

Germany's new anti-euro party is unlikely to be a key player in September's Federal Elections.

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The formation of a new anti-euro party, [Alternative für Deutschland \(AfD\)](#), has generated significant media attention ahead of Germany's Federal Elections in September. [Kai Arzheimer](#) assesses the party's electoral prospects, arguing that despite the media coverage, the AfD will find it difficult to gain substantial support in the four months leading up to the election. Current opinion polls suggest only three per cent of the electorate will support the party, falling short of the five per cent needed to gain seats in the Bundestag.



Just four months before the General Election in September, a new anti-Euro party is creating a buzz in Germany. Fronted by a professor of Economics and supported by some disaffected members of the [CDU](#), it takes its name from Chancellor Merkel's mantra that there was "no alternative" to rushing yet another bailout through parliament. According to [Alternative für Deutschland \(AfD\)](#) there is a very simple solution to the on-going Eurozone crisis: Germany should leave the euro (but not the EU) as soon as possible. A return to national currencies (or smaller, more homogeneous currency unions) and an end to the emerging system of fiscal union within the Eurozone would serve everyone better. The southern European states would be free to borrow, default and devalue until their heart's content, while Germany would be free from any commitments to keep such laggard economies afloat.

Within weeks, the new party has attracted thousands of members and created a medium-scale media frenzy. According to [one survey](#), one in four voters would consider voting for the "Alternative", but obviously, even a much smaller fraction switching from the governing parties would spell trouble for the current centre right government. Is this the end of the German party system as we know it, the euro, and last but not least the Iron Chancellor? For a number of reasons, I think that expectations might be a bit too high at the moment.

Past Experience with New Parties

Germany's multi-tier federal structure, basically proportional electoral system and generous rules for party funding by the state make it relatively easy to set up and sustain new parties. The rise of [the Greens](#), which emerged as a protest party in the late 1970s, is a case in point. However, while there are currently more than a hundred organisations registered as parties, the Greens and the Left party (successor to the German Democratic Republic's Socialist Unity party and therefore not really "new") have so far been the only non-established parties to succeed at the national level since the 1950s.

While Germans are more than happy to experiment with new parties in second-order elections, success in General Elections, where a nationwide five per cent threshold applies, has proven elusive for previous anti-Euro and right-wing populist parties. Groups such as the [STATT party](#), the [Law and Order party](#) and the [Pro Deutschland party](#) have occasionally done relatively well at the Land (state) level but have consistently failed in national contests.

Obviously, the current crisis is of a scale that would have been hard to imagine ten or twenty years ago, and the traditional ties between voters and parties have further deteriorated. But to translate this potential into an actual electoral success, the AfD will need to create a viable national party organisation within a very short space of time. Apart from campaigning, the party has to form legally recognised chapters in the 16 Länder (currently, it has no presence in Bremen and Saarland), which must then select their own slates of candidates in an orderly fashion and submit these lists by mid-July. Additionally, up to 2,000 supporting signatures by eligible voters are required in each Land. Should a Land chapter fail to meet these criteria, citizens in that territory will not be able to vote for the party.

Building 16 organisations from scratch and finding 16 sets of candidates that could plausibly run for the Bundestag will be no mean feat. As of May 2, the party had 11,500 members, up from 7,500 in mid-April. But less than a quarter of them were previously members of other parties, which in itself is a rather soft indicator for previous experience.

Elite Consensus

Initial support for the new party came from right-wing academic economists who opposed the various Eurozone bailouts on principle, reminding some observers of the important role academics played in the [1848 revolution](#) in Germany. However, the vast majority of political and economic elites staunchly support the euro. With the exception of the Left party, all parties in the current Bundestag have voted for the bailouts.

The mainstream media have so far treated the AfD with polite interest, but their anti-euro message does not resonate at all with journalists, making it difficult for the party to appeal to the general public. Business leaders have branded the AfD's ideas dangerous for the German economy, leaving the party with no allies. The comparison with the revolutionary professors of the 19th century may be flattering, but there is a downside: the 1848 revolution collapsed within months because the protagonists were more concerned with principles than with political realities.

Public Opinion

Somewhat surprisingly, support for the euro is still strong among the German public. Moreover, Germans might be worried, but Merkel's personal approval ratings are consistently high and have actually benefited from her crisis management. Support for her CDU party is now greater than it was at the time of the 2009 election, and over the last couple of months even the standing of her ailing coalition partner in the polls has improved, giving the coalition a lead over a prospective Red-Green government for the first time since spring 2010.

Support for the AfD, on the other hand, is very limited. The estimate that one quarter of the electorate could vote for them was based on the very general question of whether one "could in principle imagine voting for a Eurosceptic party such as the AfD". On the standard "Which party would you vote for" indicator, the AfD scores a more sobering 3 per cent at the moment. And these 3 per cent need not all come from the coalition parties. Oddly, the economically conservative AfD is more popular among supporters of the SPD and the Left than among those favouring the centre-right parties.

Of course, the AfD might well be successful in the medium term, and much can change over the next four months. But right now, it seems unlikely that the party will bring an end to the euro and transform the German party system by September.

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