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How the populist radical right exploits crisis: comparing the role of proximity in the COVID-19 and refugee crises in Germany

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ABSTRACT

This article studies the conditions required by populist radical right actors to convincingly create a sense of crisis. The article draws on the literature on political blame games and policy feedback to argue that it is not only the salience of an event that determines its 'populist exploitability', but also its proximity to mass publics – or more simply, how directly and closely it affects citizens. In the study, Moffitt's stepwise model of populist crisis performance is extended and expectations are formulated regarding how the proximity of an event influences the various steps of crisis performance. The article then tests this theoretical argument with a within-unit analysis of the crisis performance of a populist radical right party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD), during the refugee crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis suggests that the pandemic's proximity to people's daily lives narrowed and complicated the AfD's crisis performance in important ways. The article sheds light on the determinants of the success of populist radical right parties and nuances our understanding of the broader relationship between populism and crisis.

KEYWORDS Populism; populist radical right; crisis; blame games; proximity

Populists tend to benefit from crises. A state of crisis provides populist actors with the opportunity to nurture public disaffection with the political status-quo. This is why populists do not stand idly by until a crisis occurs, but actively seek to create a sense of crisis through carefully crafted statements and performances (Moffitt 2015, 2016). Populists usually start from a salient event that some actors perceive as a failure and,

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through a series of rhetorical steps, frame this event as a crisis manifesting the flaws of the current system and its ruling elites (and in the case of the populist radical right, Others such as minority groups or refugees), who are seen as letting down or actively antagonising ‘the people’. Crisis performance is thus an important part of the populist toolkit. However, research has yet to systematically study the conditions that populist actors require to convincingly create a sense of crisis. As has recently become clear during the COVID-19 pandemic – a very salient and prolonged public health emergency (Boin *et al.*, 2020) – populist actors across the ideological spectrum in many countries struggled to capitalise on this event successfully, often failing to turn widespread frustration with governmental crisis management into higher approval ratings (e.g. Bayerlein and Metten 2022; Bobba and Hubé 2021; Boda 2021; Brubaker 2021; Lehmann and Zehnter 2022; Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart 2022; Wondreys and Mudde 2022).

To supplement this gap in the literature, this article draws on research on political blame games and policy feedback to identify and theorise determinants of populist crisis performance (Hansson 2018; Hinterleitner 2020; Hood 2011; Mettler and SoRelle 2014; Pierson 1993; Rochefort and Cobb 1994), with a particular focus on the populist radical right (PRR). We argue that it is not only the salience of an event that determines its ‘populist exploitability’, but also its proximity with regard to mass publics (Soss and Schram 2007). In this regard, we distinguish between distant and proximate events. *Distant events* do not affect citizens in their daily lives, and are largely perceived and experienced through media coverage rather than in any ‘immediate’ way. This distance opens space for populists to simplify and distort the event in question and frame it as a crisis emblematic of the flaws of the ruling order and its representatives. *Proximate events*, on the contrary, affect all citizens directly. As a result, citizens are more familiar with the intricate complexities and the many trade-offs involved in addressing these events, which in turn narrows the space for populist crisis performance as populists are required to more substantially engage with a complex and messy reality. We incorporate this theoretical argument into populism research by extending Moffitt’s (2015) stepwise model of populist crisis performance, formulating expectations on how the proximity of an event influences the various steps of crisis performance. In doing so, we adopt a performative-discursive understanding of populism (see Moffitt 2020; Ostiguy *et al.* 2021), specifically using Moffitt’s (2016) definition of populism as a ‘a political style that features an appeal to “the people” versus “the elite”, “bad manners” and the performance of crisis, breakdown or threat’ (2016: 45) to ensure conceptual uniformity, with the latter component understandably our focus.

We take this broader argument about populism and test it in regards to the specific populist party subtype of the PRR. Namely, we undertake a within-unit analysis of the crisis performance of one of Europe's most prominent PRR parties of recent years: Germany's Alternative for Germany (AfD) during the refugee crisis (a distant event) and the COVID-19 crisis (a proximate event). The qualitative content analysis and comparison of 425 systematically coded AfD press releases suggests that the pandemic's presence in citizen's daily lives required the AfD to engage with a complex reality and the intricacies of crisis management more thoroughly than during the comparatively more distant refugee crisis. Indeed, during the COVID-19 crisis, the AfD made fewer references to other alleged government failures during this period. Moreover, it struggled to come up with a coherent crisis narrative and with bold and simplistic policy alternatives during the COVID-19 crisis as opposed to the refugee crisis.

By exploring these mechanisms behind crisis performance in an instrumental case study (Stake 1995) of the AfD, our findings contribute to the literature by identifying potentially novel determinants of the success of PRR parties. In this regard, the article specifically contributes to the body of work on the 'supply side' of PRR parties – while others have focused on factors such as party organisation (Heinisch and Mazzoleni 2016), party leadership (Art 2011) or political opportunity structures (Arzheimer and Carter 2006), our empirical focus on the role of proximity and distance opens new pathways for analysis. Moreover, our article provides a framework which can be used to test whether such mechanisms apply in other cases of the PRR, and indeed, populist parties more broadly, in the name of seeking more generalisable and universal knowledge about how crisis empirically operates under populism. This is particularly pertinent in a context in which it has frequently been claimed that we live in an age of permanent crisis (e.g. Webber 2019); a development that would seemingly provide populists with an ideal environment for their brand of politics. Our analysis nuances this claim by providing an explanation for why not all types of crises benefit populists equally. In doing so, we answer the call by leading scholars to bring new (i.e. hitherto neglected) theories and perspectives to bear on the study of populism, suggesting that this operation can indeed further push the knowledge boundaries of a well-developed research program (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2018).

The article is structured as follows. The first part zooms in on the relationship between populism and crisis and presents Moffitt's model of populist crisis performance as the ideal starting point for systematically theorising the determinants of crisis performance. The second, theoretical part enriches this model with insights from blame game and policy feedback research in order to advance expectations on how the 'issue

characteristics' – namely its proximity – of a specific event influence its populist exploitability. The third part expands on the case selection, explaining why we focus on the PRR; why the AfD is a suitable PRR party to study; why the German context is of interest; the data used; and the method employed. The empirical analysis walks readers through crisis performances of the 'refugee crisis' and the COVID-19 crisis side-by-side and in the order of Moffitt's stepwise model to make differences visible and clearly assess the role of proximity in the underlying events. The final two parts assess the limitations and implications of the presented findings.

Motivations and research gap

While populism research generally agrees that populism emerges and flourishes in the context of crisis situations (e.g. Mudde 2004; Stavrakakis *et al.* 2018), there is disagreement on whether crisis is a necessary *precondition* for populism to succeed. On one hand, there are both theorists and empiricists who argue that populism cannot emerge without crisis, with Laclau (2005), Mouffe (2005) and Kriesi (2018) all arguing that political crisis – or more precisely, a crisis of representation – is a prerequisite for the success of populist actors. Indeed, this has become a clear narrative in the academic literature, with numerous books published in recent years linking populism and crisis in their titles (see, for example, Fitzi *et al.* [2018]; Howell and Moe [2020]; Kapferer and Theodossopoulos [2022]; and Pappas [2014]). On the other side, there are prominent authors who are more sceptical of the causal link between crisis and populism. Rovira Kaltwasser (2012: 186), for example, argues that a causal link between the two can only be postulated if populism is seen as a pathology of the democratic system – in other words, proving 'causality' here requires the adoption of a particular normative view of populism as a distinct problem for democracy. Mudde (2007: 205) and Knight (1998) also question this link, but on the basis that that 'crisis' is usually an ill-defined term and thus offers only limited explanatory power. Finally, there are those who outright reject the link between crisis and populism, on the basis of the empirical fact that populism can also emerge in 'non-crisis' times (Arditi 2007), something that has become more evident over the past decades as populists have moved from being seen as exceptional, and instead increasingly become integrated into party systems across the globe – something that has particularly been evident for the populist radical right in the European context (Zulianello 2020).

Although there is disagreement across these positions, they are all united by a sense that populism and crisis are discrete and separate phenomena – that is, the idea that crisis is *external* to populism. Moffitt (2015: 195), however, is arguably the first author to explicitly critique and

problematise this perception in an in-depth manner, emphasising that populists do not merely *react* to an external crisis but actively *create* and propagate a sense of crisis through the ‘spectacularization’ of failure. Creating or performing a sense of crisis, he argues, is inherent to populism: it allows populists to pit ‘the people’ against those responsible for the crisis, to call for the simplification of political processes, and to demonstrate strong leadership (Moffitt 2015: 198). In making this argument, Moffitt draws on Hay (1995), who theorises crises as social constructions of an underlying systemic failure, which can be of various kinds: a failure of the financial system, for example, or of politics, or of public policy, or of democracy and so on. Crises therefore cannot be separated from the words and variables actors use to describe and react to them – they do not exist ‘objectively’, so to speak, but must be constructed and systematically perceived *as* crises. From this, Moffitt argues that populists elevate a systemic failure to the level of a perceived crisis through their crisis performance, and proposes a six-step model that captures and categorises the performative statements populists make for this purpose, and explains the purposes of each of these steps. This model has become a mainstay in research treating populism as a ‘political style’ (see, e.g. Bobba and Hubé 2021; Stavrakakis *et al.* 2018).

In step one of the model, populists identify a failure and generate attention for it. This is usually easier when the identified failure is salient and has already attracted a certain amount of public and political attention. In step two, populists raise the failure to the level of a crisis by inserting it into a moral and structural framework of other perceived failures (through so called ‘equivalential chains’, as per Laclau [2005]), thus creating the impression that the failure is symptomatic of a larger problem and needs urgent fixing through strong and assertive policies. In step three, populists emphasise the distinction between ‘the people’ and those responsible for the crisis – ‘the elite’, and in the case of the populist radical right, associated Others, thus constructing clear lines between in-groups and out-groups on the basis of the crisis. In step four, populists use media (such as press conferences, online media and radio and television show appearances) and events (such as marches, meetings and demonstrations) to generate broader attention for their crisis performance and to build the sense that there is urgent public ‘demand’ for the crisis to be solved. In step five, populists present themselves as strong leaders who know how to solve the crisis, for example by offering simple solutions to it, while also portraying established politicians and parties as incompetent and useless. In the final step of the model, populists try to maintain the sense of crisis they have created by expanding its purview or by identifying another one.

While this model offers a very crisp description of populist crisis performance, it remains rather agnostic on the question of *why* populists are

more or less successful in performing a specific crisis. The only ‘enabling factor’ that is explicitly mentioned is the salience of the underlying failure, which facilitates its identification as well as the subsequent crisis performance steps (e.g. a sociocultural ‘failure’ may prove more salient for the PRR, while a socioeconomic ‘failure’ may favour the populist left). Another enabling factor could be that the media jumps on the bandwagon and avidly covers populists’ crisis performance, thereby helping them to create the impression that the ‘entire people’ shares a sense of crisis (see step four, above). However, strong media attention is usually guaranteed as long as populists’ statements are sufficiently controversial and inflammatory (which is often the case) – as both democratic watchdogs and scandalisation machines, media actors duly cover the norm violations of populist actors (Allern and Sikorski 2018; Hinterleitner and Sager 2023).

And yet, populists sometimes struggle to effectively perform a crisis. As several researchers have observed, populist opposition actors in many countries struggled to dominate the agenda during the COVID-19 pandemic and turn widespread frustration with governmental crisis management into higher approval ratings (see e.g. Bayerlein and Metten 2022; Bobba and Hubé 2021b; Boda, 2021; Brubaker 2021; Lehmann and Zehnter 2022; Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2022; Wondreys and Mudde 2022). This is clearly surprising from the perspective of Moffitt’s model, given that the COVID-19 pandemic constituted a very salient and prolonged public health emergency (Boin *et al.* 2020) that provided populists with ample opportunities to pit an intrusive and overprotective government under the spell of expertise against a suffering people (Brubaker 2021), as well as in the case of the PRR, to blame ‘foreigners’ or China for the crisis given the disease emerged from there. While one could argue that the media simply did not have the time or space to cover populists’ statements and actions as making sense of the information deluge of the unfolding pandemic took priority (thus constricting the possibilities for step four of Moffitt’s model above), research on media coverage during the first phase of the pandemic suggests that the ‘crowding out’ of populist crisis performance through other forms of pandemic-related coverage was unlikely. Most of the articles published on the pandemic in eleven countries were highly negatively polarised and sensational, thus providing ample room for unconventional and provocative populist statements (Krawczyk *et al.* 2021). In light of this, we argue that there are hitherto unaccounted factors that determine the success of populist exploitability of a crisis event, and propose that the distance/proximity of the underlying failure is one such factor. The next section draws on blame game and policy feedback research to systematically develop this argument.

Theory

The literature on political blame games provides important clues on why some controversial events are easier to perform and politically exploit than others. Blame games are a peculiar subset of political contestation that consist of series of interactions between ‘blame makers’ and ‘blame takers’ that develop around controversial issues (Hansson 2018; Hood 2011). These issues can range from cases of private misconduct (such as corruption) to government decisions that deliberately impose losses on constituents (such as pension cuts) to policy failures and government blunders (Hinterleitner 2020). Blame games have also been described as language games during which government and opposition actors engage in a framing contest to assign and reject blame and to convince the public of their own interpretation of and position towards a controversial event (Boin, ‘t Hart, and McConnell 2009; Hansson 2018). While the government usually tries to downplay the severity of an event or deflect responsibility for it (Hinterleitner *et al.* 2023), the opposition seeks to turn a controversial event into a venerable crisis or scandal and use it to damage the reputation of the government (Hinterleitner 2023).

Political blame games and instances of populist crisis performance share important similarities. For one, they have a very *similar starting point*: a controversial decision or (in)action that can be perceived as a kind of failure and that is rhetorically and performatively elevated to a crisis or scandal by opponents. Moreover, both populists and opposition actors in a blame game *pursue similar goals*. They try to damage the reputation of the government (or those seen as ‘the elite’) and draw the public on their side (Hansson 2018). Finally, both populists and blame makers primarily *use rhetorical and discursive strategies* to reach these goals. They often grossly inflate a controversial event and exaggerate the government or ‘the elite’s’ responsibility for it by strategically emphasising some aspects while downplaying others.

Research on blame games and their consequences suggests that the ‘issue characteristics’ of a controversial event importantly determine opposition actors’ success in turning that event into a venerable political crisis or scandal. Issue characteristics are ‘constructs that opponents and incumbents can accentuate and exploit in order to persuade the public of their interpretation of a controversy’ (Hinterleitner 2020: 33). This finding draws on insights from policy feedback theory and literature on problem construction, which shows that the public care about government decisions and political events in differentiated ways and to varying degrees (e.g. Mettler and SoRelle 2014; Pierson 1993; Rochefort and Cobb 1994). Two issue characteristics in particular influence citizens’ perception of an event and, through this, facilitate and constrain the reframing strategies of

opposition actors: the *salience* of the event and its *proximity* to mass publics (Soss and Schram 2007).

Political events can be considered salient if they are particularly severe or novel, or if they touch on core values that the public holds dear (Brändström and Kuipers 2003; Mettler and Soss 2004). On the contrary, events that recur frequently, or which only produce material costs (instead of ideational costs) can be considered to be comparatively nonsalient. Publics can be expected to care much more about salient events than about minor or frequently recurring ones, as they trigger strong emotional reactions from citizens (Hinterleitner 2020). It is thus easier for opposition actors in a blame game to trigger public feedback to a salient event than to a nonsalient event. Up to this point, these considerations are very much in line with Moffitt's framework, which suggests that the salience of an underlying failure facilitates populist crisis performance.

However, the proximity of an underlying failure can also be expected to influence its populist exploitability. Proximity captures the extent to which a political event directly affects the majority of the public, that is, whether the event and its repercussions exist 'as a tangible presence affecting people's lives in immediate, concrete ways' (Soss and Schram 2007: 121). Since proximate events activate considerations of self-interest (Campbell 2012; Page and Shapiro 1992: 339–40), they are likely to attract much more public interest and evaluation of their consequences than events whose consequences are only felt in the distant future or must be shouldered by a small portion of the overall public (especially if that portion is politically weak). In the case of proximate events, citizens thus are more likely to recognise distortions and exaggerations as such and critically assess the political motives behind them due to this proximity. On the contrary, the 'design features and material effects [of distant events] slip easily from public view because they lack concrete presence in most people's lives' (Soss and Schram 2007: 122). Citizens thus depend more strongly on political actors and the media to interpret and assess the implications of distant events. This simultaneously implies that blame makers have greater leeway in strategically distorting the characteristics of a distant event than that of a proximate event.

Based on these insights, we expect that the proximity/distance of an underlying failure or controversial decision by those in power influences steps one, two, three, and five of Moffitt's model of populist crisis performance.¹ We outline these over the next section, and summarise them in Table 1. With regard to step 1, populists can be expected to more easily identify a controversial decision as a failure if that decision is distant rather than proximate. In the case of proximate decisions, citizens possess more detailed knowledge of that decision's reasons, implications and context than when the decision is distant to people's daily lives; circumstances

Table 1. Moffitt's (2015) stepwise model of crisis performance and associated expectations regarding proximity/distance.

| Moffitt's (2015) step-wise model of crisis performance | Associated expectations of proximity/distance |
|---|---|
| 1. Identification of failure | It is easier to identify a distant failure than a proximate failure |
| 2. Elevation to the level of crisis | It is easier to elevate a failure to the level of crisis using 'equivalential chains' when the crisis is distant rather than when it is proximate |
| 3. Blame 'the elite' for the crisis and portray 'the people' as suffering from it | It is easier to blame 'the elite' for the crisis when the crisis is distant rather than when it is proximate |
| 4. Use media to propagate performance | N/A as it is an exogenous factor dependent on media behaviour |
| 5. Present simple solutions and strong leadership | It is easier to present simple solutions and stronger leadership when the crisis is distant rather than when it is proximate |
| 6. Continue to propagate crisis | N/A as it is an exogenous factor based on occurrence of subsequent performable failures |

that endow citizens with the ability to scrutinise populist actors' often tendentious interpretation of that decision as constituting a failure. Populist actors can thus be expected to test different interpretations or crisis narratives relating to a particular decision by 'the elite' and to engage with competing interpretations more thoroughly so as to demonstrate their own interpretation's superior credibility. In the case of distant failures, on the contrary, populist actors can be expected to more quickly come up with a coherent crisis narrative and stick with it irrespective of real-world developments and competing interpretations.

Step 2 is about elevating a failure to the level of crisis by linking it into a wider framework of failures. Here, populist actors can be expected to more easily and successfully link a performed crisis with other perceived grievances and failures in equivalential chains (Laclau 2005) when the performed crisis is distant than when it is proximate. The distance of a crisis creates the scope to link a wide variety of issues to an underlying failure that do not necessarily have to be related. In a proximate crisis, on the other hand, citizens should more easily realise when populist actors attempt to link the chosen failure to other topics that have no obvious relation to it. This, in turn, can be expected to limit populist actors' possibilities to locate the chosen failure withing a wider structural or moral framework.

The presentation of 'the elite' (and in the case of the PRR, associated Others such as minority groups and refugees) as chiefly responsible for the crisis and for 'the people' suffering greatly from it, both essential elements of step 3, can also be expected to be easier and more credible in the case of a distant crisis than in the case of a proximate crisis. Given a proximate failure, the public is more likely to have basic knowledge about its origins and is hence more likely to question overly tendentious and

simplifying claims that ‘the elite’ or associated Others bear sole responsibility. Moreover, citizens are more likely to critically assess the implications of a proximate crisis for their daily lives than that of a distant crisis, which are not felt immediately and directly. Proximity thereby risks depriving populist actors of an ‘objective’ rationale for targeting ‘the elite’ or Others beyond their outright hatred for them. In the case of distant failures, on the contrary, it should be easier for populist actors to present ‘the elite’ or Others as the clear villains of the crisis narrative and pit them against ‘the people’, who suffer greatly and in a multitude of ways from the crisis (Moffitt 2015).

Finally, one can expect that proximity/distance would also influence the fifth step in Moffitt’s model of populist crisis performance, which is about the presentation of simple solutions and the demonstration of strong leadership. In proximate crises, simple answers will likely appear less credible if citizens have a better grasp of the intricacies related to it and the many trade-offs involved in addressing it. Against such a background, sweeping portrayals of other political actors as incompetent and disengaged risk backfiring, and citizens might question whether the simplistic solutions offered by populists are any better in addressing a complex and delicate issue than those that have been put forward by populists’ opponents. Populists should thus have greater difficulties in prominently positioning simple but bold policy alternatives in response to a proximate crisis than in response to a distant crisis. The following sections evaluate our expectations using a within-unit longitudinal design.

Data and method

We examine the impact of distance/proximity on populist crisis performance by conducting a within-unit analysis of the crisis performance of one of Europe’s most prominent PRR parties of recent years, Germany’s Alternative for Germany (AfD) during the refugee crisis of 2015/2016 (a distant-salient event) and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020/2021 (a proximate-salient event). Analysing the populist crisis performance of the same party during two different crises has the advantage of ensuring that many factors that might influence populist crisis performance remain constant, except the distance/proximity of the performed crisis.

Why analyse a populist *radical right* party, and why specifically the AfD? It is oft-acknowledged in the academic literature that ‘pure’ populist parties are rather rare – for ideational scholars, the ‘thin ideology’ of populism must be ‘hosted’ by substantive left or right ideological platforms to make any sense (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017: 39–41); while for

discursive-performative scholars, the populist style can be combined with any number of ideologies (Ostiguy *et al.* 2021). In this light, we choose to focus on a PRR party (rather than a populist left or populist valence party) due to the fact that the subtype is by far the most common 'kind' of populist party in Europe, as well as the most successful (Zulianello 2020). Given we are seeking to test theory and build a more general understanding of how crisis operates under populism, this makes the PRR arguably the most suitable populist party subtype to analyse.²

While the AfD may not be a 'prototypical' PRR party given its particular organisational structure and intra-party conflict (e.g. Heinze and Weisskircher 2021), it is useful as an instrumental (Stake 1995) and descriptive (Gerring 2004) case study for three reasons. First, the AfD is categorised as a PRR party in much of the comparative literature (see, for example, Dilling [2018]; Heinisch and Werner [2019]; Kamenova [2023]; Zulianello [2020]) in the mould described by Mudde (2007), combining populism, authoritarianism and nativism as its core ideological pillars. Yet it is a relatively 'young' PRR party, meaning that there is a need to develop a more systematic understanding of it, particularly in comparative focus. Second, given our focus on crisis, the German case is of crucial interest given that the country was in many ways at the centre of the 'refugee crisis', and the AfD's rise to prominence *as a PRR party* coincided with this specific crisis – while it was founded in 2013 initially as an anti-EU party, its transformation into a PRR party occurred concurrently alongside the events of 2015 and 2016 (Geiges 2018). Third, there is a level of internal 'control' at play within the AfD case that allows us to compare specifically between proximity and distance without concern about other mediating factors: the AfD was an opposition party without government participation during both crisis periods that we examine here; the governing coalition and the chancellor were the same; the German political system was stable; and there were no relevant social changes between the two crises. None of this means that the findings from the AfD case are automatically generalisable to other PRR parties, or populist parties more broadly, but the case does represent a unique and useful opportunity to test the mechanisms at play and the theory we have set out.

The refugee crisis and the COVID-19 crisis can both be characterised as salient crises – the former particularly for the AfD, given the centrality of nativism to the PRR. Both issues had a high emotionalising and tension-generating potential. During the refugee crisis, some citizens felt that their culture was threatened by foreign and mostly Muslim asylum seekers, while others felt the urge to demonstrate humanity and defend the right of asylum (Wiesendahl 2016). During the COVID-19 crisis, many people feared both infection with the virus as well as its economic

consequences (such as the threat of recession or of job loss). However, the two crises differ in how much they affected the everyday lives of the population. The refugee crisis can be clearly characterised as distant for the majority of German citizens, as most refugees were initially housed in large reception centres and their distribution across Germany varied greatly (see section after next one). Angela Merkel's decision not to close the borders and thus continue to accept refugees in Germany hence did not directly influence the everyday life of the majority of the population. As Mudde (2022: 39) puts it, 'while Europe was indeed confronted with an unprecedented number of asylum seekers in 2015 and 2016, the frame of "refugee crisis" (and even more of "migrant crisis") was a conscious political choice, rather than an objective reality'. On the contrary, the COVID-19 crisis, and by extension the governmentally decreed measures to protect the population from the coronavirus disease, effectively affected every person living in Germany and can thus be characterised as proximate. Moreover, the population was very well informed about the course of the pandemic and demanded transparent and rational explanations of its decisions from its government (Bobba and Hubé 2021: 6).

We examine and compare the AfD's crisis performance during both crisis episodes by analysing the party's official press releases. Given that the AfD has (so far) always been an opposition party, their 'crisis performance' has naturally been limited to communication, as opposed to populists in power, who have more room to manoeuvre in the forms their crisis performance takes (see, for example, Rovira Kaltwasser and Taggart, 2022). As a form of party communication, press releases lend themselves to the analysis of crisis performance because they contain the party's unadulterated demands and positions. Unlike in speeches in parliament, at demonstrations or on the social media channels of AfD politicians, it can be assumed that no 'off-brand' individual opinions are published in the party's official press releases. In short, party press releases are good representations of 'the party line', so to speak (Lehmann and Zehnter 2022; Lacatus 2019; Bernhard and Kriesi 2019).

During the refugee crisis, the AfD was not yet in the Bundestag, but had been represented in the state parliaments of Saxony, Brandenburg and Thuringia since 2014. Of these parliamentary groups, press releases from 2015 can only be found on the website of the Saxon AfD, which is why we chose these for the analysis of the first crisis episode. A focus on Saxony is also pertinent because this state was comparatively less affected by the refugee crisis than other German states (Brandenburg and Thuringia included); an aspect that further turned the refugee crisis into a truly salient but distant crisis for ordinary citizens (Geis and Orth 2016; see also Wondreys 2021). For the COVID-19 crisis, press releases from the

website of the federal party can be used, given that it has been in the Bundestag since 2017. A focus on the national level during the COVID-19 crisis is adequate because crisis management during this crisis was highly centralised and the national level thus was the primary point of attack for the AfD (which overall provides us with a full picture of the AfD's crisis performance).³ This selection from different sources does not impair our comparative analysis given that both groups of press statements are structured identically: The topic is introduced and then a party member is quoted on the topic. The only difference is that some of the press releases from the AfD parliamentary group in Saxony understandably contain more local references.⁴

For the refugee crisis, the period of analysis ranges from August 2015 to March 2016. In July 2015, the highest increase in asylum applications to date occurred and the German government suspended the Dublin procedure for Syrians in late August, making it easier for them to be granted asylum in Germany.⁵ This led to another peak in asylum applications in November 2015. The refugee crisis came to an end after 18 March 2016, when the EU-Turkey agreement was concluded, which contributed greatly to reducing the number of refugees arriving in Germany. During this period, the AfD parliamentary group in Saxony published 578 press releases, of which 218 related to the refugee crisis and thus serve as the basis for the analysis of the first crisis episode. For the COVID-19 crisis, the period of analysis ranges from the beginning of March 2020 to the end of May 2021. The first lockdown decreed by the government began on 22 March 2020, and in May 2021 many of the measures of the second and (so far) last full lockdown were lifted again, allowing for an extensive return to 'normality', or at least the sense that a 'crisis' period had passed. During this period, the AfD published 585 press releases, 207 of which relate to the COVID-19 crisis and were thus analysed. This information is summarised in [Table 2](#).

We employ qualitative content analysis methodology as developed by Mayring and Fenzl (2019) to analyse and compare the selected press statements. This approach allows for a systematic, rule-guided qualitative analysis of texts that is intersubjectively comprehensible. Definitions and anchor examples are used to determine which aspects of content are assigned to which theoretically based, deductively derived categories. As the analysis

Table 2. Summary of data.

| Crisis | Period of analysis | N of press releases released by AfD | N of press releases released by AfD related to the crisis | Overall percentage of press releases related to crisis (%) |
|-----------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|--|
| Refugee crisis | August 2015–March 2016 | 578 | 218 | 37.7 |
| COVID-19 crisis | March 2020–May 2021 | 585 | 207 | 35.3 |

aims to examine the influence of proximity/distance on the rhetorical crisis performance of the AfD, we use our adapted version of Moffitt's stepwise model as the basis for the coding categories. The coding categories are 'identification of failure', 'equivalential chains', 'blaming the elite', 'suffering people', and 'simple solutions'. The categories are not mutually exclusive: In some cases, statements contained in press releases can be assigned to more than one category. We used the program MAXQDA2022 for the analysis, software for qualitative and mixed methods content analysis that allows users to assign elements of texts to research-specific categories or 'codes'. Further information on the data collection and coding can be found in the online appendix.

Empirical analysis

The empirical analysis presents the two crisis performances side-by-side and in the order of Moffitt's stepwise model to make differences visible and to relate them to the proximity/distance of the underlying events as clearly as possible. As the analysis will demonstrate, there are important differences in the observed performances of the refugee crisis and the COVID-19 crisis. While the refugee crisis constitutes an exemplary case of populist crisis performance as captured by Moffitt's (2015) original model, the AfD's performance of the COVID-19 crisis is different in important respects and can be overall characterised as less successful. Table 3 summarises the most important differences which we subsequently describe in detail.

Step 1: identification of failure

The analysed press releases during the refugee crisis suggest that the AfD swiftly and clearly settled on a coherent crisis narrative and stuck to it

Table 3. Most important identified differences between AfD's crisis performances.

| Item | Refugee crisis | COVID-19 crisis |
|--|---|---|
| No. of crisis narratives | 1 (refugees as cultural and economic threat to Germany) | 3 (slow and lenient government reaction; devastating economic consequences of lockdowns; violation of basic rights) |
| No. of equivalential chains | 5 (economic failures; law and order problems; drug use problems; Eurocrisis; Energy Turnaround) | 1 (migration failure) |
| Pitting 'the elite' against the suffering public | Yes (through many illustrative examples) | Yes (through very few illustrative examples) |
| Proposed policy alternatives | Bold and simple | More nuanced (and partly contradictory) |

throughout the period we examined. It identified the German government's decision to open the borders to let refugees into the country as a failure that triggered the 'asylum chaos', and consistently portrayed it as an ideology-driven move that led to a situation that economically and culturally threatened the German people. This is unsurprising given the centrality of nativism to the PRR, and thus the salience of sociocultural issues for the AfD.

This is markedly different in the COVID-19 crisis, during which the AfD struggled for a significant amount of time to identify the underlying failure. Instead of quickly settling on a crisis narrative and sticking with it, the AfD 'test-drove' different crisis narratives throughout the examination period: at the very beginning, it claimed that the key failure at play was that the government did not react quickly and forcefully enough and only relied on voluntary measures to protect 'the people'. However, after a while the AfD concentrated its criticism on the harsh economic consequences of the lockdown and the alleged limitation of basic rights (such as the freedom of assembly). Given that the majority of the population was well aware of the necessity of protective measures to contain infections and also overwhelmingly supported the first lockdown,⁶ the AfD was in a difficult position, and unable to wholeheartedly condemn the government's actions. This time of the crisis was also characterised by a 'rally-round-the-flag' effect (illustrated, e.g. by daily applause for medical workers or widely shared slogans such as 'we are all in this together') that increased overall support for the government and made it even harder for the AfD to provide a successful counter-narrative. At the end of July 2020, the party even justified the first lockdown to a certain extent, claiming that 'because it [the government] did not take the coronavirus seriously at first and made correspondingly inadequate medical preparations, the lockdown was inevitable' (AfD, 30.07.2020, Chrupalla). The AfD only settled on a more coherent crisis narrative and consistently identified the government's crisis management as a failure that threatened people's basic rights once the crisis had lost some of its urgency, i.e. after the end of the first lockdown when the pandemic became less 'proximate' as it was no longer influencing every aspect of people's lives in such a dramatic way.

However, even the AfD's turn towards focusing on the violation of basic rights and the erection of a 'surveillance state' during this phase of the crisis performance did not see them take a libertarian turn, with repeated acknowledgment that hygiene regulations of course had to be followed (e.g. AfD 30.04.2020, Meuthen). Hence, it appears that people's familiarity with the crisis – as expressed in the widespread acceptance of protective measures to contain the spread of the virus, as well as the fact that it more broadly affected every citizen on an everyday level – prompted the AfD to base its identification of failure on much more nuanced claims

than during the refugee crisis. It is not simply the measures as such that were criticised, but more so their proportionality: the government either reacted too slowly or too quickly, or its measures were too intrusive or not intrusive enough.

Step 2: elevation to the level of crisis

In its press releases, the AfD tied the refugee crisis into a wide web of often only remotely related events and issues. One prominent linkage was with the government's perceived economic mismanagement: the AfD argued that Germany could not afford to integrate so many refugees because the country had already been brought to ruin ('kaputt-gespart') by the government. For example, they claimed that 'ailing school infrastructure' in Germany already did not offer enough school places in urban areas; a problem that would only be exacerbated by the 'influx of asylum and migrant children' (AfD, Feb. 10, 2016a, Wurlitzer). They also linked the crisis with law-and-order issues, in line with the PRR's authoritarianism, claiming that police stations were 'being blocked by asylum seekers', arguing that there were now 'police-free zones' due to out of control crime from asylum seekers, and overall arguing that the government wanted to 'further endanger the security of its citizens' (AfD, 23.09.2015, Wippel) by not funding the police adequately to deal with these issues. The rise in deaths related to drug use in Saxony was also linked to the refugee crisis, with drugs coming 'unhindered across the open border' because officials were too busy dealing with the 'asylum chaos' (AfD, 07.03.2016, Hütter). This was all linked in with a wider narrative of governmental failure, with the AfD presenting the refugee crisis next to the Eurocrisis, the energy turnaround (Energiewende), and the TTIP trade agreement as 'crumbling pillars of a misguided policy that will collapse sooner or later' (AfD, 18.03.2016, Berger).

While the AfD easily linked the refugee crisis into a wider framework of government failures, it struggled to do the same with the COVID-19 crisis. The only equivalential chain that was identified in our dataset was between the COVID-19 crisis and migration. Here, the AfD claimed that 'migrants would be in intensive care units far above average because of coronavirus disease'; a situation that it explained *via* the Islamophobic claim that Muslim immigrants 'quite obviously have little interest in abiding by official rules' (AfD, 03.03.2021, Brandner). Next to the comparative absence of equivalential chains to other alleged failures, it is also noteworthy that the AfD made very few attempts to frame the government's crisis management as 'symptomatic of a wider problem' (Moffitt

2015: 199). The only attempts in this direction are claims that the government's actions during the crisis were manifestations of a quasi-dictatorial surveillance state (e.g. AfD, 16.06.2020, Brandner; AfD, 24.08.2020, Brandner). An obvious explanation for these differences is that because the AfD had to repeatedly acknowledge the need for (widely accepted) protective measures, it could not easily delink them from their obvious purpose (i.e. the prevention of infections) and portray them as 'yet another' manifestation of an underlying state failure.

Step 3: blame 'the elite' for the crisis and portray 'the people' as suffering from it

During the refugee crisis, the AfD very effectively pitted 'the elite' against 'the people,' the former being seen as the evil and dishonest antagonist of the latter. On one hand, the AfD frequently accused the government of betraying and lying to 'the people.' As the AfD framed it, the government had broken its promise to 'the people' to take action against the uncontrolled entry of refugees by instead issuing a 'secret decree to the federal police' to let refugees cross the border (AfD, 17.09.2015, Petry), thus clearly linking 'the elite' and refugees in their crisis performance. On the other hand, the AfD made many statements supposed to illustrate how terribly 'the people' were going to suffer from government-induced 'mass migration.' For instance, it claimed that municipalities would soon seize gymnasiums and student dormitories, and were even considering confiscating private property to house refugees (AfD, 11.08.2015, Wippel; AfD, 12.08.2015, Berger); that taxes would be increased due to the enormous costs of housing and caring for refugees (AfD, 20.08.2015, Wurlitzer); and that German women would have to subordinate their achievements of self-determination to the 'Muslim understanding of culture' (AfD, 06.01.2016, Kersten) due to the influx of Muslim asylum-seekers. What is striking here is that the AfD used grossly exaggerated and baseless claims to emphasise both the culpability of the government, the danger of asylum seekers and the suffering of 'the people.' For example, it claimed (without reference to sources or data) that about 10% of asylum seekers were criminal (AfD, 10.11.2015, Wippel) and that asylum seekers increasingly raped German women (e.g. AfD, 30.09.2015, Wippel; AfD, 02.10.2015, Wippel), and pointed its finger directly at the government for creating this crisis.

In marked difference to the refugee crisis, the AfD did not make many differentiated statements that blamed 'the elite' and also struggled to describe and embellish the suffering of 'the people.' There was only rather vague talk about the dictatorial intentions of the Merkel government, and 'the people' were portrayed as suffering from these intentions only by

pointing to the alleged loss of basic rights. In fact, concrete examples of how the restriction of fundamental rights affected the everyday lives of the population were few and far between. One of the few examples that could be identified in this regard is that of a judge who had passed a resolution against the COVID-19 measures at the beginning of April 2021 and who allegedly had been ‘muzzled’ by the government to set a warning example for other critical judges (AfD, 27.04.2021, Brandner). Another example concerns the official COVID-19 warning app, which the AfD framed as the first step towards a ‘total surveillance state’ (AfD, 07.04.2020, Brandner) – thus aligning their claims with the ‘Querdenken’-movement, an amalgamation of conspiracy theorists, extremists and other groups opposing COVID-19 measures. By acknowledging the need for protective measures, the AfD admitted the dangers associated with the virus and recognised the government’s primary intention to protect the public from illness. This simultaneously made it more difficult to blame the government and portray ‘the people’ as suffering from the government’s actions (instead of from the virus).

Step 4: present simple solutions and strong leadership

The AfD clearly presented simple and bold policy solutions and attempted to demonstrate strong leadership during the refugee crisis. The party frequently presented nativist demands, calling for border controls, quick deportations into safe countries of origin and, if necessary, the introduction of emergency law. These proposals were portrayed by the AfD as straightforward solutions to the crisis that others did not have the courage to implement or opposed for ideological reasons (e.g. AfD, 10.08.2015, Hütter; AfD, 09.11.2015, Barth). Moreover, the AfD consistently avoided a discussion of the many intricacies that were related to its proposed measures, such as the fact that whether or not asylum seekers came from safe countries of origin had a minimal impact on the speed and outcome of the asylum process.⁷

This was very different during the COVID-19 crisis, where the AfD argued for policy alternatives that only marginally diverged from those made by conventional politicians and parties. For example, the AfD claimed that it would have decreed the first lockdown more quickly, while it would have avoided the second ‘on the basis of significantly improved data, for example through the massive and focused use of antibody and antigen tests’ (AfD, 14.12.2020, Meuthen). Moreover, while the AfD’s policy proposals were very consistent during the refugee crisis, they often were contradictory during the pandemic. For example, the party first called for widespread testing, but then protested against the use of ‘any

coercion, even indirect, in the conduct of tests' and questioned the viability of PCR tests (AfD, 10.04.2021). Given that the AfD had acknowledged the need for protective measures and instead criticised their proportionality, it was logically difficult to propose bold and very different alternatives. Thus, the comparison of the crisis episodes suggests that proximity forced the AfD to formulate more nuanced critiques of the measures taken; a fact that subsequently made it propose rather uncontroversial policy alternatives that were (partly) contradictory.

Discussion

The evidence retrieved from the two crisis episodes is very congruent with our theoretical expectations. The distant refugee crisis did not affect many citizens directly who thus depended on political actors and the media to make sense of the crisis and its implications. This set-up coincided with a crisis performance that is very much in line with Moffitt's (2015) stepwise model. The AfD quickly identified the underlying failure through a simple and coherent crisis narrative and stuck to it throughout the examination period; it elevated the failure to the level of crisis by inserting it into a wide framework of only remotely related events and issues; it used highly exaggerated claims to embellish the responsibility of the government (and associated Others) in the suffering of 'the people'; and it proposed simple but bold policy alternatives.

A very different and less successful crisis performance could be observed during the COVID-19 crisis. This proximate crisis affected many citizens directly, who had intricate knowledge of the purpose and effects of the protective measures taken by the government and thus were less dependent on intermediary actors to make sense of the crisis. This set-up coincided with a crisis performance that lacked many of the characteristics of a successful performance as outlined in Moffitt's model, and which we observed during the refugee crisis. The AfD changed its crisis narrative several times to identify the underlying failure; it was unable to construct equivalential chains between the failure and other issues, and was thus unable to set it in a wider framework of crisis; while it emphasised and embellished the culpability of the government and the suffering of 'the people', it also somewhat undermined these claims through statements that acknowledged the severity of the crisis; and it proposed policy alternatives that were internally contradictory and only marginally different from the government's crisis management.

These findings stem from the comparative analysis of two cases, and more research is evidently needed to gain a deeper understanding of how issue characteristics influence populist crisis performance, both for PRR

parties and for populist parties in general. We identified marked differences in crisis performance and related them to the distance/proximity of a crisis through theoretical reasoning. However, we based our analysis on comparative insights rather than on causal process observations, whose close study may reveal more precise causal connections and additional factors that influence PRR and populist crisis performance. As we already noted, recent research on populism during the COVID-19 crisis has pointed to a host of influencing factors, and while these contributions usually do not focus on populist crisis performance but on populist success more broadly, it is evident from them that differences in populist crisis performance are multicausal. For instance, Germany (compared to other countries) did reasonably well during the COVID-19 crisis; an aspect that may have further impaired the AfD's crisis performance opportunities.

Another limitation of our analysis, and which is due to our focus on the 'supply side' of populism, is that we have to work with a simplified understanding of the 'demand side', i.e. we assume that 'the public' or 'the people' are equally affected by a crisis and hence perceive it (as well as the government's response to it) in a rather similar way; a situation that may not apply to real-world settings as crises can obviously be perceived differently by different parts of the population. Since existing survey data⁸ shows that even a significant share of AfD voters supported protective measures during our examination period, we could reasonably assume that the German population was sufficiently 'similar' in its assessment of the COVID-19 crisis. However, other crises might be more difficult to capture in this regard. One way to overcome this shortcoming could be to systematically assess which parts of society consider a crisis proximate/distant and why, and what the identified differences imply for people's appetite for populist crisis performance.

Another avenue for future research is to 'bring in the blame takers', i.e. to systematically analyse how governments respond to (varyingly successful forms of) PRR and populist crisis performance. The existing research on blame games suggests that the consequences of blame games for politics and public policy crucially depend on how the government reacts to blame pressure from opposition actors (e.g. Flinders 2020). Hence, it would arguably be interesting to examine and compare how governments react to PRR and populist crisis performance during more and less proximate crises. This focus would answer Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser's (2018: 1686) call to 'also study how mainstream political forces are changing because of the rise of populism'. An examination of the interactions of populist (radical right) and mainstream actors in different crisis contexts may yield new insights into the determinants of PRR and populist success in specific historical and temporal circumstances.

A final limitation worth stressing once again is that our analysis has only focused on one populist party – the AfD – and more importantly, a populist *radical right* party, which is not emblematic of populism *in toto*. As a member of a party family whose core ideological feature is nativism (Mudde 2007), it is no surprise that the salience of the refugee crisis was high for the AfD, given that it played into the party's central policy area – and on the flipside, that the AfD was in less steady territory when it came to successfully basing a crisis performance around the COVID-19 pandemic. The results (and certainly the kinds of 'solutions' suggested by the party) would clearly be different if we had focused on a populist party of different ideological stripes, such as a populist left party or a populist valence party (Zulianello 2020). Indeed, one might expect salient failures around economic issues or perceptions of political corruption to be advantageous for these kinds of parties respectively. As such, future research could compare different populist parties' crisis performance across these ideological lines, and could consider how issues of proximity/distance might affect such parties differently, in the hope of building a more universal understanding of populist crisis performance.

Conclusion

This article has drawn on insights from blame game and policy feedback research to better understand how the characteristics of a crisis determine the room for populist crisis performance. Based on a comparison of the AfD's crisis performance during the refugee crisis of 2015/2016 and the COVID-19 crisis of 2020/2021, we showed how proximity of a crisis to the public (and the public's corresponding familiarity with the government's attempts to address the crisis) either constrains or opens room for populist crisis performance. During a proximate crisis, the AfD struggled to convincingly perform many of the steps that make up a successful crisis performance (Moffitt 2015). As such, our analysis shows how proximity narrows crisis performance in some ways while complicating it in others. On one hand, the AfD used fewer equivalential chains. On the other hand, they struggled to come up with a coherent crisis narrative and with bold and simplistic policy alternatives.

The insight that PRR and more broadly, populist actors need the scope and freedom of interpretation of a distant crisis in order to coherently and convincingly exploit that crisis has important implications for our understanding of populism and its consequences. Our article suggests that while populists can actively create the feeling of crisis through the spectacularization of failure, they also do not face an 'anything goes' situation, but have to work with the 'material' with which they are presented.

A focus on issue characteristics offers a parsimonious way to evaluate the quality of this material. While it seems that we indeed live in an age of permanent crisis (e.g. Webber 2019), it is also true that not all crises are equal. Capturing these differences through a focus on issue characteristics suggests a new way to assess the conditions for the success of populist actors. While there are of course other factors that determine this success, it is important to note that the approach proposed here is also compatible with broader models that consider both populist supply *and* populist demand to account for the success of populism (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser 2017). Our analysis focused on the supply side, and yet it also allows us to explain why populist actors can more easily satisfy populist demand during some crises than during others.

Notes

1. Steps four and six of Moffitt's model more strongly depend on factors exogenous to populists' rhetorical and discursive strategies (namely the behavior of the media and the occurrence of subsequent performable failures) and hence should be less dependent on an underlying failure's issue characteristics.
2. We acknowledge that nativism is often regarded as the core ideological feature of the PRR party family (Mudde 2007), rather than populism. However, given that our article specifically draws on and tests the utility of Moffitt's model – which is explicitly about populism (rather than nativism or authoritarianism) – our analytical focus in this article thus remains on populism in order to ensure conceptual parsimony between theory, case and empirics. This being said, future studies could potentially supplement Moffitt's model with measures not only of populism, but of nativism and authoritarianism as well – however, this is beyond the limits of this article given its exploratory nature.
3. Crisis management during the refugee crisis was much more a state-level affair as states are responsible for the accommodation and social care of asylum seekers.
4. However, since there are ideological variations across AfD party branches, especially across the East/West divide (see e.g. Schulte-Cloos 2022), we additionally analysed selected national press statements during the refugee crisis and statements from the Saxon branch of the AfD during the COVID-19 crisis to make sure that a comparison of different party levels did not distort our analysis (see online appendix for further details). These additional statements are overall very much in line in terms of substance and style with the statements analysed in detail.
5. '280.000 Asylsuchende im Jahr 2016', Federal Ministry of the Interior. 26 September 2017. See: <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/pressemitteilungen/DE/2017/01/asylantraege-2016.htm>.
6. Trendfragen Corona, a weekly survey by the Press and Information Office of the Federal Government of Germany, suggests that even among consistent AfD voters (i.e. voters that did not switch to another party during the examination period), 47% of voters were in favor of the protective measures

taken by the government. Among other parts of the population, support was much higher (see also Bayerlein and Metten 2022).

7. See, e.g. <https://taz.de/Diskussion-um-sichere-Herkunftsstaaten!/5222334/> (accessed 10 May 2023).
8. Trendfragen Corona, see Endnote 5.

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