



# Working Paper

**The Positions of Parties in Ideological  
and Policy Space: The Perception of  
German Voters of their Party System**

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## Abstract

Left and right are the dominant criteria to position European parties ideologically and the capacity to order parties along this ideological dimension meaningfully is not restricted to political elites or the media. On the basis of research results on the capabilities of European voters to apply the ideological labels left and right either to parties or to their own ideological orientation, we ask the following more specific questions:

- (1) Do German voters agree with each other about the left-right ordering of parties?
- (2) If yes, to what extent is the common left-right placement of the parties capable to predict the policy positions of parties in various issue domains as perceived by individual voters?

As an answer to the first question, a common scale is identified for manifest left-right placements of parties which has to be supplemented by a second dimension on which established parties are distinguished from non-established parties. Whereas in West Germany the former Communist Party of Democratic Socialism and the two right-wing parties Republikaner and Deutsche Volksunion are perceived as radical, East Germans perceive the PDS as the leftmost party that is as extremist on the left-right scale, but not as a non-established or radical party. Concerning the second question, we find a close correspondence between ideological and policy spaces of parties which is mainly restricted to the established parties, whereas small extremist outsiders have problems to be recognized as possible suppliers of concrete policy options. But they are perceived at the same time in terms of their ideological leanings. In addition, the left-right distinction has a high absorptive capacity which means that in West Germany the Greens and not the PDS are seen as the leftmost party due to their pronounced position in new politics issues as e.g. atomic energy.

# Contents

- 1. Introduction ..... 1
- 2. Previous research on the ideology ..... 3
- 3. The left-right scale applied to West and East German respondents in 1998 ..... 4
  - 3.1 Data and descriptive analysis ..... 5
  - 3.2 Method: constructing a joint scale..... 8
  - 3.3 Results ..... 10
- 4. The perception of party positions on policy scales ..... 13
  - 4.1 Method: Covariance-Analysis ..... 15
  - 4.2 Results ..... 17
- Interpretation and conclusion ..... 19

## 1. Introduction

In modern European history, the development of ideologies and of political parties has been closely linked. Ideologies as belief systems on “the political and social organization of societies, or, more generally, of their destiny” (Boudon/Bourricaud 1989: 208) differ from theories by their unjustified claims of truth (Boudon 1988: 48) and are, therefore, useful for political parties to defend policies which gain credibility through ideological labelling. Liberalism, socialism, the social doctrines of Christian democracy, fascism, these are examples of ideologies which were either adopted by political parties or used by intellectuals to characterize political parties. Because of the suitability of ideologies for political disputes, references to them are made in pairwise comparison, the one ideology standing for the “pro” position in a political conflict and another one standing for the “con” side. Political scientists have debated whether the adversarial character of politics leads to a multidimensional “superposition des dualismes” (Duverger 1967: 262) or whether the various ideological criteria can be compressed to a “unidimensional simplification” (Sartori 1976: 337). Bobbio has more recently argued that the left-right distinction in terms of equality and inequality as political values and that a second distinction between liberty and authoritarianism as political methods (1996: 27) can be combined to the following four ideological groups: The extreme left being “both egalitarian and authoritarian” (example “Jacobinism”), the moderate or center left being “both egalitarian and libertarian” (example “liberal socialism”), the moderate or center right being “both libertarian and inegalitarian” (example “all conservative parties”) and the extreme right being “antiliberal and antiegalitarian” (example “fascism and nazism”). These ideological groups can still be distinguished in political discourses of present day democracies and are, at least partially, reflected in their party systems, as we may add.

Unidimensional simplifications are not self-evident, especially when two criteria are used to construct the left-right dimension. Applying only one criterion as “how much government intervention in the economy should there be?” (Downs 1957: 116) facilitates scale construction but creates the problem of classifying concrete ideologies or parties on this scale which may result in contradictions. Thus the fascists e.g. are publicly labeled as extreme right but favor “fascist control of the economy rather than free markets” to cite Down’s own example (1957: 116). A possible solution is a social class perspective postulating that ideologies, even if created by Mannheim’s “sozial freischwebender Intelligenz” (1952: 135), are useful weapons for specific social classes in omnipresent class conflicts. Lipset popularized this idea distinguishing ideologies by their class bases and distinguishing at the same time between a democratic and an extremist version of the ideology of the left as the ideology of the lower classes, ideology of the center as the ideology of the middle classes and of the right as ideology of the upper classes. His thesis is that “each major social stratum has both democratic and extremist political expressions. The extremist movements of the left, right, and center (Communism and Peronism, traditional authoritarianism, and fascism) are based primarily on the working, upper and middle classes, respectively” (Lipset 1963: 127). The social strata are conceptualized as the major supporters of these ideologies so that the left-right distinction of parties follows from the rank order of social strata supporting these parties and, therefore, ideologies.

Downs, being very familiar with Mannheim's work, kept the idea that ideologies "are nearly always viewed partly as means to political power employed by social classes or other social groups" (1957: 96) but changed the "espousers" who "desire to gain power" through ideology from social groups to political parties. From here there is only a small step to our argument that the dominant political conflict of an era adds meaning elements to the dominant ideological dimension on which parties are ranked. But, at least in Europe where the development of modern parties was based on social cleavages, new ideological meaning elements are added under the constraint that the social identities of parties are not endangered (Mair 1997: 23).

We will analyse the correspondence between this ideological dimension and specific issues which were on the agenda of German politics before the 1998 Bundestag election.<sup>1</sup> On the basis of research results on the capabilities of European voters to apply the ideological labels left and right either to parties or to their own ideological orientation, we ask the following more specific questions:

1. Do German voters agree with each other about the left-right ordering of parties?
2. If yes, to what extent is the common left-right placement of parties capable to predict the policy positions of parties in various issue domains as perceived by individual voters?

With the first question, we go beyond the practice to present party means on left-right scales as evidence for the collective wisdom of the electorate. We have to go beyond because an ideological dimension has to fulfill its orientation function both for voters and parties. How should parties communicate with voters if they don't share a common understanding of party positions on the respective ideological scale? On the basis of a common understanding, parties can build bridges between ideological and policy spaces so that ideologies are capable to function as information shortcuts for voters.

But since voters are not interested in ideologies per se, but in political outcomes useful for them, the shortcut is only helpful if there exists a known relationship between ideology and policies. This necessary correspondence between ideological and policy space is elegantly modelled by Hinich and Munger (1994) as a linear relationship between the ideological positions of parties and voters' perceptions of parties' policy standpoints concerning specific issues. We will test this theory with data from German preelection surveys in 1998.

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<sup>1</sup> Our primary data base is a pre-election survey representative of the German electorate which was part of the project "Politische Einstellungen, politische Partizipation und Wählerverhalten im vereinigten Deutschland" conducted by Jürgen Falter, Oscar Gabriel and Hans Rattinger and financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft. This survey is archived at the Zentralarchiv fuer Empirische Sozialforschung at the University of Cologne under the study number 3066. In addition, we use another national survey for which fieldwork was conducted from mid-May to mid-June 1998 as part of a project of Franz Pappi and Paul Thurner on German public opinion concerning the Euro.

## **2. Previous research on the ideology**

Downs was the first to argue that “many a voter finds party ideologies useful because they remove the necessity of his relating every issue to his own philosophy. Ideologies help him to focus attention on the differences between parties; therefore, they can be used as samples of all the differentiating stands. With this shortcut, a voter can save himself the cost of being informed upon a wider range of issues.” (1957: 98).

Hinich and his collaborators (1981, 1984, 1994) have developed a theory which allows to design optimal campaign strategies if one focuses only on position issues. They assume that voters have policy and not ideological preferences, but that voters have difficulties in recognizing party positions on the respective policy scales because they do not invest enough time to gather the relevant information. Thus, they guess from their knowledge about the ideological positions of parties where the parties might be placed on certain policy scales. Then a single voter is able to evaluate which party offers a policy which comes close to his or her ideal point on the respective policy scale. In general, voters care more about specific policies than about ideology so that their policy preferences should be better predictors of their vote than their ideological self placements.

Seen from the supply side, a party can offer a policy which will guarantee an optimal position on the policy scale if it takes the mapping function from the ideological to the policy scale correctly into account. This mapping function is supposed to be linear with one important parameter, the translation coefficient. The larger this coefficient, the more voters discriminate between left and right parties concerning the policy scale in question. When a right party knows that leftist policies are not seen as very attractive solutions of the respective policy problem by the electorate, it will try to capitalize on this fact by exaggerating the importance of the left-right positions of parties for this question. The left parties will choose the complementary strategy to play down ideological distinctions as applied to this policy question.

Hinich and Munger (1994, 1997) argue that ideology is more than a pure orientation device. A certain ideological position stands for certain types of policies so that the voters are able to extrapolate what a party will do in the future, even if the respective policy was not yet discussed in the election campaign. Thus, ideology helps to solve the commitment problem political leaders have in mass democracies. With this additional argument it becomes the more important to investigate the relation of the parties' ideological positions to their perceived policy position.

The European paradigm of an ideological dimension with great “absorption capacity” (Mair 1997: 26) is the left-right dimension. This distinction dominated political discourse in Europe, at least till the breakdown of the socialist systems in the early 1990s (cf. Giddens 1994, 1998 e.g.) or is still dominating, as Bobbio argues. It can be even traced in the general electorate of European countries, especially if applied to political parties. The first scholars who have shown the capability of European electorates to rate parties meaningfully on a left-right scale were Americans (see Barnes 1971 for Italy e.g.) who were soon followed by Europeans who developed the survey methods further to measure



both party ratings and ideological self identifications of voters on left-right scales (see Klingemann 1972 for Germany). Studies on individual understandings of left and right followed, based on open survey questions. Fuchs and Klingemann (1990) find that a left-right schema is better recognized by their German and Dutch than their American respondents. They conclude that it “measures generalized political positions” (pp. 233) which are specified by the individual respondents with various criteria the most frequently mentioned meaning element being political parties (pp. 225). The content associated with the left has changed in Germany from the early 1970s to the 1990s by the adoption of “new politics” issues imported into the party system by the Greens (Bauer-Kaase 2001: 236). Other authors have relied on correlations of left-right self identifications with value orientations like postmaterialism to come to the same conclusion (van Deth/Geurts 1989, Middendorp 1992, Knutsen 1995). “Left-right semantics have an impressive absorptive power, describing an over-arching spatial dimension capable of incorporating many types of conflict.” (Knutsen 1995: 63). We agree with Bauer-Kaase’s conjecture that the driving force behind the changing contents of left and right among voters are the political conflicts between parties as discussed at the elite level of a political system.

We expect first, that we are able to recover a latent dimension underlying manifest left-right ratings of parties which will reveal the shared understanding of parties’ ideological positions. Second, these positions will have varying predictive power for the perceptions of parties’ policy positions depending on the issue domain and on differences between West and East German voters even eight years after unification. We expect that the correspondence between ideology and policy spaces is still seen less clearly by the East Germans who lack the experience of the policy fights before unification, especially in the field of “new politics” issues. What we are not interested in are differences between individuals due to degrees of political sophistication. As Converse (1964) has shown long ago and what is debated ever since (see Nie et al. 1976, Neuman 1986, Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996 to quote only some important monographs), many individual voters have a limited understanding of politics. But there exist other causes of variation on the macro level, as different levels of political mobilization during election campaigns or, in our case, more or less tight relationships between an issue domain and left-right terminology. We are more interested in these sources of variation at the macro level than in degrees of political sophistication between individuals.

### **3. The left-right scale applied to West and East German respondents in 1998**

In Germany, as in other European countries, political parties are the most frequently mentioned meaning element of the left-right schema (cf. Fuchs and Klingemann 1990: 225). The parties are, therefore, anchor points for citizens’ ideological orientations and as such the appropriate objects of ideological evaluations.

Compared to the established three or four parties of the 70s and 80s in West Germany, German unification enlarged the parliamentary party system to five parties, with the electoral successes of the

PDS from the Bundestag election of 1990 onwards. As before unification, the Christian Democrats are divided into two parties, the CDU and the Bavarian CSU, even if they function as one parliamentary party in national parliament. Finally, right-wing parties garner enough electoral support from time to time to enter single state parliaments (Landtage) or the European parliament without ever crossing the five percent threshold of Bundestag elections. In the 1998 pre-election survey we shall analyze, the Republikaner (Rep) and the Deutsche Volksunion (DVU) were, therefore, included in the left-right question battery. Overall, we have data on left-right placements of eight parties. These are, in addition to the parties already mentioned (CDU and CSU as two separate parties, PDS, Republikaner and DVU), the Social Democrats (SPD), the Free Democrats (FDP) and Bündnis 90/Grüne as the merger of the original Green party and the East German anti-communist citizen movement Bündnis 90.

In multiparty systems, it is not self-evident that all voters know about all parties. But if an ideological dimension fulfills its assumed function of reducing information costs, we should expect that voters have some ideas about the ideological positions even of small parties. The ideological visibility should be especially increased when the media label them as extremist either on the left or the right side of the ideological spectrum.

But we expect, nevertheless, that in general visibility declines with electoral support. Thus, the percentage of “don’t knows” should be smallest for the two largest German parties, the SPD and the CDU, and then decline monotonously with decreasing electoral support. Here, we have to take into account regional strongholds, what we accomplish by separating the data set into West and East Germany, thereby respecting the character of the PDS as above all an East German party. But we do not over-emphasize the regional aspect of party support by dividing West Germany any further, even if the CSU is, of course, an explicitly regional party. Because of its long presence in federal politics and the cartel formed with the CDU, we expect relatively high visibility, even if somewhat lower than that of SPD and CDU.

### **3.1 Data and descriptive analysis**

Our primary data base is a pre-election survey representative of the German electorate 1998 which was part of the project “Politische Einstellungen, politische Partizipation und Wählerverhalten im vereinigten Deutschland” (see footnote 1). Separate analyses of East and West Germany are, of course, justified also by other reasons aside from the regional character of the PDS. West Germans should be more familiar than East Germans with the German party system whose core is identical with the former West German governmental parties CDU/CSU, SPD and FDP. And the placements of parties on the left-right scale could be different in the two parts of Germany, expressing different political experiences and ideological perspectives.

Our hypotheses about the capacity of voters to position parties on the manifest left-right scale are validated, with some minor and one major exception (Table 1). The latter concerns the higher percentages of valid responses by East German respondents. Every single party is ideologically

evaluated by a higher percentage of East than of West Germans, and with the exception of the CSU which does not compete for votes in East Germany, all standard deviations are smaller here than in West Germany. We are tempted to interpret this result analogously to the functional theory of party identification (Shively 1979). If voters are less familiar with the policy positions of parties, they have to rely more on information shortcuts as the left-right scale. We shall check subsequently whether the condition of less familiarity with policy positions does indeed apply to East Germans compared to West Germans.

The mean placements of parties are very similar in both parts of Germany.<sup>2</sup> There exist only slight differences due to a somewhat larger left-right polarization in East Germany. Identifying themselves as more leftist than the West Germans, the East Germans place the two socialist parties more to the left and the extremist right parties to the right. The leftmost party in the West are the Greens who are perceived closer to the middle categories by East Germans. This relatively large difference, compared to the slight differences of the means for CDU and CSU, may reflect the legacy of Bündnis 90 as an anticommunist citizens' movement, whereas the original West German Greens of the 1980's also encompassed former members of communist student organizations.

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<sup>2</sup> In the two-sample t Test for independently drawn samples the null hypothesis that the means in West and East Germany are the same cannot be rejected for SPD, CDU, CSU and FDP at the significance level of 1%.

**Table 1**  
**Placements of parties and self on left-right scale**

West Germany				
Parties	% Second Votes 1998	Valid survey responses % of N = 1106	left-right placements	
			mean	standard deviation
SPD	42.2	87.3	4.24	1.63
CDU	28.7	86.8	7.34	1.89
CSU	8.4	86.4	8.15	2.10
Greens	7.3	84.7	3.46	1.82
FDP	7.0	83.7	6.54	1.69
Rep	1.9	85.1	9.92	2.53
PDS	1.2	80.1	3.48	3.47
DVU	0.8	78.3	9.69	2.91
	-	86.4	5.45	2.00

East Germany				
Parties	% Second Votes 1998	Valid survey responses % of N = 527	left-right placements	
			mean	standard deviation
SPD	35.1	90.7	4.11	1.42
CDU	27.3	90.5	7.31	1.88
CSU	-	88.6	8.19	2.13
PDS	21.6	89.9	2.44	1.92
Greens	4.1	87.5	4.09	1.54
FDP	3.3	86.7	6.76	1.75
DVU	2.8	86.0	10.35	1.86
Rep	1.5	89.4	10.39	1.88
Self	-	90.3	4.87	1.91

### 3.2 Method: constructing a joint scale

When respondents are asked to rate parties on a manifest left-right scale, their answers can be interpreted as expert ratings, so one could apply Thurstone's law of comparative judgement (1960). We have, of course, not asked which of every pair of parties is more leftist so that we could infer the party positions from the error distribution of the discriminant process. But we can rely on this logic and compare the ideological distances between two neighboring parties with the two standard deviations of the respective party ratings. What we learn from such an analysis is the fact that the ideological distances between two neighboring parties are never larger than the larger of the respective parties' standard deviation, with one exception and that is the relative large left-right distance between SPD and FDP, e.g. the distance crossing the scale's midpoint. Thus, the respondents as "experts" may frequently turn around the order of two left or two right parties, less probably the order of a left and a right party. Our task is to find a unique joint scale or space which gives the best approximation of a shared ideological party space. We rely on principal component analysis to recover this space assuming that most of the joint variance and that is the first component, refers explicitly to the manifest content of the ideological evaluations. But first we transform the input data in a psychologically meaningful way.

From Table 1, the differences of party means can be computed. Thereby, the individual differences between respondents are summarized twice, for the first and second party e.g., and then the distance between the parties follows from these two aggregate measures. As an alternative, we could sum individual differences and compute the one mean of these differences. In order to represent these distances in a coordinate system, we need a common reference point which has the same meaning for all respondents. In our case, this could be the midpoint of the scale because of the scale wording and the rigorous order of SPD and FDP. Because of the scale itself and because of the relatively large distance between the rightmost left party and the leftmost right party, we assume that respondents use the scale midpoint as their point of comparison, first guessing whether a party is left or right and second estimating the distance from this midpoint.

Given two parties  $j$  and  $j'$ , respondent  $i$  ( $\in 1, \dots, n$ ) reports his or her estimates  $x_{ij}$  and  $x_{ij'}$  of the ideological position of  $j$  and  $j'$  on the original scale which is presented to him or her as a horizontal graph of eleven contiguously ordered quadrangles and the labels "left" on the left side and "right" on the right side. Numbering these quadrangles from 1 to 11, 6 is the midpoint so that the  $x_{ij}$  for each party  $j$  ( $j \in 1, \dots, m$ ) are transformed by subtracting 6.

$$(1) y_{ij} = x_{ij} - 6$$

Treating now each respondent as a separate coordinate, we compute the mean of the squared Euclidean distances, say between party  $j$  and  $j'$ :

$$(2) d_{j,j'}^2 = \frac{1}{n} \sum_i (y_{ij} - y_{ij'})^2 = \frac{1}{n} \left\{ \sum_i y_{ij}^2 + \sum_i y_{ij'}^2 - 2 \sum_i y_{ij} y_{ij'} \right\}$$

Normally, these individual distances are centered around their mean, giving:

$$(3) d_{j,j'}^2 = \frac{1}{n} \sum_i (y_{ij} - \bar{y}_j)^2 + \sum_i (y_{ij'} - \bar{y}_{j'})^2 - 2 \sum_i (y_{ij} - \bar{y}_j) (y_{ij'} - \bar{y}_{j'})$$

or

$$(4) d_{j,j'}^2 = \text{var}(y_j) + \text{var}(y_{j'}) - \text{covar}(y_j, y_{j'})$$

With eight instead of two parties we get a symmetric variance-covariance matrix from which we can then extract the principal components. Assuming that two principal components are necessary to explain most of the variance, the distances between parties are now approximated by the respective loadings  $l_{j1}$  and  $l_{j2}$ :

$$(5) d_{j,j'}^2 = (l_{j1} - l_{j'1})^2 + (l_{j2} - l_{j'2})^2 = (l_{j1}^2 + l_{j2}^2) + (l_{j'1}^2 + l_{j'2}^2) - 2(l_{j1} l_{j'1} + l_{j2} l_{j'2}) = \\ = \text{communality}(y_j) \text{var}(y_j) + \text{communality}(y_{j'}) \text{var}(y_{j'}) - 2 \text{covar}(y_j, y_{j'})$$

Thus, the mean of the squared distances between two parties in n-dimensional space can be approximated by the loadings of a principal components analysis in a space of few dimensions. In order to keep the midpoint of the left-right scale also as a reference point for the joint space, we skip the centering of the data around their means. Concretely we factor the matrix resulting from equation (2) for all pairs of parties directly.

As a last step of this analysis, the individual component scores  $f_i$  are computed, assuming a two-dimensional solution. Then we are able to estimate the original  $y_{ij}$  as follows:

$$(6) \hat{y}_{ij} = f_{i1} \cdot l_{j1} + f_{i2} \cdot l_{j2}$$

That is, the original survey response is decomposed into two party loadings, representing the position of party  $j$  in the resulting two-dimensional space, times the respective individual component scores. Ideally all respondents should have similar views of this common space, allowing only more or less polarization along the dimensions. The larger the positive value of  $f_{i1}$ , the larger the manifest scale value of that party with the highest positive loading and the smaller the value given to the party with the lowest loading by this particular individual. Since the relationship between latent and manifest scale is linear, the  $f_{i1}$  or  $f_{i2}$  are not party specific, but dimension specific. Hinich and Munger label the component or factor scores translation coefficients, since they tell us for every respondent how he or she translates the latent party positions into party locations on manifest scales (1994: 148-150).

We are able to test the assumption of a common latent space by checking whether the respondents do at least agree on the sign of the  $f_i$ 's. When the translation coefficients vary a lot, then this indicates heterogeneity of the analyzed population with respect to their ideological understandings.

### 3.3 Results

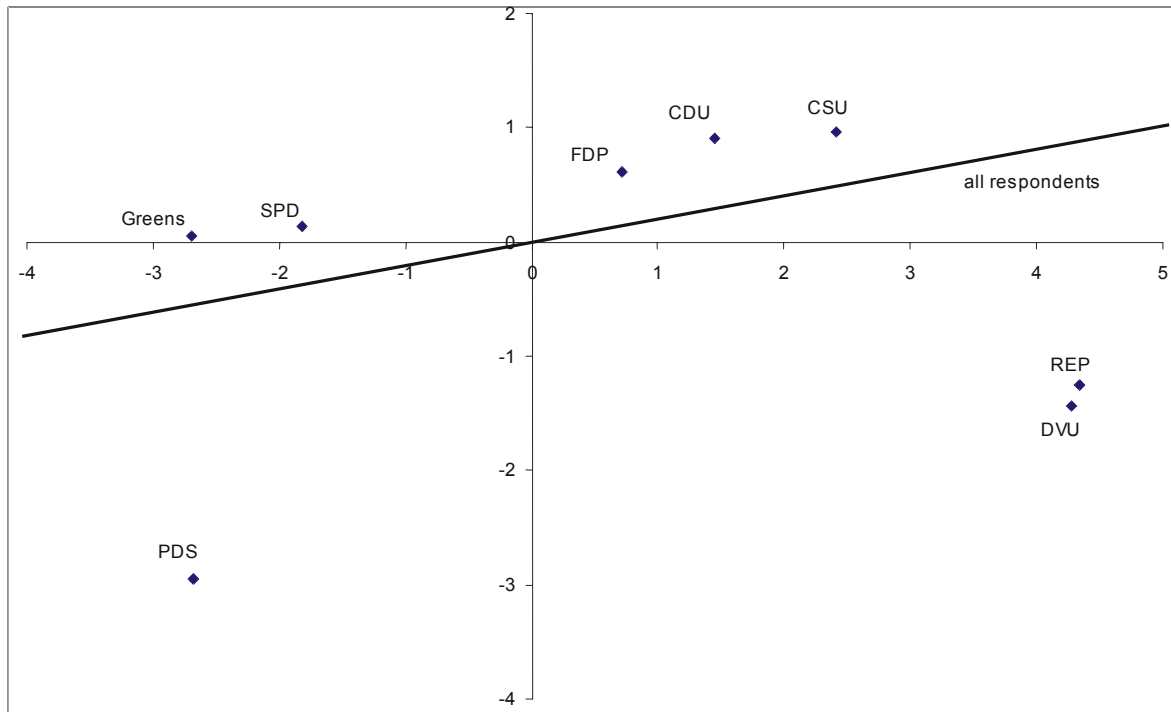
Turning now to the results of our principal component analysis (see Table 2), it is not astonishing that the first component explains a very big share of the total variance of parties' left-right placements. The input data are after all answers to one manifest ideological scale and not similarity judgements or preference data on parties from which factors would be extracted whose meaning is open to the interpretive skills of the researcher. We do not hesitate to interpret the first component as the shared understanding of left and right as applied to parties among West and East German respondents. The loadings replicate the picture we already know from the means on the manifest scale; the larger polarization of these means in East Germany reemerges as the higher percentage explained by the first component in East Germany than in West Germany. What we learn in addition to the left-right placements is variation on a second dimension underlying the answers of respondents to the left-right questions. Concerning this second component, the loadings of the extremist parties both on the left and right side have negative signs and are placed opposite the established parties CDU, CSU, FDP, SPD and Greens. Drawn as a graph (see Figure 1), the West German configuration reminds of the famous horseshoe pattern often reported as the result of smallest space analyses of party ratings or Bobbio's conceptualization. We interpret this second component, at least in West Germany, as the degree of radicalism in the sense of non-established vs. established parties. The more negative the loading, the more radicalism is associated with the respective party. Interestingly, the West Germans perceive the PDS as the most radical party, more radical than the Republikaner or DVU, whereas the East Germans do not share this understanding but see the PDS as more extremist on the left-right

**Table 2**  
Results of a principal components analysis of left-right placements of political parties\*

Parties	West Germany		East Germany	
	Loadings		Loadings	
	$l_1$	$l_2$	$l_1$	$l_2$
CDU	1.45	0.91	1.66	1.52
CSU	2.41	0.96	2.65	1.67
FDP	0.71	0.61	1.04	1.17
SPD	-1.82	0.14	-1.92	0.60
Greens	-2.70	0.06	-1.92	0.58
PDS	-2.68	-2.95	-3.74	-0.03
Rep	4.34	-1.25	4.61	-0.74
DVU	4.28	-1.43	4.59	-0.57
Eigenvalue	63.35	14.45	74.44	8.05
Explained variance	0.68	0.16	0.81	0.09

\* Input is the variance-covariance matrix according to equation (2).

**Figure 1**  
**The joint ideological space in West Germany: Party loadings and the median of the translation coefficients for all respondents**



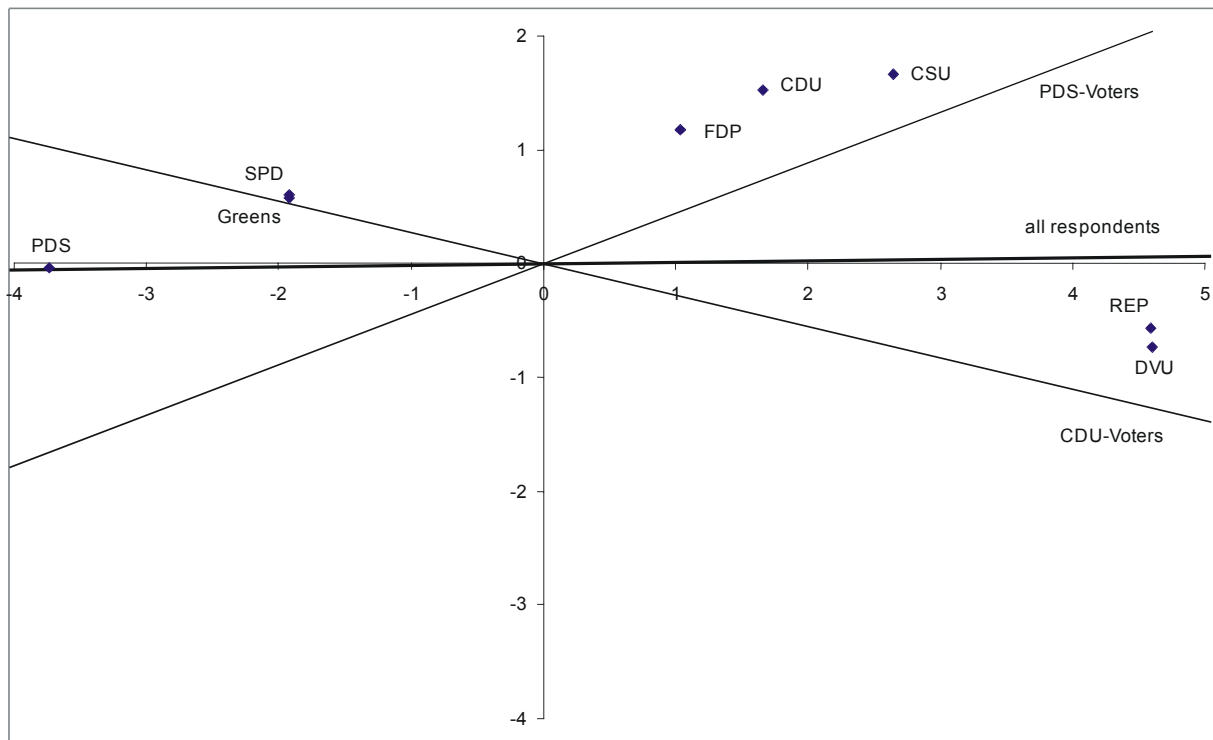
dimension, but not very radical. Overall, the East Germans discriminate less on this second dimension.

We now ask whether it is justified to interpret the party configuration as a joint space, e.g. as a collective configuration as perceived by the overwhelming majority of citizens and not as an aggregate picture of diverse individual perceptions like a mean of 6 for a party which is rated 1 by half of the respondents and 11 by the other half.

The straight lines in bold type running through the origin of the coordinates in Figure 1 and 2 are the medians of the translation coefficients for all respondents; the thinner lines represent the medians of CDU- and PDS-voters in East Germany. This East German solution is a good example of population heterogeneity concerning the second dimension. CDU and PDS voters have very similar translation coefficients for the first dimension and coefficients even differing in sign for the second dimension. Thus, they cannot have the same understanding of this second dimension. A major reason for the necessity of a second dimension is that voters of left parties perceive parties' ideological position on the first dimension differently from voters of a right party, here first of all CDU-voters. Seen from the latter's perspective, the ideological positions of SPD and PDS move together, whereas the distance between CSU and the two right-wing parties increases. Left voters, first of all those of the PDS, perceive the left-right differences between parties the other way around so that the ideological distance between CSU and DVU or Republikaner shrinks. These diverse perspectives add up to a



**Figure 2**  
**The joint ideological space in East Germany: Party loadings and medians of the translation coefficients for all respondents and for CDU and PDS voters**



median translation coefficient of almost 0 for the second dimension. Thus, we conclude that the East Germans do not really use a symmetric common criterion of degree of radicalism when evaluating parties. Though in their view, the PDS is the leftmost party and therefore extremist, it is not radical in the sense of an anti-system party against the established parties either of the left or the right.

In West Germany, one can stronger argue in favor of a second dimension in its own right. The median of the translation coefficient of all respondents is positive ( $f_2 = 0,21$ ), even if also here some groups of voters do not share this understanding. But these are minorities, characteristically voters of non-established rightwing parties like Republikaner or DVU. Since the voters of the established parties including the Greens agree on their perspectives of the party system not only with respect to the first but also with respect to the second dimension, we conclude that this second dimension can be interpreted as a common radicalism dimension opposing the established insider to the radical outsider parties both on the left and the right.

But over and above these subtleties of interpreting the second dimension, one has to emphasize the major result of our analysis: The German electorate in both parts of the country has a common understanding of the left-right dimension as applied to the parties, only the former East German communists are perceived differently. West Germans perceive it as a non-established party sharing its position on the left-right scale with the Greens, whereas for the East Germans, the PDS is clearly the leftmost party without any radical flavor. This collectively shared ideological perception of the parties

on the first dimension will be used to predict the perceptions of the parties' policy positions. The degree to which these predictions are successful will tell us how well the left-right schema does indeed function as an orientation device in actual politics.

#### **4. The perception of party positions on policy scales**

Parties compete for votes by claiming to have the best policies and the most competent politicians to govern the country. Voters do, of course, prefer competent to incompetent politicians and they are not easy to fool by advertising campaigns alone. Thus, it is difficult for parties to influence their politicians' images in the short run. But parties and their politicians have some leeway in advocating policy options which they think are attractive for voters and at the same time not too far away from their own ideological standpoints so that these options are seen as credible.

Two research plans are possible. The one is to factor analyze perceived policy positions of parties across several issues and see whether the party loadings are the same or very similar to the party scores on a manifest ideological scale. These loadings do represent the positions of parties in latent ideological space in the double sense that the original manifest perceptions do not have direct ideological content and that factor analysis has recovered a latent space which is interpreted in ideological terms by the researcher.

Since we have already identified parties' ideological positions and have presented evidence of their collective character, we apply a second research strategy. We will run regressions to predict the perceived policy positions of parties with the party loadings on the first principal component of our analysis of the left-right scale (see Table 2). Since each respondent had to rate several parties, the regression parameters can be computed for the individuals separately with the usual analysis of covariance test of parallel regression lines. Then we are able to compare issues in terms of their agreement with the left-right ideological conflict of German politics. Severe conflicts in policy domains which are not structured by the left-right distinction between parties should have the potential to break up the party system. But as long as the major cleavage runs between the two large parties of the left and right, the SPD and CDU, the more probable development are slight adjustments of the positions of the minor parties. They may change their left-right placement, caused by coalitional decisions e.g. or they may move into main stream party politics on this scale from the outside of an anti-establishment party.

A major problem of issue voting is that many voters are not familiar with the issues discussed by political elites and the media. Only recently, Converse has discussed the consequences of the "maldistribution" of political information within the electorate for voting studies and reinstated his old advice from 1964 "to interpret research findings in terms of layers of the electorate generating any particular body of data" (2000: 335). But instead of stratifying the electorate into "ideologues", "near ideologues", and according to further levels of conceptualization till the last group of "no issue content"

is reached (Converse 1964: 212-16), we opt for another strategy. We conceive degrees of familiarity with issues also as issue and situation specific and will focus our attention on these determinants.

First of all, it is important whether people care about the problem or not, and have therefore preferences concerning its solution. Second, they need information on the solutions advocated by parties, but they themselves have not to be ideologues in Converse's sense of "active" users of ideological dimensions of judgement with consequences of constraints among their own attitudes. An ideological dimension as an orientation device as developed by Downs and modified by Hinich and collaborators is a much less demanding concept.

The degree of opinion formation about the policy problem within the general electorate can be measured by more or less sophisticated methods. We rely on the simplest method and compare the percentages of respondents across issues who answered "don't know" to the questions on their own opinion. These percentages serve then as a baseline of comparison for the "don't know" replies to the questions on perceived party positions. We presume that respondents have much more difficulties answering the belief than the attitude questions. This presumption is not self-evident in every case. As we know from Table 1, the party with the highest percentage of valid answers to the left-right question was the SPD; 87,3 per cent of the West and 90,7 per cent of the East Germans rated this party on the manifest scale. And the response rate of the self placements is about the same and not significantly higher.

This situation is quite different for the issue questions. We exemplify our approach by analyzing four position issues which were included in German preelection studies of the 1998 Bundestag election: The ideal topmost income tax, policy options for atomic energy, immigration policy and further European integration. All these questions were asked in the format of a policy scale presented to the respondents with labelled endpoints. The percentage of valid answers was highest for immigration, followed by European integration and atomic energy which still were well above 90 per cent in East and West Germany. Only the percentages of "don't know" for the income tax question dropped below 90 per cent to 87 among West Germans and 83 among East Germans. Contrary to the left-right question, many more respondents lost their way when asked about party positions, especially concerning the small parties. Thus, almost two thirds of the respondents were not able to tell the position of the DVU towards atomic energy, but also 50 per cent in West Germany and 39 per cent in East Germany did not know the position of the PDS either. In general, the "don't know" can be arranged as a Guttman scale for each issue with the dominant pattern being CDU at the top, followed by SPD, FDP and Greens. There are two exceptions. The position of the Greens is the best-known position concerning atomic energy, and the right-wing parties Republikaner and DVU outdistance the PDS concerning immigration and, only in West Germany, also concerning European integration (cf. Pappi et al. 2000).

Here, we have to ask how far we want to stretch the concept of issue voting in multiparty systems. Should a meaningful issue voting only be possible if a voter has a complete overview of the policy offers of all parties? Surely not. In the German system, a voter perceiving only the positions of the two

large parties has enough information to cast a vote for one of them. Not all parties, especially not the minor ones, have to be included in the choice sets of all voters. Thus, the layers of information in multiparty systems may be organized by choice sets and less by political sophistication in general. These different choice sets have to be taken into account when the voting decision in multiparty systems has to be explained.

But since we are aiming at testing the correspondence between ideological and policy positions of parties, it makes sense to include as many parties as possible, paying attention at the same time to the condition that the relevant subsamples do not become too small. Thus, we decided to include four parties into the West German and five parties into the East German analysis. With CDU and CSU combined to one party in all issue questions, we included in addition SPD, FDP and Greens in the West German analysis and add the PDS in the East German analysis. The ideological position of CDU/CSU was computed as a weighted mean of their loadings, the weights being their relative share of seats.

The percent of respondents fulfilling the condition of valid data for four parties in West Germany and five parties in East Germany varies between 75.9 and 50.8. As one could expect from the results of the questions on issue attitudes, the income tax question caused most difficulties for the perception of party positions. Only 58.4 percent of the West Germans and 50.8 percent of the East Germans were able to assess the party positions. The percentages for the other three issues are higher, ranging from 71.3 percent (European integration) to 75.9 percent (immigration) in West Germany and from 54.8 percent (atomic energy) to 66.0 percent (European integration) in East Germany. One can, of course, argue that the task for the East Germans was more difficult because they had to estimate policy positions of five instead of four parties. But on the other side, the party causing the difficulties in the East is the third largest party, the PDS, and not a party which does not receive many votes anyhow. Thus we conclude that the East Germans had more problems to get informed about the policies advocated by the German parties eight years after unification, even if they could understand the left-right scale very well. Their problem was to learn what ideology means for the policy standpoints of the parties. These policies have a history going back to the Federal Republic of Germany before unification, the history of which is, of course, less familiar to the East Germans.

#### **4.1 Method: Covariance-Analysis**

How well do the parties' ideological positions now predict their perceived policy positions on the four issue scales? Knowing the history of the left-right distinction, one conjecture is that left-right has the best predictive power for economic, tax and welfare policy, but it could also be, especially in West Germany, that the meaning of left-right has absorbed "new politics" issues as protection of the environment or atomic energy. Also immigration is often discussed as a philanthropic issue concerning asylum and less as a labor market policy. We expect the least correspondence between ideology and policy issues for European integration which was never discussed in left-right terms among Germany's established parties.

Statistically, we estimate the following equation for each issue:

$$(7) \quad \hat{x}_{ij} = \beta_i I_i + \gamma L_j + \delta_i I_i L_j$$

Given perceptions  $x_{ij}$  of respondent  $i \in 1, 2, \dots, n$  for party  $j \in 1, 2, \dots, m$ , we first stack to data matrices so that we get  $n \times m$  observations. Variable  $I_i$  refers to the identification number coded as  $n-1$  dummy variables for all respondents whose  $m$  perceived policy positions are analysed.  $L_j$  is our measure of party  $j$ 's ideological position which does not vary between individuals because we use the loadings on component 1 from Table 2. And  $I_i L_j$  records the interaction between the respective variables so that  $\gamma + \delta_i$  is the estimate of the slope of the regression line for individual  $i$ . We are interested in the sign and the steepness of the slope. The steeper the slope, the wider the gap between left and right parties on the issue scale, whereas the sign tells us whether right parties have a high issue scale value (positive sign) or a low value (negative sign).

According to the theory of Hinich and Munger (1994), the  $\delta_i$  are allowed to have an impact on individual's perceptions so long as most respondents agree on the sign of  $\gamma + \delta_i$ . The larger the minority viewing the correspondence between ideological and issue scale the other way around, the less useful is ideology as a common orientation device.

Ideally, the  $\delta_i$  would not pass a significance test so that the common ideological positions of parties alone determine the translation coefficient on which all respondents agree except from small random fluctuations. The only remaining parameters to be estimated from equation (7) are then the  $\beta_i$  as respondent specific intercepts. They tell us where on the issue scale  $i$  centers his or her perceptions compared to the midpoint of 0 on the left-right scale. We do not have specific hypotheses about these intercepts, except the one that longer rating scales will explain more of the total variance of the  $x_{ij}$  than shorter scales as the usual 1 to 7 scales.

The question on the topmost income tax allowed answers from a tax rate of 20 to one of 80 and we expect that respondents will associate higher tax rates with left parties so that the  $\gamma + \delta_i$  should be negative. The other three issue questions apply the usual 1 to 7 format with labelled end points, the value 7 indicating a "left" position for atomic energy (powering down atomic energy) and "right" positions for immigration (less immigration) and for European integration (integration has already gone too far). Thus, one could expect a positive sign for the translation coefficients for immigration and for that issue which was not discussed in left-right terms among the established parties, namely European integration. And we should not forget that we had to leave out the small right-wing parties due to missing observations.

## 4.2 Results

First, we have to test whether we need the full model (7) with all parameters or not. In Table 3, the mean squares are listed for each model parameter and, with two exceptions, all three sources of variation are significant. The exception is the issue of atomic energy in East Germany where only the common  $\gamma$ -parameter is significant. But this seems not to be the ideal situation anticipated because

**Table 3**  
**The explanatory power of model (7)**

Issue	R <sup>2</sup> of model without $\beta$ -effects <sup>1</sup>	Mean squares for parameter estimates		
		$\beta_i$	$\gamma$	$\delta_i$
West Germany				
Top Income Tax: High	0.564	235.69*	6483.84*	157.18*
Immigration : Negative	0.728	3.33*	2429.47*	3.80*
Atomic energy: Positive	0.797	1.91*	7251.38*	2.82*
European integration: Negative	0.667	5.46*	626.70*	2.39*
East Germany				
Top Income tax: High	0.615	428.69*	7873.34*	289.69*
Immigration : Negative	0.611	5.17*	295.06*	4.66*
Atomic energy: Positive	0.516	2.64	1441.97*	3.08
European integration: Negative	0.626	4.50*	1008.87*	2.66*

<sup>1</sup>) Corrected  $R^2 = (SS_{\text{Model}} - SS_{\beta}) / (SS_{\text{Total}} - SS_{\beta})$

\* probability for null hypothesis < .01

the model fit is rather poor ( $R^2 = 0.516$ ) compared to the other corrected  $R^2$ . For the sake of uncomplicated comparisons, we will interpret the estimates of the full model in this case, too. But we have corrected the computation of the  $R^2$  by deleting variance due to the  $\beta_i$ , since this is an idiosyncratic source of variation in which we are not interested.

We interpret the  $R^2$ s as indicators of the left-right content of the issues. The higher  $R^2$ , the better can the perceptions of the policy positions of parties be predicted linearly by the common understanding of left and right as applied to parties. This prediction is influenced to a greater extent by the parties at the margins than by parties nearer to the midpoint of the ideological scale. Evaluated from this perspective, it is not astonishing that the two “new politics” issues immigration and atomic energy result in higher  $R^2$  in the West where the Greens are the leftmost party, and that the topmost income tax rate results in a higher  $R^2$  in the East where the PDS is the leftmost party. Contrary to our expectations, European integration also seems to be well linked to the left-right schema. We will see when interpreting Table 4 that this result tells us more about perceived policy differences between the left and rightmost party than about ideology in substantive terms.

Table 4

**The slope parameters ( $\gamma + \delta_i$ ) of model (7): Means and percentages  
of respondents having positive, zero, and negative slopes**

Issue	Means of slopes	Percentages with		
		positive	zero slopes	negative
West Germany				
Top Income Tax: High	- 0.942	37.1	3.6	<u>59.3</u>
Immigration : Negative	+ 0.481	<u>79.4</u>	3.7	16.9
Atomic energy : Positive	- 0.839	5.7	0.7	<u>93.6</u>
European integration: Negative	- 0.367	<u>19.4</u>	14.3	66.3
East Germany				
Top Income tax: High	- 1.214	36.7	5.6	<u>57.8</u>
Immigration : Negative	+ 0.203	<u>64.6</u>	4.5	31.0
Atomic energy: Positive	- 0.484	11.1	-	<u>88.9</u>
European integration: Negative	- 0.252	<u>11.7</u>	2.6	85.8

Given the fact that we need both  $\gamma$  and  $\delta_i$  to achieve a good fit to the data, we turn now to the theoretically most important results, the means of the slope parameters and the percentages of respondents agreeing in the predicted sign of the slopes (see Table 4). Starting with the signs, all expectations are confirmed with the exception of European integration. This issue is positively linked to the right parties and that means first of all to the CDU/CSU, and negatively associated with left parties, and this means the Greens in West and the PDS in East Germany. The percentage of respondents sharing this view is larger among East than among West Germans (85.8 per cent instead of 66.3 per cent), indicating that the PDS is perceived as more anti-European than the Greens.

The issue showing most consensus is atomic energy, reflecting the dominance of this policy conflict in the 1980s and 1990s in Germany. The correspondence between left and right and policy positions on immigration is also close, even if the slope is less steep than for atomic energy. It is reassuring for the party identity serving character of left-right that the slope is steepest for the "old politics" issue of income tax and steeper in East than in West Germany, the problem being the comparatively low agreement regarding the negative slope. We concede that the question wording may be responsible

for this result. Issue questions concerning abstract principles instead of concrete social groups demand a lot of attention from survey respondents. Generally, formulating survey questions becomes a major difficulty if one wants to maximize policy content as discussed by the political elites and the media.

## **Interpretation and conclusion**

We have used political parties as anchor points of voters' ideological reasoning. This is not the "active use of ideological dimensions of judgment" as conceptualized by Converse (1964: 214), but a capability of voters to utilize ideological labels when asked about the left-right positions of parties. What we have shown is first that the West German and the East German electorate each have a shared understanding of their parties' left-right position and second that, depending on the issue domain and the difficulty of the policy question, majorities of German voters interpret the policy standpoints of parties in a way compatible with the meaning of left-right as discussed by the political elites and the media. These latter results are an important finding corroborating the theory of Hinich and Munger (1994).

In Germany, the party system provides favorable boundary conditions for a test of this theory. The Social Democrats are perceived as a moderate left and the Christian Democrats as a moderate right party and these two parties together dominate the German party system with a vote share of about three fourths in Bundestag elections. They function as important anchor points in policy conflicts and when the SPD offers a policy option compatible with a left ideology, a competing option offered by the CDU/CSU is easily labelled as right. The same logic applies, of course, when the CDU/CSU initiates a policy option compatible with a conservative or right ideology. Thereby, the left-right distinction can easily adopt new meaning elements, if and only if the identity of the two major parties remains intact. These identities are rooted in the traditional social cleavages of German politics, the Social Democrats being perceived as a party favoring the lower classes and the Christian Democrats as the conservative pole of the religious cleavage. But given these constraints, other meaning elements can be integrated flexibly into this ideological framework. This explains e.g. that market liberalism is not automatically the opposite of a social democratic welfare state.

The nature of political competition in a party system dominated by two parties reinforces "un dualism des tendances" (Duverger 1967: 245). In such a situation, voters do not really need much orientation from ideology to learn about the policy positions of the two major parties. But it is nevertheless a finding in its own right that a majority of voters agree in their view of a linkage between the ideological and policy positions of the parties.

How far does this agreement go? Does it include the smaller parties? And do the ideological positions of the smaller parties have the same orientation function in many policy domains, even if the policy positions of parties, as documented in party platforms etc. deviate partially from the left-right order of



parties? If yes, this would be stronger evidence supporting the Hinich/Munger theory of ideology than the findings presented in this paper.

We have argued that the minor parties have an important impact on the meaning of left and right if they successfully assert themselves as parties more extreme than either SPD or CDU/CSU and being at the same time accepted as players in established politics. The first condition refers to public attention and the second condition refers to visibility across issue domains. These two conditions are fulfilled by different parties in West and East Germany. In West Germany, the Greens are placed at the leftmost position with the consequence that the meaning of being left changed from traditional social democratic issue positions in favor of social welfare for the lower classes to “new politics” issues as first of all giving priority to protection of the environment against economic growth. In East Germany, the leftmost position of the PDS strengthens the welfare and income redistribution issues of the old left.

This interpretation should be further corroborated by showing that the latent dimension underlying the manifest perceptions of parties' policy standpoints across various domains reflects the joint left-right order which we have derived from manifest left-right placements of parties. As we have shown in another paper (Pappi et al. 2000), the latent policy dimensions are very sensitive to issue domains. Thus, even in West Germany the PDS may appear in the extreme left position if one focuses on redistributive issues, being replaced by the Greens even in East Germany if one focuses on “new politics”-issues (Pappi et al. 2000: 45). This means that the shared ideological dimension we identified in each part of Germany is better applicable for “new politics”-issues in the West and “old politics”-issues in the East, so that the meaning of left and right does indeed reflect the dominant issue concerns of the respective electorates.

The close correspondence between ideological and policy positions of parties was shown to exist for established parties, whereas small extremist outsiders have problems to be recognized as possible suppliers of concrete policy options. But they can be perceived at the same time in terms of their ideological leanings. If the ideological space would strictly be unidimensional then it would be an easier task for mass publics to extrapolate the policy meaning of extreme left or right positions. But we identified two ideological dimensions, the first being the left-right distinction and the second distinguishing established from non-established parties. Concerning the first dimension we found an overwhelming consensus, whereas the second dimension seems to be less a dimension in its own right, especially in East Germany, but can also be interpreted as a consequence of the different perspectives left and right voters have regarding this ideological dimension.

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