



## **Democratic Dilemmas: Dealing with *Alternative für Deutschland* and *Vox España***

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The recent events in Germany whereby CDU, FDP and AfD voted together to confirm Thomas Kemmerich (FDP) as Premier of the State of Thuringia, the subsequent uproar (particularly in the CDU, but also in the SPD) and resignation of Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer as head of the CDU have sharply thrown into focus some of the difficulties arising from a situation in which a party with significant voting support and members in all the state parliaments and the Bundestag is deemed unacceptable in any sort of alliance. In fact, at the federal level AfD is the third party in terms of percentage of the vote (2017: 12.6 %), and in Brandenburg, Saxony and Thuringia it is the second (2019: 23.5%, 27.5%, 23.4 %, respectively. These are the highest levels anywhere in Germany).

In Spain there is a counterpart to the AfD, Vox España. The similarities in the positions and aims of the two parties are detailed in Gould 2019b. Basically, they are nationalist authoritarian parties holding conservative, or even reactionary, views of society, national identity and culture, together with opposition to immigration and with open scepticism about the EU. However, there is no evidence that such scepticism is the decisive factor in voter support for the party (Dijkstra et al 2019).<sup>2</sup> In addition, AfD urges a larger role for referenda in lawmaking and a consequent reduction of the role of parliamentary-style democracy.

In the elections on 2 December 2018 for the parliament of the autonomous region of Andalusia Vox obtained 10.97 % of the vote. In the national elections of 28 April 2019 it achieved 12.26%, and in the elections of 10 November 2019 this rose to 15.09 %, putting the party in third place with 52 seats out of 350. As mentioned, in the Bundestag, AfD is also in third place with 12.6% of the *Zweitstimmen* and 89 seats out of a total of 709.

In Andalusia, the current Partido Popular (conservative and Catholic) premier of the autonomous region was confirmed in office in January 2019 with the support of the votes of the 12 Vox members after a written agreement on policy measures between the two parties had been negotiated and signed (Gould 2019a; Ferreira 2019). Similarly, on 26 July 2019 the PP candidate for Premier of Murcia was confirmed with Vox votes after the PP and Cs had accepted a comparable agreement (Mármol 2019), as also happened in the Community of Madrid on 14 August 2019 (Mateo 2019).

In the *Cortes Generales* of Spain, the national parliament, a practice of erecting a *cordon sanitaire* around Vox is currently in place, approved by the leading parties, PSOE (Partido socialista obrero español, centre-left) and the PP, and without protest from the other, smaller, parties of various stripes. Vox has been denied any chair of any committee or any position of responsibility or authority in the workings of the lower house, the *Congreso de los Diputados* (Casqueiro 2020a; 2020b). But as noted above, this stands in contrast to Andalusia, the Community of Madrid (NOT

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<sup>2</sup> In a very large analysis of voting patterns, Dijkstra, Poelman and Rodríguez Pose (2019) recently demonstrated that deindustrialisation, lagging wage levels and a less educated work-force are decisive factors in anti-EU voting.

the national government) and Murcia where the coalition Partido Popular and Ciudadanos (centre-right) governments were created by, and continue to exist with, the explicit support of Vox.

This commentary now wishes to make two points: 1) can the exclusion or attempted marginalisation of these parties be effective in reducing their appeal? and 2) how long can the exclusion or attempted marginalisation continue?

Both AfD and Vox play an active and full role in parliamentary and committee debates, extra-parliamentary debates, public appearances, and electronic communication of all types. They are not excluded from the political or public scene; but, depending on the rules and functioning of their respective legislatures at the national or sub-national level, they are being excluded from at least some positions of direct responsibility and authority.

There is ongoing debate on the reasons for voter support of AfD. An overview of some scholarly analyses is given in Gould (2019b). These appear to be divided broadly into two groups: social/identitarian reasons or economic factors. Voter support for Vox is still being explored. However, the detailed study by Ortiz Barquero (2019) on the 2018 vote in Andalusia suggests that in that election Vox support increased with income level and that a simple “loser of globalisation” hypothesis cannot be sustained. Rather, it is particular Spanish factors, including the Catalan question, which are more dominant. The range of voters for Vox across the social spectrum, from the unemployed in the provinces to comfortably-off madrileños, is made clear in the recent article published in *El País*, the newspaper of record in Spain. The survey may not be scholarly, but it certainly is serious and revealing (Abril 2020).

However, whatever the reasons for such right-wing voter support, and these may even be volatile and thus exploitable by an agile party on the far right, it appears unlikely that the attractiveness and attraction of Vox or AfD will be reduced by the process of exclusion currently underway.

As indicated, attempts of different types are being made to exclude Vox and AfD from positions of direct influence within political structures. But the nature of the two societies in which they exist is such that there is no impediment to the diffusion of their ideas by print, broadcast and electronic media. The values which the traditional parties wish to defend militate strongly against any such restriction. In addition, the exclusionary practices by the established parties are purely obstructionist and in themselves do not provide any counter-arguments to specific or general AfD or Vox positions. Nor do such practices add any positive arguments in favour of the type of politics or society the established parties support. In the Spanish case, there is even evidence to think that, faced with a strong and vocal rival on the right, the PP is being pushed both in its language and its practices to take up positions closer to those of Vox (Junquera 2020).

Clearly, the current practices of exclusion, containment, or obstruction are thought to be beneficial for the established party or parties supporting such practices, as also for the respective country. The strength of the counter-reactions in Germany to the CDU and AfD voting together in Thuringia in the way that the PP, C's and Vox did in Andalusia, Madrid and Murcia, makes clear that the SPD and CDU/CSU are convinced both that they already have voter support for their rejection and that in this way they may even increase voter support.

But the question remains, is this exclusion self-defeating? As pointed out in Gould 2019b, in the views of AfD and Vox (and consequently of many of their supporters), neither the established political parties nor the existing political practices are working to the advantage of nation and country. Although there is less support so far in some German states and some Spanish autonomous regions, in other areas and nationally, between roughly 11% and 27% of voters at various levels feel themselves disregarded, ignored, or hold the view that their personal identity and / or situation within national identity is being significantly endangered by the incompetence of the traditional parties of right and left. For the AfD and Vox, then, one can argue that this exclusion is a gift. The practice can certainly be viewed or presented as showing clearly that established parties are indeed not interested in them. Jörg Meuthen, Federal Spokesperson for AfD made exactly this point on 18 February 2020 on Twitter, "Selbstgerechte Scheindemokraten rätseln: Politische Quarantäne für AfD-Wähler?" ("Self-righteous fake democrats are wondering: Political quarantine for AfD voters?").<sup>3</sup>

The question is also exacerbated by the fragmentation occurring in political landscapes: there are now six parties represented in the *Bundestag* (seven if you count CDU and CSU as separate entities), and up to twenty-three (depending on how the counting is done) parties organised into ten parliamentary groups in the *Congreso de los Diputados*. Simply put, this means that single-party majority governments are now largely a thing of the past: minority governments or coalitions are likely to be the norm. And as has been seen in both countries, the formation of coalition governments has become difficult. In Spain this has already led to the situation in Andalusia, the Community of Madrid and Murcia of a conservative and Catholic party (PP) accepting Vox support for the election of a premier in return for political concessions. It led also to the subsequently disavowed Thuringian attempt, three and a half months after the elections of 27 October 2019, to form a government under an FDP premier with the help of CDU and AfD votes; it led also to the equally contested proposal reached on February 21<sup>st</sup> for the CDU to vote with FDP, SPD, Greens and Die Linke (as a descendent of the ruling communist party of the one-time German Democratic Republic hitherto considered totally beyond the pale for any alliance with the CDU), to confirm Bodo Ramelow of Die Linke as premier and exclude AfD from any political alliance (Locke 2020). The extreme disagreement between the federal and state levels of the CDU underlines the fundamental questions: for both practical reasons and for considerations of

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<sup>3</sup> Viewed 21 February 2020.

democratic representation, how long can, how long should, at what levels of government and to what ends can the policy of exclusion be maintained?

There is no easy, simple, or single answer to these questions. But, clearly, neither AfD nor Vox is going to go away. The factors pushing voters towards such parties remain: population movements, European political and economic integration, economic globalisation, and trends towards cultural change or even cultural homogenisation often viewed and presented as cultural loss or cultural decadence. Attempting to ignore or banish parties which have clearly perceived this and which are acting astutely is not a positive response. And, as I have suggested above, it might even be what these parties want, demonstrating, they argue, that the current political format does not work.

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