

Contextualizing Left and Right

How Party Positions Are Perceived in Times of Change

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Originally derived from the seating order of the French National Assembly, the distinction between left and right is still omnipresent in the political and public discourse alike. The overwhelming majority of citizens are able to locate themselves, parties, or individual candidates on a left-right axis. Positioning of this kind primarily serves as a simplification, as it reduces political conflicts to a single but vital dimension. Voters also make their decisions based on their proximity to a party on this dimension. By contrast, in the popular scientific discourse and in barroom debates throughout the country, apologists for a “crisis of democracy” often complain that political actors are becoming less distinctive on this very dimension.

At the same time, the substantive meaning of left and right often remains vague. In the Western European context, the distinction is usually based on economic policy issues. For example, there are debates on the extent to which the state should regulate and control markets, or on what social security measures should be funded by the public. However, there are other aspects that may also be relevant for assessing party positioning and that may thus influence left-right perception. This emerges particularly clearly in the case of right-wing populist parties, whose classification as right wing is primarily based on sociocultural issues. According to this, the parties are considered right wing because they demand a more restrictive immigration policy, emphasize strict enforcement of the law, and promote a more a conservative family model.

The meaning of what is considered left and right can also change over time. Hence, in the long run, factors such as globalization or gradual shifts in values change people’s priorities and attitudes, and thus also political competition and the perception of politics. In the short run, events such as the economic and financial crises or the so-called refugee crisis can alter political competition and perceptions of left- and right-wing politics. What this means is that the meaning of left and right are reevaluated. Yet it also seems plausible that this meaning is not constant across political actors. For example, both ecological parties and social democrats are seen as broadly leftist; however, for green parties, this perception is likely based on sociocultural issues, while for social democratic or socialist parties, economic policies are decisive. Such an assumption is supported by a glance at the core electorate of these two party families.

It is thus plausible that in the course of the so-called refugee crisis, economic issues have taken a back seat, and parties are more likely to be identified as left or right based on sociocultural issues. In addition, it can be expected that larger societal changes, such as the high numbers of refugees, will not affect all parties in the same way. Based on the public debate and the election results of the last two to three years, it is primarily the AfD, the CDU, and the CSU that have played a central role in the refugee discourse. Although the SPD decisively supports the chancellor’s policies on the refugee question, the criticisms leveled by the AfD and the CSU are not so much directed against the Social Democrats, but against the CDU and Angela Merkel. We could thus expect potential changes in the weighting of the two subdimensions in assessments of the parties’ left-right positioning, especially for the CDU, CSU, and AfD. Is there empirical support for this?

Summary: Even though the terms “left” and “right” are omnipresent in political communication, their meaning can vary widely, depending on the context. Our findings on public perceptions of German parties since the 2013 Bundestag election show that especially the perception of the AfD has changed dramatically. Since the debate about refugees has started, citizens evaluate the party increasingly based on socio-cultural issues—and as more and more right-wing. We find an opposite trend for the CDU that might provide an explanation for its electoral results in recent regional elections.

To answer this question, we took data from GLES, the German Longitudinal Election Study, which is being conducted at the WZB among other institutes. The total of 3,895 people who were questioned in four surveys between the end of 2013 and the middle of 2016 were asked to locate the parties on a left-right dimension and to position them as well regarding economic and sociocultural issues on 11-point scales. In our estimation model, we assume that citizens use their positioning of the parties regarding economic and sociocultural issues to assess the parties' left-right positions. We measure the respective influence empirically using an estimation parameter that ranges between 0 and 1. Higher values mean that economic policy issues are weighted more highly. To put it another way, this value corresponds to the relative weight that these two sub-dimensions exert on the assessment of the parties' left-right positions. Values of about 0.5 would mean that both sub-dimensions are equally relevant when assessing a party's position on the left-right axis.

Our analyses show that the assessments vary greatly across parties. For instance, economic policy positions play a greater role for the left-wing party Die Linke than for the other parties. Sociocultural positions, on the other hand, are more important for the left-right positioning of the CSU—but also especially for the AfD. But what has changed since the Bundestag elections of 2013? For many parties, the influence of the two dimensions on perceptions of their positioning has remained relatively stable. This particularly applies to the CSU: Perceptions of its left-right positioning were already influenced more by sociocultural issues before 2013, and such assessments have remained unaffected by the growing criticisms leveled at the Chancellor's policies by the Bavarian sister party.

But in the case of two parties, there is an especially clear trend. To the extent that the relevance of sociocultural issues has increased for the AfD, their relevance has decreased for perceptions of the CDU. Thus, for the CDU, economic policies have increased in importance relative to sociocultural ones for their left-right positioning. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for the CDU's poor state election results in 2016 and for the success of the AfD, which is making vote gains from the electorate that exists to the right of the center. This development has unleashed more unrest in the CDU than at any other time in Angela Merkel's chancellorship.

The AfD has exhibited by far the strongest trend. Accordingly, in the course of the so-called refugee crisis, perceptions of the AfD shifted significantly towards sociocultural issues. It is easy to see how this result relates to trends in the individual parties' popularity values as well as to the fact that the AfD represents the authoritarian sociocultural preferences of substantial proportions of the population better than all other parties. While in the period shortly after its founding, perceptions of the party's left-right positioning were based more on its economic positions, the growing importance of sociocultural issues for locating the AfD on the left-right scale has been evident since 2015 at the latest.

This shift coincides neatly with developments within the party: After Bernd Lucke left the party as a result of losing a power struggle with the present AfD leaders, a programmatic refocusing or reprioritization could take place. At the same time, the media spotlight shifted away from the European debt crisis. This explains why the average perception of the AfD's left-right positioning shifted from the moderate right to the extreme right over time. While in 2013, people still perceived the AfD as a center-right party (average of 7.0) close to the CDU (6.9) and the CSU (7.6), its positioning has become more extreme over time. In 2016, the mean value for the AfD was 9.6, while the mean values of all other parties remained almost constant. Admittedly, there is only one party that has changed over time, but it has changed dramatically, and the AfD is a party that is currently determining political events and the public discourse far beyond its electoral weight. Moreover, it is also the only party that is increasingly located on the left-right axis based on sociocultural issues.

There are a variety of conclusions that can be drawn from these results. First, the meaning of left and right—that is, the basis on which a party is perceived as



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left or right—may vary between parties. Second, the meaning (or connotations) of left and right may also change within relatively short periods of time—and the extent of this change can also vary between parties. The best example of this is the development of the AfD, but also the opposite trend in the CDU. Third, it is evident that people accurately perceived the internal development of the still-young AfD. Its change in course from a Euroskeptic, economically liberal “professors’ party” to an openly right-wing populist party was also reflected in public perceptions. Contrary to more skeptical scholars who reject the idea that the public is able to or interested in undertaking such assessments, our results show that the population at large is able to follow and classify party politics, even outside electoral campaigns.



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It will be interesting to observe how the trends for the AfD and the CDU in particular will develop in the run-up to the Bundestag election, and whether we will observe changes for other parties—if topics like migration and domestic security remain in the spotlight. Since changing perceptions of the left-right axis, the key dimension of competition, can also be reflected in changes in electoral behavior, the next Bundestag election also has the potential to shake up the established power relations, in the short run at least.

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