

How the German Right Reacts to Youth Climate Activism

Article by Kaja Zimmermann

July 28, 2020

The youth climate mobilisations that snowballed since 2018 have been met by many with admiration and respect, with teenage leader Greta Thunberg even nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize two years running. But the climate strikers have by no means escaped backlash. Kaja Zimmermann examines how young activists in Germany have been pointedly targeted by the far right. What strategies does Alternative für Deutschland use to discredit school strikers, and why does climate mobilising generate such a strong reaction on the Right?

As the Covid-19 pandemic dominates the news worldwide, climate issues retreat in the minds of the public. In Germany, this shift plays into the hands of the far-right populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). AfD politicians oppose governmental action on climate change and young climate activists around the world are a thorn in their side. AfD's response to burgeoning climate activism since 2018 has been hostile and included personal attacks on the youth climate leader Greta Thunberg, branding school strikes a danger to democracy, and accusing Green and left-wing parties of being the puppet masters behind the youth movement.

Why, rather than simply ignoring Greta Thunberg and her fellow youth activists, does the AfD choose to mock and insult them, and what strategies do they employ in doing so?

For the AfD, the recent decline in attention to climate issues is confirmation of their belief that climate activism is artificially created hysteria. On social media, the party highlights this in various ways. Götz Frömming, a member of the German Bundestag and chairman of the AfD in the Committee on Education, proposed on Instagram in March that school pupils and students could contribute to agricultural work and harvesting instead of protesting for the climate. Alice Weidel, the AfD's deputy federal spokeswoman, tweeted that the current health crisis exposes who is of utmost importance to keep our societies functioning, and that climate activists are not. A local AfD group maliciously posted on Twitter an obituary for Fridays For Future (FFF) activists who died from coronavirus, calling them "child soldiers". Why, rather than simply ignoring Greta Thunberg and her fellow youth activists, does the AfD choose to mock and insult them, and what strategies do they employ in doing so?

Climate as a dividing line

If a young climate activist and a far-right politician were to meet, it is highly likely that they would disagree on the issue of climate, with the former advocating radical change and the latter denying the reality of the ecological crisis. While not all young people are climate activists, climate and the environment are key political issues for the younger generation. In a 2019 Amnesty International survey, participants aged 18-25 most commonly cited climate change among the most important global issues. Climate protests the world over are led by young people – Vanessa Nakate, Alexandria Villaseñor, Isra Hirsi, and Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, amongst others – and inspire others to take action. The youth-led global strike of September 2019 is estimated to be the largest climate protest in history with 6

to 7.6 million participants worldwide.

On the other hand, far-right parties in the European Union are heterogenous and have different positions on climate policies. Their behaviour can be broadly divided into three groups: denialism, indifference, and support. According to a study by Berlin-based think tank Adelphi, only three out of the 21 European far-right parties covered in the study support international climate action. One of these is the Hungarian Fidesz party, which advocates international greenhouse gas reductions. However, most European far-right parties either ignore or deny human-caused climate change.

The AfD, which actively refutes climate science and rejects all climate action, is a prominent example. Much research has been done about the party's focus on nature conservation and rejection of international climate agreements. AfD's politicians can be heard attacking young climate activists, their protests, and their concerns.

A strategy of delegitimation

For a long time, the AfD ignored climate protests and climate change was low on their agenda. When climate protests increased in size and visibility, they abandoned this stance and became increasingly vocal. According to a study by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue and Greenpeace UK, the party's Facebook posts about climate change more than tripled between 2017-2018 and 2018-2019. Most are denunciations of Greta Thunberg, who is mocked for her Asperger syndrome, compared to fascist leaders, and belittled for her age. The AfD has also echoed baseless claims that Greta Thunberg is only the face of a covert, pre-planned public relations campaign run by the international left. The Institute of Strategic Dialogue's Jakob Guhl explains that the ad hominem attacks on Greta Thunberg are intended to make those who praise her seem irrational.

The AfD's initial reaction towards the Fridays for Future movement in Germany was also characterised by harsh criticism of school strikes. For the AfD, seeing school pupils disregard legal provisions for compulsory education by skipping class is worrying, a slippery slope away from the rule of law and a development to be severely punished. But interestingly, AfD members have themselves been known to use methods of civil disobedience when it serves their own interests, for example by attending unannounced hygiene protests against governmental coronavirus restrictions. This double standard suggests that AfD's criticism of civil disobedience is simply an excuse to dismiss the climate activists' demands.

The more the belief in anthropogenic climate change is presented as a question of faith, the less mandatory it becomes to take action. The AfD therefore challenges serious concerns about climate change by asserting that climate activism is driven by ideology and not based on science.

To call into question the legitimacy of the school strikers and their dedication to their cause, the AfD filmed a documentary about an FFF strike in Berlin. The Youtube video shows AfD politician Harald Laatsch interviewing protesters, asking questions like, "Is the CO₂ in the atmosphere very bad for trees?" and exposing their lack of knowledge as they struggle to explain their answers. The camera focuses on details such as two beer bottles (to imply the young activists are only going to the protest for fun) and a designer handbag (to make them seem hypocritical when preaching moderate consumption). The documentary shows some of the protest attendees but

includes no extracts of the main public speeches; the AfD is unwilling to engage with the protesters' claims and deliberately casts them in a bad light.

The climate movement is framed as a “climate cult” or “climate religion” with Greta Thunberg as the leader and those who share her demands as unthinking followers. The more the belief in anthropogenic climate change is presented as a question of faith, the less mandatory it becomes to take action. The AfD therefore challenges serious concerns about climate change by asserting that climate activism is driven by ideology and not based on science.

While the AfD vehemently opposes climate strikes during school time, they generally concede the right to demonstrate. However, they suggest that the children are puppets, not voicing their own opinions but instrumentalised and exploited by certain adults. Götz Frömming argues that young people should not have a say in climate issues because they are not experts and have insufficient knowledge, something which makes them gullible and easy to manipulate. Frömming relates today's climate protests to his youthful worries about nuclear war and forest dieback, threats that – he explained to pupils – never materialised, and climate change probably won't either. He also emphasises the social pressure on young people to take part in climate strikes, comparing it to the atmosphere under National Socialism in 1930s and early 1940s Germany.

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Who, then, are the adults supposedly instrumentalising young people for their own agenda? According to the AfD, politicians, especially from the Green party and left-wing lobby groups, are behind the movement, as evidenced by their many party flags flying high at protests. The AfD points to the left-wing positions of many local FFF groups on migration, gender, and capitalism as further proof. For FFF activists, environmental issues are deeply interconnected with social issues, and climate justice and equality are part of their demands. The AfD reads this as evidence that left-wing and green ideas are entangled and that the climate movement poses a threat to the system they want to maintain.

While other established parties seek to attract young voters by following the green zeitgeist, the AfD's environmental programme bears the slogan “Stop the Greens – Protect the Environment”. It argues that climate policies harm the German economy and nature. Instead, the AfD presents itself as the only rational party that truly protects and represents ordinary people. AfD co-founder Alexander Gauland warns against the left-green ideology that uses children as a means of exerting pressure to abolish the free market and “reshape democracy”. The creation of a corrupt elite, in this case the established parties, is a well-known strategy in populism. Rather than engage with climate science, the AfD turns a scientific discourse into a political one. Clearly the question of how to respond to climate change is a highly political one, but what the AfD contests is the scientific consensus on the existence of human-caused climate change, presenting it as an invention of elites.

The logic behind the attacks

Casting light on the strategies used to delegitimise climate activists brings us to the question of what drives this campaign. The AfD and young climate activists have opposing interests when it comes to climate change. AfD wants retain the status quo, while the activists demand radical change in areas ranging from energy production to the economic system. These changes would hit those currently living carbon-intensive lives hardest. As Mark Blyth

argues, people living in the countryside who depend on cars or industrial workers whose jobs are threatened by strict environmental policies will have to make more sacrifices than highly skilled urban citizens. In refuting climate action, the AfD purports to act in the interest of those who feel left behind by climate politics.

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While climate activists demand global efforts, the AfD wants to focus on national-bound nature protection and sees international climate treaties as a threat to German prosperity and autonomy. This stance leaves little common ground with climate activists. Nevertheless, there are similarities in the narratives and methods of these two groups. Both consider themselves as resistance to the establishment, albeit from different perspectives. The AfD claims to represent ordinary people against the interests of the corrupt elite, and the youth activists protest for climate action against inactive governments. Both sides employ protests and civil disobedience. Yet the AfD rejects everything that comes from their opponents. As they cannot make minors the only enemy, they direct part of their anger towards the established parties that are “instrumentalising naïve children”.

As the connection between environmental and social justice becomes increasingly recognised in international treaties, the far-right party fears that climate action is just a pretext for redistribution and system change in Germany. Alice Weidel claims that current climate policies are a threat to the country’s prosperity and ordinary people.

A new political opposition

Looking at the relationship between far-right parties and youth climate activism in other European countries reveals similar strategies. In France, politicians from the far-right Rassemblement National dismissed Greta Thunberg in a similar manner to the AfD, and claimed that children were being used to spread “a fatalist message about the world going up in flames”. The right-wing populist People’s Party in Belgium (dissolved in 2019) argued that young climate activists are manipulated. State media in Hungary needs governmental permission before even writing about Greta Thunberg. Anti-climate lobbying reaches far beyond parties. The Covering Climate Now journalism initiative revealed how a network of radical free-market lobby groups with close ties to the fossil fuel industry and funders of climate denial have coordinated aggressive campaigns against Greta Thunberg and climate strikers.

In the years to come, the tension between the far right and the climate movement could escalate further. Climate action will become increasingly urgent and protesters may feel yet more frustrated at inaction and slow progress. The sense of alienation among the “left-behinds” could grow due to a climate-friendly politics that jeopardises their livelihoods. Dealing with climate change is paramount but if adaptation and mitigation fail to consider social inequalities, the political and social divide will surely deepen. In such a scenario it might not only be AfD versus youth climate activists, but the far right versus the Greens more generally could become a primary dividing line in politics.



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Published July 28, 2020

Article in English

Published in the *Green European Journal*

Downloaded from <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/how-the-german-right-reacts-to-youth-climate-activism/>

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