the content dimension: We analyse (1) the *educational understanding* (Meyer, 2021) and (2) in line with Helbig and Nikolai (2015), *policy ideas on school organisation* (school structure, control of access, lesson content).

(1) The dimension of *educational understanding* includes educational goals and the understanding of justice in school policy (Meyer, 2021), which, according to Nikolai and Rothe (2013), is reflected in the concepts of equality of condition and equality of opportunity. In the case of equality of opportunity, "students from different backgrounds should have the same chances of achieving a certain (target) status under the condition of equal performance" (Saur & Nikolai, 2024, p. 393), whereas equality of condition "includes the demand that all children are supported in such a way that they have the same chances to reach a certain (target) status (e.g., university entrance qualification), regardless of their origin" (Saur & Nikolai, 2024, p. 393).

(2) The ideas of political parties regarding their educational understanding influence their positions in the field of *school organisation* (school structure (2.1), control of access (2.2), lesson content (2.3)) (Helbig & Nikolai, 2015; Saur & Nikolai, 2024).

2.1. The *school structure* dimension refers to how educational programmes should be differentiated. The school system in Germany is known for its segregation (Nikolai, 2019). While comprehensive school systems were introduced in many European countries after the Second World War (Wiborg, 2009), the German school system still adheres to its division of pupils after four years of primary school (except for the six-year primary school in Berlin and Brandenburg). Although many federal states have merged individual school types in the last two decades, such as the *Hauptschule* (in some federal stated named as *Mittelschule*) and *Realschule* (sometimes also including the *Gesamtschule* as a comprehensive school), the *Gymnasium* as the grammar school still exists as an independent school type in all federal states, meaning that the idea of assigning and dividing children to different educational programmes at an early stage of their educational career is still upheld today (Helbig & Nikolai, 2015). The dimension of school structure includes, for example, ideas on the duration of primary school, the structure of the secondary school level, options for integrating school types, and whether the Abitur can be taken at non-grammar school types in two-tier school systems.

2.2. The dimension of *access control* illustrates how the access to secondary school forms following

the primary school should be regulated and whether a primary school recommendation and fixed grades should be mandatory for attending the *Gymnasium*. This dimension also includes arguments regarding the existence of central examinations, the timing of grade retention in primary schools, and whether work and social behaviour should be recorded in grades (Helbig & Nikolai, 2015).

2.3. The dimension of *lesson content* refers to the question of how curricula should be designed in terms of content. Exemplary of this is the question of whether curricula should also include subjects such as philosophy, economics, or social studies, as well as the importance attached to democracy education, sex education, and the thematisation of LGBTQIA+ issues. This dimension also reflects ideas regarding language support in schools for children with a migration background, as well as support for children with special educational needs.

This article's area of focus is school policy, as this is one of the AfD's main issues in education policy (Hafeneger et al., 2021). To reconstruct the AfD's school policy ideas in political documents, the article analyses the patterns of reasoning, highlighting the AfD's concepts through specific words and motifs. First, the school policy positions are analysed based on the dimension of educational understanding, with a focus on the idea of qualifying and selective performance. Then, the dimension of school organisation is examined, which includes political ideas about school structure, access control, and teaching content.

Analyses of Political Documents in Thuringia

The election manifestos (AfD TH, 2014, 2019, 2024) and the education policy position paper (AfD LT TH, 2017) were analysed using a combination of structuring and inductive content analysis (Mayring, 2022). With this methodological approach, texts can be categorised and coded to elucidate the parties' arguments.

(1) Policy Ideas on Educational Understanding: Emphasis on the Idea of Qualifying and Selective Performance

While centre-left and centre-right parties advocate redistributive effects of formal education in schools (Giudici et al., 2024), this is not relevant for right-wing parties; they favour the principle of meritocratic appointment: AfD Thuringia's focus is on learning goals rather than on competencies. The AfD demands that the performance principle should be enforced (AfD TH, 2024, p. 36). The party argues that schools have a selection function and should promote the individual talents of pupils. The AfD assigns responsibility for educational success to individual pupils. The "development of their talents […] is the task of each individual" (AfD TH, 2014, p. 9, own translation). Based on Meyer's (2021) definition of equality of opportunity in school systems, this statement legitimises inequalities. According to the AfD, pupils themselves are responsible for their learning success, and it is not the school that should compensate for existing inequalities through measures. Parents also have a duty in this regard: "Parents bear responsibility for their children" (AfD TH, 2014, p. 9, own translation). Right-wing populists reject state intervention in family and school education, asserting the right to raise their children themselves and viewing the mother's role as central to education (Nikolai & Feldengut, Forthcoming). The AfD election manifestos do not address the integration function of schools (see Fend, 2008) but argue that schools are primarily tasked with qualifying and selecting according to competencies. To acclimatise pupils "to the performance orientation of our society at an early age" (AfD LT TH, 2017, p. 37, own translation), the AfD sets out specific requirements for the school structure, control of access to school forms, and lesson content. It is striking that in the dimension of educational understanding, the AfD

Thuringia emphasises the role of parents more strongly in its 2019 election manifesto (AfD TH, 2019), while this is not mentioned in the latest election manifesto from 2024 (AfD TH, 2024). However, across all three election manifestos (AfD TH, 2014, 2019, 2024), the performance principle is placed above the integration function of schools.

(2) Policy Ideas on School Organisation

2.1. School Structure and Differentiation According to Interests, Talents and Performance

The AfD Thuringia assumes that "low-performing pupils often hinder the learning of higher-performing pupils" (AfD LT TH, 2017, p. 43, own translation). Therefore, the AfD Thuringia is in favour of a "differentiated and structured school system" (AfD TH, 2024, p. 31, own translation; see also AfD TH, 2019, p. 27) and prefers a "school system differentiated according to individual talents," as this would "fulfil the respective abilities of pupils" (AfD TH, 2019, p. 27, own translation; see also AfD TH, 2024, p. 31). According to the AfD Thuringia, "homogeneous learning groups would provide a particularly favourable development environment for pupils' learning" (AfD LT TH, 2017, p. 39, own translation). The aim of AfD school policy is that "every child should be able to develop their talents in the best possible way, according to its abilities" (AfD TH, 2019, p. 27, own translation). The *Gymnasium* should remain an elite school and prepare students for higher education (AfD, 2024, p. 31). However, it should be noted that other parties, such as the Christian Democratic Party, also advocate a differentiated school system (Nikolai & Rothe, 2013). What constitutes an extreme position is that the party rejects measures to specifically support children with a migration background in schools or advocates that disadvantage compensations should be listed in certificates (AfD TH, 2024, pp. 36, 38).

The AfD rejects the expansion of the *Gymnasium*, fearing an academic precariat (AfD TH, 2024, p. 32). A supposed "academization mania" (AfD TH, 2024, p. 32, own translation) should be stopped. As a non-grammar school type in Thuringia, the *Regelschule* has the task of preparing pupils for vocational education and training and should remain the central school type. The AfD Thuringia rejects the promotion of the *Gemeinschaftsschule* (which involves joint learning from grade 1 to 12) and even wants to withdraw it (AfD TH, 2019, p. 27). However, this demand is no longer included in the current 2024 election manifesto, although it does assert that the *Regelschule* should be the "heart" (AfD TH, 2024, p. 31, own translation) of the school system in Thuringia. The party also advocates for financial support for private schools as well as the maintenance and expansion of special schools for pupils with special educational needs. According to the party, this would promote the diversity of educational pathways. Inclusion should not be implemented across all schools. The AfD Thuringia contends that children with learning difficulties due to a disability receive "appropriate support" (AfD TH, 2024, p. 32, own translation) and care at special schools. Additionally, parents should have the right to send their children to a special school (AfD TH, 2019, p. 28; AfD TH, 2024, p. 32). According to our interpretation, the AfD Thuringia views inclusion not as promoting the right to education for all children, but as hindering the learning progress of children without special educational needs. The AfD Thuringia's demand for a structured school system, including the retention of special schools, is also maintained in the latest election programme from 2024 (AfD TH, 2024). This aligns with the educational perspective already identified, according to which the AfD Thuringia favours the idea of achievement over the integration function of schools.

2.2. Access Control and the Importance of Grading and Class Repetition

In all three election manifestos (AfD TH, 2014, 2019, 2024) and in its education policy paper (AfD LT TH, 2017), the AfD stresses the importance of grading and grade repetition for controlling who

gets into which type of school. The party is in favour of maintaining "performance-based grading" (AfD LT TH, 2017, p. 42, own translation), as it argues that grades are objective and performance-based, independent of origin. According to the AfD Thuringia, access to secondary schools, especially grammar schools, should only be possible if the grades from primary schools suggest this. In its programmes, the party advocates the retention of grades in primary schools (AfD TH, 2024, p. 36). It argues that grades "acclimatise pupils to the performance-orientation of our society at an early age" (AfD LT TH, 2017, p. 37, own translation) and provide them with "clear feedback on the quality of their performance" (AfD TH, 2024, p. 36, own translation).

The AfD Thuringia further justifies grades by arguing that they promote independent learning and support the intrinsic motivation of children, as well as being important for group dynamics and fostering competition among pupils. In its advocacy for grades, including for behaviour, cooperation, and order, the AfD aims to promote the so-called secondary virtues such as diligence, punctuality, and a sense of order (AfD TH, 2024, p. 31). The AfD Thuringia would also like to retain class repetitions, as they are seen "as a necessity for the development of personal maturity in the sense of a second chance" (AfD TH, 2014, p. 11, own translation; see also AfD TH, 2024, p. 36). Promotion decisions should therefore be made every school year (AfD TH, 2024, p. 36).

2.3. Lesson Contents and the Rejection of Sex Education in Primary Schools, Gender and Political Neutrality of Schools, as well as the Promotion of Practical Skills

The AfD Thuringia also expresses its views on lesson content in its programmes. It rejects sex education as an "early sexualisation" (AfD TH, 2024, p. 35, own translation; see also AfD TH, 2019, p. 23) in kindergartens and primary schools (AfD TH, 2014, p. 11). The AfD Thuringia sees early sex education lessons as a "deep intrusion into children's natural sense of shame and individual privacy" (AfD LT TH, 2017, p. 36, own translation). In addition, the AfD perceives this as an "eroticisation of children," which should be "not the task of public educational institutions" (AfD LT TH, 2017, p. 36, own translation). The AfD Thuringia also rejects gender-neutral teaching. As the AfD argues that "gender is not a construct, but a biological fact" (AfD LT TH, 2017, p. 35, own translation), it denies gender diversity. Measures such as "gender mainstreaming" or the use of gender-neutral language in schools are rejected as "socio-political re-education measures" (AfD TH, 2014, p. 11, own translation; see also AfD TH, 2024, p. 35) and characterised as ideologically motivated. Likewise, the discussion of different sexual orientations and various family forms in the classroom is rejected (AfD LT TH, 2017, p. 37). Analyses of the AfD's positions indicate that family and gender policy issues play a strong role and that these are generally based on a binary gender model (Nikolai & Feldengut, Forthcoming). Addressing homosexuality or sexuality in general in the classroom is seen as harmful to children and young people (Oldemeier, 2021) and is often interpreted as child endangerment (Nikolai & Feldengut, Forthcoming).

In its recent election manifesto, the AfD also demands that lessons should be politically neutral. The aim is to avoid "one-sided political indoctrination and influence, through which certain political views or parties are disparaged or discussed in an unobjective manner" (AfD TH, 2024, p. 30) in schools. This demand is absent from earlier election manifestos (AfD TH, 2014, 2019) and is probably to be understood as a reaction to the fact that teachers are increasingly being asked to stand up for the democratic order in classrooms and to reflect on right-wing ideas with their pupils (GEW, 2024). In several federal states, the AfD has attempted to set up online portals where parents and pupils could complain about teachers. These portals have so far been banned by the courts but have left teachers feeling insecure (Hentges & Lösch, 2021).

The AfD Thuringia is in favour of strengthening practical teaching content in schools (e.g., home economics lessons, woodworking, metalworking, electrical engineering, etc.). This is intended to counteract an alleged overly theoretical orientation (AfD TH, 2019, p. 27). In its latest election manifesto (AfD TH, 2024, p. 42), the AfD in Thuringia advocates a return to training teachers for primary education and teachers for the *Regelschule* at teacher training colleges. This would remove the training of these teachers from the university context and make it more practice-oriented. Critics view such a demand as a deprofessionalisation of teachers and a two-tier training system (TL, 2023). As Giudici et al. (2024) pointed out, right-wing parties "promote […] practical rather academic skills." This may also be related to the anti-science attitude that is attributed to the AfD (Rüther, 2023).

Summary and Outlook

Using the example of election manifestos and an education policy programme of the Thuringian state association, we were able to show in the article that the AfD Thuringia is committed to strengthening and maintaining a differentiated school system that limits access to grammar schools. As Giudici et al. (2024) have already pointed out, right-wing parties are "less supportive of expanding access" and do not frame education "as a means of redistributing opportunities." The AfD Thuringia declares the qualification and selection of pupils as the core functions of schools while ignoring the aspect of integration. This contradicts Fend's tasks of schools (Fend, 2008), according to which schools have three functions: qualification, selection, and integration. According to the AfD, it is not the task of schools to support pupils regardless of their social and/or migration background or special educational needs, but to assist them within homogeneous learning groups. The AfD Thuringia favours the expansion of practical content in schools and strengthening vocational orientation to encourage more pupils to pursue vocational training and fewer to attend university. This is consistent with the analyses by Berg et al. (2023), according to which right-wing parties "emphasize practical rather than academic skills" (p. 23; see also Giudici et al., 2024). While the positions on school structure can be classified as moderate and are, in part, also represented by other parties (Nikolai & Rothe, 2013; Saur & Nikolai, 2024), the positions on teaching content, on the other hand, can be classified as extreme. Sex education that begins in kindergarten or primary schools is rejected, and political neutrality in schools is also demanded. Gender neutrality in teaching and the thematisation of different sexual orientations and family models beyond the heteronormative nuclear family image are rejected. These positions in school policy align with analyses by Bereswil et al. (2021) on the parliamentary practice of the AfD, which discredits gender research at universities and rejects the use of gender-neutral language. The AfD also frames its school policy demands as a cultural crusade against progressive-liberal values, manifesting in a strong advocacy of "traditional gender roles and a critical position to LGBTQI[A+]-related issues on the curriculum" (Berg et al., 2023, p. 10; see also Akkerman, 2015).

Overall, there have been no changes in the content of the positions on the understanding of education and school organisation over time in the three election manifestos. However, the detail of the statements on school policy has changed. While the chapter on education policy in the 2014 election manifesto still had five pages (AfD TH, 2014), the current 2024 election manifesto has 17 pages, and the school policy positions are explained in more detail. Many of the positions outlined here – for example, the party's meritocratic understanding of justice, its stance on class repetition and grades, or its interpretation of the political neutrality of schools – should be further analysed in light of current pedagogical findings and ethical considerations. Our analyses focused on the Thuringian state association within the AfD, which is characterised in the literature as extremely

right-wing populist. It would be interesting to analyse the school policy positions of other AfD state associations. However, to be able to make differentiated analyses of the school policy positions of the AfD, further analyses should also be carried out, for example based on parliamentary debates or posts on social media (Gawert & Saur, forthcoming).

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