

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Dealing with the populist radical right in parliament: mainstream party responses toward the Alternative for Germany

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## Abstract

In recent years, populist radical right parties (PRRPs) have continued to establish themselves in parliaments across Europe. However, there is little research on party responses in parliaments. This article explores how mainstream parties have dealt with the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in state parliaments. Its contribution is twofold: theoretically, it links the existing literature on party responses to the parliamentary arena and proposes a comprehensive framework for analyzing party responses in parliament, distinguishing between the formal and the policy level. Moreover, it tries to understand the variation of responses by emphasizing three important factors: party ideology, the government–opposition divide, and the federal structure of parties. Empirically, the article explores the crucial variation of response patterns toward the AfD at the subnational level, which is often neglected in the study of PRRPs. The results show that party responses reflect an ongoing learning process with no ‘magic formula’ in sight. Overall, the article underlines the importance of party responses in the initial phase for the PRRPs’ impact and offers substantial theoretical and empirical impetus for future research.

**Keywords:** populist radical right; party responses; parliaments; Germany

## Introduction

The study of populist radical right parties (PRRPs) mainly focuses on their key features and explanations for their electoral success (Mudde, 2007). Only a few scholars, however, address the question of how mainstream parties<sup>1</sup> can and should deal with them (Downs, 2001; Meguid, 2005; Bale *et al.*, 2010; Casal Bértoa and Rama, 2021). This is a significant shortcoming: PRRPs are usually perceived as a threat to liberal democracy (Abts and Rummens, 2007; Albertazzi and Mueller, 2013). Party responses are central in dealing with this threat as they fundamentally shape the PRRPs’ perceived legitimacy and room for maneuver (Art, 2007; Minkenberg, 2013).

This article contributes to the debate on how to deal with PRRPs. It analyzes how mainstream parties respond to PRRPs in the key institution of liberal democracies: parliaments. In research on responses to PRRPs, the parliamentary arena is often neglected (Rensmann, 2018; Atzpodien, 2020; Schwanholz *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, such studies only rarely recognize the importance of subnational politics (Loxbo, 2010; Backlund, 2020; Paxton and Peace, 2021). This is another blind spot, as mainstream parties often gain their first experience with PRRPs there, at least in federal political systems, paving the way for its legitimization and future influence (Art, 2007).

<sup>1</sup>Defined here as those who have already participated in government at the national or subnational level (see also de Vries and Hobolt, 2020: 21).

In Spain, for example, VOX entered a subnational legislature in 2018, then gaining national attention to enter national parliament the following year (Mendes and Dennison, 2021).

Similarly, the ‘Alternative for Germany’ (AfD, *Alternative für Deutschland*) was already represented in 13 of 16 state parliaments when entering the Bundestag in 2017 (Arzheimer, 2019). Today, the party is one of the most successful young PRRPs in Europe: only founded in 2013, it is now represented in all 16 state parliaments, with a strong party organization (Heinze and Weisskircher, 2021). Although mainstream parties gained experience in dealing with the AfD early on, party responses are still widely debated in public. For example, the election of Thomas Kemmerich (FDP) as prime minister of Thuringia with support from the FDP, CDU, and AfD on February 5 2020 was interpreted as a breach of taboo and received massive national and international attention, followed by Kemmerich’s resignation a few days later.

This paper studies party responses to the AfD in German state parliaments. It contributes to the literature in the following ways: theoretically, it links the existing literature on general party reactions to the parliamentary arena and proposes a differentiated framework for analyzing complex party responses in parliament, distinguishing between formal and policy responses. In addition, it tries to explain variation with three factors: (V1) party ideology, (V2) government–opposition divide, and the (V3) federal structure of parties. Empirically, it contributes to the study of the AfD and analyzes response patterns at the subnational level, often neglected in the study of PRRPs. In doing so, it builds on initial German-speaking analyses (e.g., Schroeder *et al.*, 2017; Heinze, 2020) and places the important case of the AfD in the broader international context of the normalization of the far right today (Mudde, 2019).

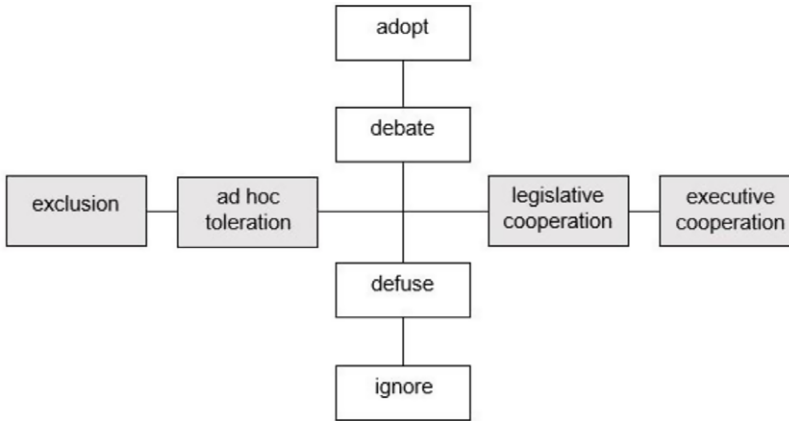
Methodologically, the analysis is based on an original combination of semi-structured interviews with MPs from mainstream parties and a content analysis of parliamentary documents. I collected the data in four German state parliaments (Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saxony-Anhalt, Thuringia). The results show that mainstream party responses reflect an ongoing learning process. Importantly, response patterns do not always change in the same direction: parties have not found a ‘magic formula’, and dealing with PRRPs will remain a difficult balancing act. Three factors proved to be a useful first step in understanding the variation in party responses: mainstream parties only got to know the (V1) AfD’s ideology and parliamentary behavior over time and adapted their responses. Moreover, it tended to be easier for (V2) governing parties to distance themselves from the AfD. Finally, the (V3) federal structure of parties was an important organizational factor, evident in the ‘punishment’ of deviant behavior by the national party organization or the ‘uploading’ of successful responses. Overall, the single-case study provides important insights into party responses toward a relatively new PRRP and offers substantial theoretical and empirical impetus for future research.

The article proceeds as follows: in the next section, I introduce the theoretical response options in parliament and outline key factors that could explain mainstream party behavior. I then explain the empirical research design, case selection, and methodological approach. Thereafter, I present the variation of mainstream party responses and their learning processes. Finally, I discuss the main findings and highlight important questions for future research.

### **Theoretical framework: response options in parliament**

The pioneering work on party responses toward PRRPs has tended to neglect the parliamentary arena. In the following, I discuss the existing literature and argue why it is essential to include the logics and scopes of action in parliament when analyzing party responses there. I then introduce a differentiated typology of formal and policy response options, specifying previous approaches and linking them to the parliamentary arena.

In the study of party politics, responses toward PRRPs have been of increasing concern. Numerous scholars have studied the adoption of PRRPs’ policy positions by mainstream parties (e.g., Meguid, 2005; Bale *et al.*, 2010; Van Spanje, 2010; Han, 2015). However, they are only of



Legend: grey background = formal level, white = policy level.

Figure 1. Response options in parliaments.

limited use in grasping the more complex party behavior in parliament, which goes beyond individual policy positions. Existing theoretical frameworks have been unable to map voting behavior on parliamentary initiatives or candidates of PRRPs, or whether mainstream parties introduce joint motions with them. Beyond the question of policy adoption, some important contributions have already differentiated further response options in public office (e.g., Downs, 2001; Minkenberg, 2001; Art, 2007; Heinze, 2018). Still, these works hardly refer to parliaments and fail to elaborate on response options in this specific arena. The same is the case with in-depth studies that deal with the effects of the *cordon sanitaire* (e.g., Van Spanje and Van Der Brug, 2007; Pauwels, 2011) or government coalitions with PRRPs (e.g., Heinisch, 2003; Akkerman and de Lange, 2012).

When analyzing party responses in parliament, it is essential to consider the arena's specific logics and scopes of action, as they partly differ from those in the extra-parliamentary arena (Heinze and Lewandowsky, 2021). Once a party has entered parliament, response options relevant in electoral campaigns or public debates are hardly transferable: while a PRRP can be excluded from debates or completely ignored before entering parliament, this is often no longer possible in the parliamentary arena, as each represented party enjoys certain privileges. In Germany, these include, among others, the right to ask questions and to speak, the right to fill parliamentary offices, and the right to dispose of financial resources (Heinze, 2020).

Through these parliamentary rights alone, PRRPs can exert influence – often regardless of mainstream party responses. These parliamentary opportunity structures are mostly dismissed in previous studies on the PRRPs' direct and indirect impact (e.g., Schain, 2006; Carvalho, 2014). In Germany, for example, with the parliamentary privileges already mentioned, parties can not only influence parliamentary debates (Atzpodien, 2020; Schwanholz *et al.*, 2020) but also develop a professional organization to mobilize outside parliament (Heinze and Weisskircher, 2021). In addition, every parliamentary party enjoys a certain degree of media attention (De Jonge, 2021). Consequently, it is essential to conceptualize party responses for the parliamentary arena.

To address these points, I combine the existing approaches on party responses and relate them to the parliamentary arena: Downs (2001) distinguishes between ignore, isolate, co-opt, and collaborate strategies, but does not focus on the parliamentary arena. The same applies to Meguid's (2005) differentiation between dismissive, accommodative, and adversarial strategies and Bale *et al.*'s (2010) differentiation between hold, defuse, and adopt. Building on these approaches, Figure 1 distinguishes between eight ideal-typical response options on the *formal* and *policy level* (for the different levels see also Decker, 2000; Minkenberg, 2001). They are arranged in a two-dimensional model to reflect the

complexity of party behavior. For instance, each party in parliament must decide not only whether to elect PRRP MPs to office (*formal level*) but also how to address their positions (*policy level*). In the proposed typology, these responses can be combined. Theoretically, all *formal* responses can be linked to all *policy* responses, although some combinations are empirically unlikely (e.g., *ignore* and *executive cooperation*). Therefore, the two dimensions are correlated to some extent. In general, I assume that *exclusion* and *ignore* as well as *cooperation* and *adopt* are strongly interdependent and that the intervening responses on the axes move in a similar direction and may also overlap. In the following, I elaborate on the individual response options and relate them to the parliamentary arena to develop the analytical framework.

### **Response options at the formal level**

**Exclusion:** On the formal level, mainstream parties can exclude a PRRP legally or politically (Downs, 2001: 27). Legally, they may restrict the PRRP's parliamentary rights (e.g., their right to speak or fill parliamentary offices). This usually requires a change in formal rules or at least in the informal parliamentary practices. Politically, mainstream parties can exclude a PRRP through a *cordon sanitaire*, that is, a strict blocking alliance between all or almost all of them (Downs, 2001: 27; Van Spanje and Van Der Brug, 2007). In parliament, they may reject all PRRP candidates and initiatives, also refusing to introduce joint motions. Such a broad blocking coalition was formed against the Sweden Democrats, for example (Heinze, 2018). Through exclusion, mainstream parties may reduce the PRRP's influence and legitimacy but risk further alienating voters who are already suspicious of 'the establishment' (Abts, 2015).

**Ad hoc toleration:** Mainstream parties can also vote with PRRPs on a case-by-case basis, for example by electing their candidates to parliamentary offices. In Germany, such toleration can happen indirectly, with mainstream parties abstaining from voting and therefore from opposing a candidate. Such a more pragmatic approach can have various motivations, for example traditional parliamentary practice or the prevention of parliamentary deadlock. It strongly depends on the (in-)formal rules in parliament.

**Legislative cooperation:** Cooperation with a PRRP in parliament can also occur more proactively, with mainstream parties introducing individual joint parliamentary initiatives or supporting some (usually not all) PRRP motions. Outside of government coalitions, policy proximity or office-seeking are important reasons for individual legislative collaboration. Moreover, due to the government–opposition divide, opposition parties tend to vote 'together' against government initiatives, as will be explained in the next section.

**Executive cooperation:** Legislative cooperation may become more systematical through direct or indirect executive cooperation (Downs, 2001: 28). Usually, executive cooperation goes hand in hand with more than individual legislative cooperation. Only when providing minority support, PRRPs do not have to support all government initiatives, but may still have considerable influence (Heinze, 2018). Forming government coalitions with a PRRP can have different causes and effects (e.g., the hope of 'disenchanted' or 'taming' it). Here, the empirical evidence is mixed. For example, government participation does not necessarily lead to a tightening of immigration policy, a moderation of the PRRP, or a loss of voters (Heinisch, 2003; Akkerman and de Lange, 2012; Minkenberg, 2013).

### **Response options at the policy level**

**Ignore:** On the policy level, mainstream parties may ignore a PRRP in principle. In parliament, this is only possible to a certain extent, as parliamentary representation guarantees important rights. In Germany, for example, government *must* respond to questions from the opposition. In parliamentary debates, however, mainstream parties have more leeway. For instance, they can decide not to debate any PRRP motion or even leave the assembly room when PRRP

politicians step up to the lectern (as was the case vis-à-vis the National Democratic Party of Germany). By simply ‘doing nothing’, mainstream parties seek to deprive the PRRP of legitimacy or importance, but risk violating their ‘democratic duties’ in the eyes of the electorate (Downs, 2001: 26).

**Defuse:** Instead of not dealing with the PRRP at all, parties can try to – more actively – reduce the salience of the issues it takes up. For example, they can try to shift attention to economic policy rather than immigration, as could be observed prior to the 2014 elections in Sweden, for example (Heinze, 2018). In parliament, parties may decide that only one MP (on behalf of all mainstream or all governing parties) will speak on motions of a PRRP to briefly clarify their position. By doing so, they do not completely ignore the debate but try to lower the attention for the issue taken up by the PRRP. However, it is unlikely that mainstream parties will win back skeptical voters this way or challenge the PRRP’s issue ownership (Meguid, 2005: 349; Bale *et al.*, 2010: 413).

**Debate:** Mainstream parties can also engage with PRRP positions on a particular issue by pointing out their policy-related, legal, or financial weaknesses. At the same time, mainstream parties may stick to their previous positions and actively promote them. In Germany, this form of demarcation can happen in parliamentary debates or through alternative motions. In any case, it requires intensive work and thus ties up personal and time resources. Moreover, debating issues that were put on the agenda by a PRRP can strengthen their legitimacy (Meguid, 2005: 349). In the long term, however, this approach might contribute to the vitalization of party competition and thus curb the PRRPs’ mobilization potential.

**Adopt:** Mainstream parties can also adopt individual PRRP’s positions or rhetoric. In parliament, for instance, they may introduce motions that were previously drafted in a similar way by a PRRP. The exact requirements for parliamentary initiatives are different in every country. However, numerous studies show that mainstream parties do not necessarily win back voters when adopting PRRP positions (Van Spanje and De Graaf, 2018; Spoon and Klüver, 2020). Instead, this approach may contribute to legitimizing PRRP demands (Eatwell, 2000; Meguid, 2005).

In sum, I distinguish between eight ideal-typical response options on two levels. The framework may be used to map complex party responses toward PRRPs in different contexts. However, when applying it to specific cases, the particular rules and practices of the parliamentary system must be considered. To understand the variation in response patterns, I highlight three factors.

### ***Toward an explanation of party responses in parliament***

Needless to say, party behavior is a complex process that cannot be explained by one factor alone. In general, most scholars assume that parties seek to maximize votes, offices, and policies (Downs, 1957). Based on the rational choice tradition, Strøm (1990) developed a unified theory of competitive party behavior under specific institutional and organizational conditions. Accordingly, I focus on three factors below: (V1) party ideology, (V2) government–opposition divide, and the (V3) federal structure of parties. Although I do not claim that these are the only ones influencing party behavior toward PRRPs in parliament, I maintain that they provide a helpful first set of variables.

First, (V1) party ideology remains crucial for understanding competition between vote-, office-, and policy-seeking parties (Downs, 1957; Strøm, 1990). In general, mainstream parties must perceive a new party as a ‘threat’ in order to react (Meguid, 2005). If they lose voters to it, they will try to win them back, for example by adapting their positions. PRRPs tend to pose the greatest threat for right-wing mainstream parties, although left-wing mainstream parties can also come under pressure (Bale *et al.*, 2010; Han, 2015; Oesch and Rennwald, 2018). As right-wing mainstream parties usually share the greatest overlaps in potential voters and policy, they are most likely to adopt PRR positions. This relationship has been studied several times for policy positions (Harmel and Svåsand, 1997; Akkerman, 2015), but less so for formal responses. Therefore,

I assume that (H1) right-wing mainstream parties are more likely to *cooperate* with (and *adopt* to) a PRRP in parliament than left-wing mainstream parties (who are more likely to *exclude* it). *Ad hoc toleration* or even *cooperation* becomes more likely if, for example, the PRRP appears rather moderate in its initiatives and speeches. At the same time, I expect (H2) *exclusion* to become more likely if a PRRP does not clearly distance itself from right-wing extremism. In this case, mainstream parties will more actively oppose a PRRP (e.g., by *debating* or *defusing* instead of *ignoring*).

Second, party behavior cannot be understood without institutional factors (Strøm, 1990). Since I focus on party responses in parliament, I shall include the (V2) government–opposition divide, which is considered a crucial factor in understanding party behavior in this arena (Mair, 1997; Hix and Noury, 2016; Louwerse *et al.*, 2017). While other party characteristics might also be relevant, such as the new party size or its participation in government (Otjes, 2012: 38), I argue that the government–opposition divide might have the greatest explanatory strength in the context of this study: Germany is a country with a tradition of multiparty majority cabinets, in which governing and opposition parties usually vote in opposing ways (Bardi and Mair, 2008: 159; Louwerse *et al.*, 2017: 749). While governing parties try to implement the policies agreed to in the coalition agreement, opposition parties are supposed to control and criticize the government. Since the AfD is still *excluded* from government everywhere, there is no need for governing parties to *cooperate* or *adopt* – regardless of how many seats the AfD has won (see variables above). Consequently, I assume that (H3) governing parties will *exclude* (and *ignore*) the AfD more clearly than opposition parties (e.g., by simply rejecting its proposals). At the same time, I expect (H4) opposition parties to more actively *debate* and distance themselves from the AfD in opposition (e.g., by introducing alternative motions).

Third, party behavior in parliamentary democracies is constrained by organizational factors. Since I investigate party responses at the subnational level, the (V3) federal structure of political parties seems crucial here. Although other factors, such as party leaders, may also play a role (Strøm, 1990), I argue that in multilevel settings such as Germany, party responses to PRRPs are more fundamentally shaped by the interplay between parties at the subnational and national levels. While both have some room for maneuver, they are highly interdependent, for example, in their electoral and coalition strategies (Bardi and Mair, 2008). On the one hand, federal parties set fundamental guidelines that shape the behavior of their subnational parties, which rely on the organizational and financial support of their mother parties (e.g., for elections). Consequently, (H5) mainstream parties at the subnational level will try not to deviate from the *exclusion* of their ‘mother parties’. On the other hand, the subnational level is a ‘laboratory’ where new strategies are tested and ‘uploaded’ if they prove successful. In Germany, this interplay could be observed in the first *executive cooperation* with the Greens (Debus, 2008), but never with a PRRP, as they have always been *excluded* (e.g., German People’s Union or the Republicans; see Minkenberg, 2001; Art, 2007). Drawing from the experiences in other European countries, however, I assume that (H6) *cooperation* (and *adoption*) with the AfD will first take place at the subnational level (before possibly being transferred to the national one).

In sum, party behavior is a complex process that is constrained by different objectives and institutional and organizational factors. In this study, I focus on three of these, which seem to provide a helpful first stepping stone in understanding the behavior of vote-, office-, and policy-seeking parties in a specific institutional (parliament) and organizational context (subnational level). The next section explains the research design and case selection.

### **Research design and case selection**

This article applies a most different systems design and focuses on party responses toward the AfD in four state parliaments: Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia. Methodologically, it triangulates semi-structured interviews with MPs from



**Table 1.** Election results in the four states under study

	CDU	SPD	Greens	Left	FDP	AfD
Baden-Württemberg	<b>27.0</b>	12.7	<b>30.3</b>	–	8.3	15.1
Rhineland-Palatinate	31.8	<b>36.2</b>	<b>5.3</b>	–	<b>6.2</b>	12.6
Saxony-Anhalt	<b>29.8</b>	<b>10.6</b>	<b>5.2</b>	16.3	–	24.3
Thuringia	33.5	<b>12.4</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>28.2</b>	–	10.6

Note: Figures in percent; data for Thuringia from 14.09.2014, for the other cases from 13.03.2016; legend: governing parties in bold.

mainstream parties and a content analysis of parliamentary documents. All data were collected as part of a dissertation project (Heinze, 2020).

The four cases were chosen as they were among the first in which the AfD entered parliament and *as different as possible* with regard to the variables presented above. In terms of (V1) party ideology, we find mainstream parties in the right-wing spectrum (CDU, FDP) and leftwing spectrum (SPD, Greens, Left), with slightly varying positions between the states as well as over time (for a detailed analysis see Bräuninger *et al.*, 2020). Importantly, the AfD was particularly radical from the beginning in the two eastern German states (Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia) and took rather moderate positions in the two western German AfD associations (Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate) (Häusler and Roeser, 2015; Hensel *et al.*, 2016). For example, the two eastern German party leaders at the time (Björn Höcke in Thuringia and André Poggenburg in Saxony-Anhalt) did not distance themselves from the anti-Islamic movement PEGIDA and were co-signatories of the pronounced radical right ‘Erfurt Resolution’ (Berntzen and Weisskircher, 2019). The latter fueled internal party disputes and led to the resignation of many rather moderate party members in 2015. Although the AfD as a whole has radicalized over time (a process driven by the eastern German branches; Arzheimer, 2019; Heinze and Weisskircher, 2021), ideological variation could be relevant if the two rather radical AfD factions were more strongly excluded by mainstream parties than the comparatively moderate ones.

Second, the case selection maximizes the variation in the (V2) government–opposition divide. Since I expect governing parties to be able to distinguish themselves more easily from the oppositional AfD, it seems particularly interesting to study CDU’s responses in different constellations (more so than, e.g., the Left or the Greens, because of their policy distance). In Baden-Württemberg and Saxony-Anhalt, the CDU entered government, so there was theoretically no need to cooperate with AfD, while in Rhineland-Palatinate and Thuringia they shared the opposition status (see Table 1). In some cases, the AfD’s rise meant a hard break with previous party strongholds and coalition traditions. In Saxony-Anhalt, a (rather unpopular) coalition was formed between CDU, SPD, and Greens, which could make it difficult to find a unified response toward the AfD. In Baden-Württemberg, the new government coalition consisted of Greens and CDU, who had cooperated before (though not under Green leadership). In Rhineland-Palatinate, the CDU found itself in opposition after SPD, Liberals, and Greens formed a coalition, but this was also less of an upheaval than in Thuringia, where the CDU went into opposition for the first time ever after the first red-red-green coalition was formed (under Left leadership).

Due to the Basic Law and party law, (V3) federal and state parties in Germany are highly dependent on each other. Federal parties set central policy and strategic guidelines. Although state MPs legally do not have to follow them, dissenters risk losing the party’s support, which they need for elections. Nevertheless, state parties have a substantial degree of autonomy in their policies and parliamentary work. At the beginning of legislative periods, for instance, they adopt their own rules of procedure (*Geschäftsordnungen*). As a result, parliamentary rights and duties vary slightly, for example, the regulations on the number and allocation of parliamentary offices or on individual instruments, such as how often and how long parties may intervene in debates. These specific rules and practices will be included in the analysis of party responses. Although they are a constant

rather than a variable in this study (i.e., they do not change throughout the period under investigation), they are important in order to understand the organizational context of party responses.

To study the four cases, I conducted semi-structured interviews and analyzed parliamentary documents. The period of investigation was the beginning of the respective legislative periods (September 2014 in Thuringia and March 2016 in the three other cases) to mid-2018. It can be assumed that all parties gained significant experience in dealing with the AfD after at least half of the legislative period.

I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with one MP of each mainstream party represented<sup>2</sup>. The interviewees were selected on the basis of their function within the parliamentary group, which suggests that they can reconstruct and reflect on its policy and strategic decision-making processes. The interviews generated data on which no public information is available, for example, on perceived party behavior in committees and possible agreements between parties. Moreover, the interviewees were asked to assess their own party's responses and those of the others over time, as well as their goals and problems when dealing with the AfD. They were also asked whether their current responses toward the AfD correspond to their initial expectations, and how they assessed the approaches of other mainstream parties. The interviews were conducted between June and September 2018 and lasted about 40 minutes on average (see Appendix). All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity.

Parliamentary document analysis enables the valid reconstruction of party responses in parliament. It includes all bills and motions issued by AfD ( $N = 327$ ) and documents related to them (e.g., plenary protocols, alternative motions, and amendments). The analysis reveals how mainstream parties voted on AfD initiatives and whether they submitted joint initiatives. It also provides information on the number of MPs responding to AfD motions, whether mainstream parties referred them to committees, and whether they proposed alternative motions.

In the subsequent content analysis, the material was interpreted and assigned to the ideal-typical response options. To ensure maximum impartiality, no thresholds were set prior to data collection (e.g., how many alternative proposals support a *debate* approach). Instead, individual party responses were compared as context-sensitive as possible (e.g., which responses were available in a specific context and which were used, also in comparison to the other states). To increase transparency, individual categorizations are italicized in the analysis.

### ***Analysis: party responses toward the AfD in parliament***

In all state parliaments, *formal* and *policy* responses toward the AfD were not stable but changed over time, even in different directions (see Table 2). Instead of pursuing consistent strategies, mainstream parties have gone through several learning processes. On the *formal level*, left-wing parties in Thuringia opted for the AfD's *exclusion* even when it was a newcomer, while all parties in the two western states pursued individual *legislative cooperation*. Over time, however, mainstream parties moved toward *ad hoc toleration*. In Thuringia, they then elected AfD candidates to parliamentary office on a case-by-case basis, while in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate, they stopped introducing joint parliamentary initiatives with the AfD. On the *policy level*, the end results are more mixed. In Thuringia, there was a switch from *defuse* to *debate* and in Saxony-Anhalt from *debate* to *defuse*. In Rhineland-Palatinate, only one spokesperson of the governing parties ever reacted to AfD initiatives, while in Baden-Württemberg usually all parties *debated* AfD initiatives. Ultimately, nine parliamentary groups opted for a *debate* approach and seven rather for *defusing* AfD initiatives. There were several mixed forms between these ideal-typical responses. In the following, I elaborate the changes in response patterns for each state parliament and try to understand them based on the factors presented.

<sup>2</sup>A full list of interviews can be found in the Appendix.



Table 2. Summary of party responses

	Party	Formal level	Policy level
Baden-Württemberg	CDU	Individual legislative cooperation → ad hoc toleration	Debate
	SPD	Individual legislative cooperation → ad hoc toleration	Debate
	Greens	Individual legislative cooperation → ad hoc toleration	Debate
	FDP	Individual legislative cooperation → ad hoc toleration	Debate
Rhineland-Palatinate	CDU	Individual legislative cooperation → ad hoc toleration	Debate
	SPD	Individual legislative cooperation → ad hoc toleration	Defuse
	Greens	Individual legislative cooperation → ad hoc toleration	Defuse
	FDP	Individual legislative cooperation → ad hoc toleration	Defuse
Saxony-Anhalt	CDU	Ad hoc toleration + individual legislative cooperation	Debate → defuse
	SPD	Ad hoc toleration	Debate → defuse
	Greens	Ad hoc toleration	Debate → defuse
	Left	Ad hoc toleration	Debate → defuse
Thuringia	CDU	Ad hoc toleration	Debate
	SPD	Exclusion → ad hoc toleration	Defuse → debate
	Greens	Exclusion → ad hoc toleration	Defuse → debate
	Left	Exclusion → ad hoc toleration	Defuse → debate

### Baden-Württemberg

In Baden-Württemberg, there was a clear change in response patterns of governing parties (Greens, CDU) and opposition parties (SPD, FDP) over time. On the *formal level*, it is the only state parliament where the AfD was able to fill fewer parliamentary offices after mainstream parties changed the informal parliamentary practices: to prevent AfD from appointing a vice-president, mainstream parties did not have to change the rules of procedure – they simply did not have to elect one. These ‘procedural tricks’ were criticized from some mainstream parties in other state parliaments. However, there was no strict *exclusion*. Instead, mainstream parties even introduced a joint bill with the AfD at the beginning of the legislative period (which was never the case in the other state parliaments, see Table 3). This kind of *legislative cooperation* must be understood in the context of parliamentary practice: the bill (to amend the Referendum Act) had already been drafted in the previous legislative period and was designed to be supported by all parties. However, such cooperation remained an exception, as the AfD sharply criticized the other parties in the debate, which is why they angrily withdrew the draft. Afterward, they never *cooperated* with the party again and rejected all its motions, thus moving toward a stricter *ad hoc toleration*.

On the *policy level*, the change of response patterns was less drastic. From the beginning, mainstream parties mainly pursued a *debate* approach by always referring AfD motions to committees (more than in the other state parliaments; see Table 3). The governing parties always spoke to AfD initiatives individually and thus never *defused* them. However, mainstream parties rarely introduced alternative motions, which means that their *debating* rarely went beyond what was necessary. Nevertheless, there were learning processes. For example, all parties interviewed described that they increasingly tried to be less provoked by the AfD’s behavior and rhetoric and not to jump ‘through every hoop’. As a result, they increasingly *ignored* individual provocations but showed unity when ‘red lines’ were crossed (e.g., through joint motions against anti-Semitism).

### Rhineland-Palatinate

In Rhineland-Palatinate, too, responses of governing parties (SPD, FDP, Greens) and the oppositional CDU changed over time. On the *formal level*, mainstream parties changed the rules of procedure at the beginning of the legislative period. As a result, the AfD could not appoint a vice-president and received fewer committee seats. Although such a practice had already existed before and the AfD lost its legal challenge against it, these parliamentary ‘tricks’ were criticized by the

Table 3. Party responses in more detail

	Baden-Württemberg	Rhineland-Palatinate	Saxony-Anhalt	Thuringia
<b>Legislative cooperation: Joint parliamentary initiatives by all parties (including AfD)</b>				
Bills	1	0	0	0
Motions	0	2	0	0
<b>Debating and voting on AfD initiatives</b>				
AfD bills referred to committees	100%	100%	16.7%	0%
AfD bills that achieved a majority	0%	0%	0%	0%
AfD motions referred to committees	100%	0%	12.9%	0%
AfD motions that achieved a majority	0%	0%	13.0%	0%
<b>Defusing: Number of mainstream parties debating AfD initiatives</b>				
AfD bills discussed by a limited number of parties (1 <sup>st</sup> debate)	0%	28.6%	0%	36.1%
AfD bills without debate (1 <sup>st</sup> debate)	0%	14.3%	0%	0%
AfD bills discussed by a limited number of parties (2 <sup>nd</sup> debate)	0%	28.6%	20%	75%
AfD bills without debate (2 <sup>nd</sup> debate)	11.1%	14.3%	60%	0%
AfD motions discussed by limited number of parties	0%	82.9%	7.7%	44.2%
AfD motions without debate	14.3%	4.9%	4.3%	0%
<b>Debating (further): Mainstream parties' (alternative/amendment) motions to AfD initiatives</b>				
Motions by governing parties	0%	0%	15.5%	2.9%
Motions by opposition parties	0%	41.5%	12.4%	20.6%
(Independent) motions by government and opposition parties	7.1%	0%	8.2%	0%
Joint motions by all parties (but AfD)	0%	0%	0%	4.4%

AfD and other parties outside the state, similar to the case of Baden-Württemberg. Still, the AfD was received with *ad hoc toleration* rather than a strict *exclusion*, as AfD candidates were always elected to the remaining parliamentary offices. At the beginning of the legislative period, and in line with parliamentary practice, mainstream parties even introduced two motions with the AfD, both on parliamentary rules (see Table 3). After that, none of the AfD motions received a majority, meaning that mainstream parties moved toward a stricter *ad hoc toleration*.

On the *policy level*, response patterns toward AfD also changed. At the beginning of the legislative period, the governing parties decided to *defuse* AfD initiatives by having only one speaker comment on them on behalf of all (see Table 3). The SPD MP interviewed stated: ‘That does not mean that we refuse to engage in political debate, but you also do not have to take a debate where you can deal with all the arguments in 20 minutes to an hour so that the AfD ends up with even more airtime for its social media’ (Interview 10, SPD, 2018). They even intensified this practice when they noticed that the AfD repeatedly tried to drag out parliamentary debates by drawing ‘blue cards’ (a form of intervening in other MPs’ speeches to get extra time to speak). The Greens MP interviewed explained: ‘They kept extending their speaking time and repeating the same things over and over again, and we just disagreed with them. And then several AfD MPs drew blue cards for every speaker and totally blew up the plenary session, and the more speakers we then send into the debate, the more space they have to draw their blue cards’ (Interview 11, Greens, 2018). In Rhineland-Palatinate, AfD motions were also the least likely to be referred to committees for intensive *debate* (see Table 3). There were also no alternative motions by the governing parties. In the interview, the Green MP argued that they did not want to treat the AfD like a ‘normal’ party this way (Interview 11, Greens, 2018). In opposition, the CDU actively distanced itself from the AfD by drafting alternative motions (Interview 9, CDU, 2018). This happened in 41.5 percent of the cases (see Table 3).

### Saxony-Anhalt

In Saxony-Anhalt, responses of the three governing parties (CDU, SPD, Greens) and the oppositional Left Party also changed over time. On the *formal level*, we see some *legislative cooperation* of the CDU, with twelve AfD motions achieving a majority (mostly concerning parliamentary minority rights, for example, on the appointment and filling of investigation committees; see Table 3). The CDU’s voting behavior even led to coalition crises, for instance in autumn 2017, when some CDU MPs supported the AfD motion to establish a committee of enquiry on ‘left-wing extremism’. The other parties also *tolerated* the AfD rather than *excluding* it. For example, all AfD candidates were elected to parliamentary offices, even if some were controversially debated. The SPD MP explained his voting behavior with the distinction between the right to propose a candidate and to push one through: ‘As a member of parliament, I cannot be forced to actively help this right to be implemented, that is, if there is an election for a vice-president of the AfD, no one can force me personally to vote for him, because this election is a personal decision. And the AfD also has to accept that. Then it is up to them to propose a candidate who also meets with the approval of the other MPs in case of doubt’ (Interview 6, SPD, 2018).

On the *policy level*, party responses also clearly changed although there was never a division of labor between the three governing parties. Instead, at the beginning of the legislative period, all parties *debated* AfD motions individually (see Table 3). After about half a year, however, all mainstream parties moved toward a stronger *defuse* approach by not speaking on some AfD initiatives at all (e.g., if they had already been discussed or rejected; Interview 8, Left, 2018). To find a uniform approach, governing parties also referred AfD motions to committees more frequently than, for example, in Thuringia (Interview 6, SPD, 2018). In 12.4 per cent of the cases, the oppositional Left Party prepared alternative motions in order to *debate* and actively distance itself from the AfD (see Table 3).

### Thuringia

In Thuringia, too, responses of the three governing parties (Left, SPD, Greens) and the oppositional CDU changed over time. On the *formal level*, there was never any *executive* or *legislative cooperation* with it during the period under study. Although individual actors (e.g., CDU faction leader Mike Mohring) did not rule out *cooperation* before the elections, no joint motions were introduced with the AfD (see Table 3). AfD initiatives never achieved a majority, although the CDU voted for them in rare cases. In addition, AfD candidates were usually elected to parliamentary offices. However, there were some exceptions, such as when Stefan Möller did not achieve a majority as chairman of the judiciary committee in 2017, thus leading to a short-term deadlock (as no new judges could be appointed). After five months, mainstream parties finally elected Möller, thus exchanging *exclusion* for *ad hoc toleration*. In the interview, the Green MP explained that they had understood that otherwise they would be cutting their own flesh, as the AfD could present itself as a ‘victim’ of the corrupt ‘old parties’ (Interview 3, Greens, 2018).

Changes in the response patterns also took place on the *policy level*. In the beginning, the three governing parties tried to *defuse* AfD motions by having only one MP speak to them on behalf of all of them (see Table 3). With this practice, they wanted to give the AfD as little attention as possible (Interviews 2 and 4, SPD and Left, 2018). After about one-and-a-half years, they moved from *defusing* to *debating* by increasingly speaking individually on AfD initiatives. In the interview, the Left Party MP explained that they wanted to counter the AfD more forcefully this way (Interview 4, Left, 2018). The oppositional CDU had already pursued such an approach before, not only *debating* AfD motions but also drafting numerous alternative motions to distance itself (in 20.6 per cent of cases; see Table 3). Over time, all parties made greater efforts to *debate* the AfD together (e.g., through joint motions against racism or anti-Semitism).

### Explaining the different response patterns

The following section discusses the extent to which (V1) party ideology, the (V2) government-opposition divide, and the (V3) federal structure of parties contribute to explaining variation in party responses and changes over time.

With regard to (V1) party ideology, the results are mixed. On the one hand, (H1) right-wing mainstream parties were not always more willing to *cooperate* with the AfD than left-wing parties. For example, at the beginning of the legislative period in Baden-Württemberg, *all* parties introduced a joint bill with the AfD, but only in Saxony-Anhalt did the CDU vote for AfD motions (*legislative cooperation*), pointing to a somewhat distinct role for the CDU. On the other hand, (H2) the AfD was not more strongly *excluded* in Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia (where it initially appeared rather radical) than in Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate (where it appeared relatively moderate). However, it is important to consider the mainstream parties’ learning processes and the AfD’s own radicalization over time (Arzheimer, 2019). At the beginning of the legislative periods, most parties did not know very much about the AfD’s positions, strategies, and parliamentary behavior. Instead, it took some time for them to learn about them and adapt their behavior. In Thuringia, where the AfD entered parliament already in 2014, mainstream parties hardly knew anything about the parliamentary ‘newcomers’, including extremist actors like Björn Höcke. In the interview, the Green MP explained: ‘There was a Facebook page of Höcke with a long text saying that he was a father, a teacher, coming from the West, living in Eichsfeld. Nothing else was known. And he did not say anything at all. He rarely showed himself. They did not really campaign at all’ (Interview 3, Greens, 2018). Overall, the AfD was a ‘black box’ (Interview 1, CDU, 2018). Only with time did the parties learn that the AfD mainly uses provocations and insults in the plenary hall to gain media attention instead of, for example, working in the mostly non-public committees. Later, some AfD politicians also appeared very radical in the extra-parliamentary arena, for example Höcke who demanded a ‘180-degree turnaround’ in

Germany's approach to its Nazi past in 2017. Therefore, over time, mainstream parties reacted more thoughtfully (with a mix of *ad hoc toleration* and *debate*). Similar developments could be observed in the other states: in Baden-Württemberg, mainstream parties never *cooperated* with the AfD again after realizing how the party uses targeted provocations and even racist insults (e.g., against the president of the parliament) to inflame parliamentary debates and gain media attention. Moreover, it repeatedly asked for similar details in its minor interpellations, also on very specific local issues. The mainstream parties did not see this as an interest in actual policies, but as a 'paralysis strategy' against authorities and ministries (Interview 15, Greens, 2018). In Rhineland-Palatinate, too, the governing parties intensified their *defuse* approach when they noticed that the AfD was more interested in its own media staging than in actual policies or debates. Due to the AfD's provocations and even anti-Semitic statements, all parties appeared more united over time (e.g., through joint parliamentary initiatives). Against fundamental rules of decency, some MPs even stopped shaking hands with AfD MPs (Interviews 11 and 12, Greens and FDP, 2018). Similarly, the parties in Saxony-Anhalt *debated* AfD motions less when they realized that the party was less interested in the actual debate than in its own media staging, as described by the Green MP: 'This is a stage for them, and they really cut out passages from their speeches and put them on the internet' (Interview 7, Greens, 2018). The AfD attracted attention with provocations there early on, for example, when it left the first plenary debate to take part in a demonstration. In sum, all mainstream parties increasingly pursued a mix of *ad hoc toleration* and *debate* or *defuse* in order not to allow the AfD to portray itself as a 'victim'.

The (V2) government-opposition divide also partly shaped party responses. In general, it was (H3) somewhat easier for governing parties to *exclude* and *ignore* AfD initiatives, for example, in Thuringia and Rhineland-Palatinate (where the CDU was not part of the government). However, individual *legislative cooperation* sometimes led to conflicts within the coalition, especially between the CDU and the Greens in Saxony-Anhalt. There, government participation could not prevent the CDU from voting for AfD motions and entering into heated discussions with its coalition partners, with whom there was never a 'love marriage' (Interview 5, CDU, 2018). In contrast, Greens and CDU appeared relatively united in the Baden-Württemberg government, although they differed in some positions. In the interviews, MPs from both parties stated that they tend to solve conflicts internally. At the same time, (H4) opposition parties introduced alternative motions to *debate* and actively distance themselves from the AfD. This was most common among the CDU in Rhineland-Palatinate, less so in Thuringia, where the CDU first had to familiarize itself with its new opposition role. At this time, however, even the Left Party MP praised the CDU's *debate* approach in Thuringia: It would counter the AfD 'very well and also very intensively' (Interview 4, Left, 2018). In Saxony-Anhalt, the Left also used alternative motions to *debate* and distance itself from the AfD in opposition, but saw less need to clarify its policy differences than the CDU (Interview 8, Left, 2018).

Moreover, the (V3) federal structure of parties clearly shaped the organizational context of party responses: as expected, (H5) mainstream parties at the subnational level tried to maintain the *exclusion* of the AfD by their mother parties. In the interviews, they also showed awareness of federal dependencies. For instance, the CDU interviewee in Baden-Württemberg stated that any initial *cooperation* with the AfD would be a signal toward its normalization – no matter where it occurred (Interview 13, CDU, 2018). However, (H6) the first individual *legislative cooperation* with the AfD appeared at the subnational level, but led to strong criticism from the mother parties. The 'punishment' of deviant behavior was particularly visible in the two eastern German state parliaments, for example, when Mohring was not re-elected to the CDU federal executive committee in 2014 after not ruling out *cooperation* with the AfD in Thuringia. Angela Merkel criticized the CDU's voting behavior in Saxony-Anhalt and emphasized that she had a different idea of 'non-cooperation'. More generally, several MPs, who were interviewed, described how they consulted their federal parties ahead of the 2017 Bundestag election, once again pointing to the importance of subnational politics and the 'uploading' of party responses. For example, the SPD MP in

Baden-Württemberg explained that it was the state parties who advised their federal parties on how to deal with the AfD before the 2017 election (Interview 10, SPD, 2018). In Saxony-Anhalt, the interviewed CDU MP stressed that the strategy paper ‘Demarcation instead of exclusion’ developed in Saxony-Anhalt would now apply to the entire federal party (Interview 5, CDU, 2018).

## Discussion

This analysis has shed light on party responses toward the AfD after its first entry into German state parliaments, a context that is special in many regards but nonetheless important for the broader study of responses toward PRRPs. Given Germany’s history, and the relatively strong *cordon sanitaire* vis-à-vis PRRPs related to how the country dealt with its Nazi past, the analysis of responses to a PRRP that (finally) managed the parliamentary breakthrough is particularly interesting. Not only does the proposed typology provide a powerful framework for exploring party responses toward other PRRPs but also the empirical analysis has generated insights that help us assess other cases.

It has been shown that even in a setting as restrictive as Germany’s, it is difficult for mainstream parties to completely *exclude* a new PRRP. An important reason for this is that the AfD enjoys various rights and privileges through parliamentary representation. These make a strict *exclusion* or *ignoring* in this arena almost impossible – especially since a PRRP can thus stage itself as a ‘victim’ of the supposedly corrupt, undemocratic ‘old parties’. This should make us skeptical about whether a *cordon sanitaire* can be sustained in the long term in other countries without such historical legacies once a PRRP has established itself in (subnational) parliament.

Despite the special context, the German parties were ill-prepared. They did not know how to react to the AfD and pursued a variety of responses in the initial phase. Through my interviews, I not only observed these processes from the outside but also gained a stronger internal perspective: many MPs described that even after years, they did not follow long-term strategies in how to deal with the PRRP. For example, it was difficult for them to find a balance between *debating* AfD claims and not falling for provocations. These findings suggest that coherent strategies are unlikely in other contexts as well and that party responses are rather the result of short-term considerations than long-term planning. The institutional and political-cultural context plays an important role here, for example, which instruments of exclusion are available or how much parties usually cooperate (e.g., between government and opposition; Louwse *et al.*, 2017). This room for maneuver should always be included when categorizing individual response options.

As shown, the three factors considered in the empirical analysis contribute to the explanation of variation in party responses. Even though the CDU factions did not react the same way everywhere, it was mainly the CDU that *cooperated* with the AfD (especially in Saxony-Anhalt – despite its government role and criticism from the mother party). However, response patterns seemed to differ more across states than across party families. One reason for this could be that the AfD has built up electoral strongholds – especially in the eastern German states, while holding increasingly radical to extremist stances there (e.g., it became the strongest party in Saxony and Thuringia in the 2021 federal election; see also Weisskircher, 2020). Although this study cannot solve this puzzle, it seems plausible that in other countries, too, right-wing mainstream parties that are confronted with regional strongholds of PRRPs are more likely to open up to them. Again, the subnational level seems to be crucial here and should be included in future studies of party responses.

## Conclusion

This article pursued two goals: theoretically, it introduced a differentiated typology of response options on the *formal* and *policy levels* that proved to be a powerful framework for analyzing the



complex and varying party responses toward PRRPs in parliament. In doing so, it further developed the existing literature on party responses by relating it to the parliamentary level and its specific rules and practices. Empirically, the article explored the crucial variation of response patterns toward the AfD in state parliaments, thus shedding light on processes at a neglected political level.

The results show that party responses toward the AfD reflect ongoing learning processes rather than consistent strategies. After the new PRRP first entered parliament, mainstream parties tried out different reactions: while they initially excluded the AfD more in Thuringia on the *formal level*, they even cooperated with it legislatively in western German state parliaments. In the medium term, all mainstream parties turned toward *ad hoc toleration*, for example, by electing AfD candidates to parliamentary offices on a case-by-case basis. On the *policy level*, party responses also changed, sometimes in different directions. In Rhineland-Palatinate and Thuringia, there was initial agreement among governing parties that only one speaker should respond on behalf of all to AfD motions (*defuse*). Over time, mainstream parties in Thuringia debated AfD motions more individually. After two years, mainstream parties in all state parliaments were still pursuing a mix of debating and defusing, that is, of actively opposing AfD initiatives and trying to shift attention away from them.

Three factors proved to be a useful first step in understanding this variation. First, (V1) party ideology was partly decisive: while it was not only the right-wing mainstream parties that initially cooperated with the AfD, it was most often the CDU. In addition, all parties got to know the AfD's ideology and parliamentary behavior over time and adapted their responses, especially when it appeared provocative and became more radical. Second, the (V2) government–opposition divide shaped party responses: as expected, it tended to be easier for governing parties to distance themselves from AfD initiatives, especially in coalitions between ideologically relatively similar parties. Opposition parties, including the CDU, actively distanced themselves from the AfD by drafting alternative motions. Moreover, the (V3) federal structure of parties was important: as expected, the first collaboration with the AfD occurred at the subnational level, but was sharply criticized by the mother parties at the national level, suggesting a strong *cordon sanitaire*. Many parties seemed aware that they could only counter the AfD's normalization together, at all levels.

Overall, this single-case study provides important insights into the learning processes of mainstream parties vis-à-vis a relatively new PRRP, as well as various practical and scientific implications. Importantly, and of broader relevance for the study of responses to PRRPs, parties have not found a 'magic formula', but rather reconsider their reactions on a case-by-case basis (e.g., when to tackle radical claims, when not to fall for targeted provocations?). The introduced typology reflects this complex balancing act by differentiating between formal- and policy-level response options and provides a powerful tool to study party behavior toward PRRPs also in other contexts. In practice, other parties can learn from the experience of their German counterparts and familiarize themselves with their PRRP's positions and strategies before adapting their behavior accordingly. Even in the special case of Germany, however, a strict *cordon sanitaire* seems almost impossible in the parliamentary arena, due to the rights and privileges that come with parliamentary representation.

In addition, the findings point to important opportunities for future research. Using the proposed typology, future studies can explore party responses in other settings. How do party responses evolve in different institutional and political-cultural contexts? What other factors shape party behavior toward PRRPs, such as timing, party size, or intra-party dynamics? In this analysis, we do not find systematic cooperation with the relatively new AfD, but are mainstream parties more likely to cooperate the longer it is represented or the more seats it has? What are the parties' strategic goals when turning exclusion into greater cooperation? How do they trade-off the danger of normalizing the PRRP's ideology and the potential criticism of other actors with their quest for government participation? What is the role of party leaders in this process? Finally, and in a broader perspective: how can learning processes toward PRRPs at the subnational level be

institutionalized and transferred, perhaps even cross-nationally? As PRRPs are here to stay, these issues seem more urgent than ever.

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