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Ties that No Longer Bind?

Effects and Responsiveness of Party Attachments in a Period of Crises

Lea Gärtner, Harald Schoen, and Alexander Wuttke

Introduction

Like many Western democracies, Germany has undergone a period of dealignment (Dalton 2012). As partisan independents are particularly likely to switch their vote from one election to the next (Schoen 2003), the erosion of party attachments makes the electorate more responsive to external changes and the partisan balance more flexible. However, it may also undermine the stability of the party system. Party attachments serve as a stabilizing force because party identifiers often stick to their parties despite their parties' inability to meet their demands. Moreover, some party identifiers may even adjust their positions to the party line to accommodate unexpected policy shifts. This is because their attachments provide a perceptual screen, which structures and stabilizes political attitudes and behavior (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Bartels 2002; Green et al. 2002; Lenz 2012). Although the notion might be unappealing to proponents of bottom-up theories of democracy (Achen and Bartels 2016), party identification may thus inhibit, or at least limit, protest voting and party defection. Consequently, it may enable (mainstream) parties and the party system as such to survive severe social, economic, or political challenges forcing unpopular political decisions largely unscathed. For the German political system, the European debt crisis and the European refugee crisis represented such challenges, which may have underscored the importance of party attachments as a stabilizing force.

However, serious societal challenges not only emphasize the desirability of party attachments as a stabilizing force but may also undermine partisan ties. While it is widely accepted that ties to political parties shape perceptions of the political context, they do not completely blind party adherents to the political reality (e.g., Redlawsk et al. 2010). Under certain circumstances, partisan attachments may be weakened or even abandoned or changed (Campbell et al. 1960; Green et al.

2002). For instance, parties may have to make policy choices that contradict their traditional policy stances in order to cope with severe internal and external challenges. Although party supporters may ignore or reinterpret such policy changes as matching their own preferences, crises increase the salience of political choices. Party identifiers are thus more likely to perceive the mismatch between their preferences and their party's policies in times of crisis. Such feelings of dissonance are likely to disaffect party supporters, some of whom may choose to abandon their partisan ties. Along these lines, the societal challenges faced by the German political system in the last decade may have undermined the attachments of party identifiers in the German electorate, potentially furthering the dealignment process or even engendering realignment. Party identifiers may have learned that their policy preferences are at odds with policies pursued by the party they identify with. In turn, attachments to parties in government that were considered responsible for resolving crises may have weakened or even eroded. Rather than underscoring the stabilizing function of party attachments, these challenges may thus have shaken the prevalence and balance of party attachments in Germany. Against this backdrop, we examine how identifiers' policy positions and party attachments have changed during the debt and refugee crises, considering their perceptions of parties' policies.

Party Attachments in Periods of Crises

The role of party identification as a force of its own, guiding identifiers' perceptions, attitudes, and behavior, has been at the heart of the concept since its inception (Campbell et al. 1960). Nowadays, it is widely accepted that the relationship between party identification and novel experiences is flexible (e.g., Leeper and Slothuus 2014). Accordingly, party attachments, understood as psychological bonds, may induce partisan motivated reasoning (e.g., Campbell et al. 1960; Redlawsk 2002; Taber and Lodge 2006) and guide voters' political perception, information processing, and decision-making (e.g., Evans and Pickup 2010; Huddy et al. 2015). The degree to which party attachments exert these effects may depend on several individual-level and contextual factors. For example, strong partisan ties are more resistant to change and exert stronger effects on perceptions, attitudes, and behavior than weak ones. Moreover, high levels of partisan polarization increase the salience of party attachments and thus make partisan considerations more accessible to voters (e.g., Druckman et al. 2013; also Jerit and Barabas 2012; Nicholson 2012). Accordingly, strong identifiers may be particularly inclined to vote for their party and support its politicians, performance, and policies in political environments in which party attachments are highly salient.

However, even in periods of high polarization, parties cannot always count on the unconditional support of their adherents. This suggests that partisan motivated

reasoning has limits and that other factors may also influence political information processing (e.g., Redlawsk et al. 2010). The political information citizens receive usually consists not only of partisan cues but also speaks to self-interest, other identities, values, and attitudes. Depending on voters' perception of partisan cues and the importance they attach to relevant predispositions, the latter may come into play as a force of their own. In other words, the impact of party attachments may also depend on the weight party identifiers give to other predispositions. Accordingly, even strong identifiers may disapprove of their party leader's misconduct or oppose a policy proposed by their party if novel information suggests that their party did or proposed something that is at odds with a strongly held predisposition (e.g., Schoen et al. 2017a). If this dissonance is large, party identifiers may even be willing to reconsider their party attachment (Jennings and Markus 1984).

In real-world politics, conditions are usually quite favorable for party attachments. Most parties pay close attention not to change policy positions too quickly to prevent challenging their supporters' preferences (e.g., Adams 2012; Adams et al. 2014). Moreover, parties' policy positions, like the outcomes of government action, are seldom unequivocal, but rather ambiguous, providing parties and their adherents with considerable leeway for interpretation and frequently allowing identifiers to project their own policy positions on their parties (e.g., Brody and Page 1972; RePass 1976; Parker-Stephen 2013; Bisgaard 2015). In times of crisis, however, parties may have to make hard choices and, consequently, implement policies that contradict their traditional stance to limit the fallout of severe societal challenges. Because crises raise public attention, such contradictory policies tend to be highly visible and less open to interpretation. In consequence, crises increase the probability that party identifiers are confronted with information that puts their party affiliation at odds with other vital attitudes. In this vein, large-scale events that challenge many adherents' party images have the potential to shake party affiliations and lead to a shift in the balance of party attachments in the electorate (Key 1959; Campbell et al. 1960: Chapters. 7, 19; Carmines and Stimson 1989).

Germany in Times of Crises

Over the last decade, political discourse in Germany has focused heavily on a series of crises, including the European debt crisis and the European refugee crisis. To derive convincing expectations about party identifiers' reactions to these crises, we require a thorough analysis of the flow of events, in general, and the behavior of parties, in particular. A crisis must be severe in several respects to shake deeply ingrained party identifications. First, it must be salient enough to surpass the threshold of awareness. Second, because party attachments are central

to identifiers' belief systems, challenging them requires a crisis to touch upon an issue that is considered equally important. Third, the crisis must either draw attention to parties' positions on an issue that had not been salient prior to the crisis or force parties to revise their positions on an issue. If this is not the case, party adherents are unlikely to perceive any changes in the position of their party and hence have no reason to adopt the party position or to reconsider their attachment. In short, a crisis needs to be salient, speak to an important issue, and change identifiers' perceptions of parties' positions in order to affect party attachments.

While many events described as political crises unfold without capturing the attention of a larger public, the two crises named above were, without doubt, very salient in citizens' minds (cf. [Kratz and Schoen 2017](#)). The European debt crisis entered German public awareness in 2010 when the Eurozone countries passed the first European bailout package for Greece and the resolution to establish a European Stability Mechanism (ESM). In September 2011, public interest and media coverage skyrocketed after Bundestag and Bundesrat had approved an extension of the German guarantees and agreed to cut Greek debt by 50 percent three months later ([Appendix 1](#); [Picard 2015](#)). Attention to the European refugee crisis rose sharply in 2015 when more than one million asylum seekers crossed the German border. Their arrival was extensively covered by the media and elicited heated discussions about immigration policies at all levels of society. All in all, these events were ubiquitous both in terms of media coverage and their prevalence in political debates at the time.

Besides being highly salient, the crises also revolved around issues most citizens consider important, namely financial security and immigration attitudes (e.g., [Snyderman et al. 2004](#); [Sides and Citrin 2007](#); [Lewis-Beck et al. 2008a](#)). The European debt crisis threatened German savers' investments and perpetuated the economic downturn brought about by the global financial crisis. Among citizens with restrictive immigration preferences, the one million asylum seekers entering Germany in 2015 aroused fears that the government had lost control over the German borders, resulting in indiscriminate mass immigration. The increase in the number of asylum seekers also prompted a larger public discussion about the feasibility of integration on such a large scale. Empirical evidence confirms that citizens were aware of these crises and considered them an important, if not the most important, problem German politicians had to counter at the time (cf. [Chapter 10](#)).

Party identifiers' perceptions of their parties' positions are less straightforward to assess. The European debt crisis did not induce major shifts in German parties' policy positions, but it did result in serious intra-party rifts. This suggests that identifiers who favored the "losing" side of the internal debate may have felt abandoned by their parties. Eventually, all parties except the Left supported the bailout packages and the ESM, forming a broad parliamentary consensus on how to respond to the crisis. However, factions within the governing parties CDU, CSU, and FDP insisted that the bailouts would lead to an unacceptable and illegal joint liability

between the Eurozone states (Detjen 2014; Lange et al. 2014). The left wings of the largest opposition party, the SPD, and the smaller Greens aligned themselves with the Left in criticizing that the conditions of the bailout packages would inevitably lead to cuts in the social services of impacted countries (Lange et al. 2014). In consequence, the debt crisis provided opponents of the Euro rescue, who did not identify with the Left, with reasons to reconsider their party attachments, especially if their opposition to German aid was strong. At the extreme, supporters of SPD and Greens may have abandoned their party attachments, and some identifiers may even have switched their allegiance to the Left. Similarly, CDU, CSU, and FDP identifiers may have turned their backs on their parties. Considering that no (parliamentary) conservative party opposed the Euro rescue, these supporters are unlikely to have shifted their support to another party. Because the European debt crisis as well as the party positions pertaining to it were difficult to grasp, we may find that party identifiers who are highly interested in politics more readily reconsidered their party attachments.

The situation was entirely different during the European refugee crisis. In August 2015, Chancellor Merkel spoke the often-quoted words “Wir schaffen das!” (“we can do this”), marking a major shift toward a more liberal immigration position of the CDU, the senior party in the governing grand coalition with the SPD (cf. Mader and Schoen 2019). This change was met with fierce criticism by the conservative wing of the CDU as well as the Bavarian sister party, the CSU. In consequence, not only the changed position of the CDU but also the more restrictive stance of the CSU became very salient for citizens. At the same time, the newly established AfD caught the public attention with its openly xenophobic anti-immigration positions and harsh attacks on the government’s allegedly lax immigration policy (Wuttke 2020). We therefore expect weakening or eroding partisan ties and, in extreme cases, even an increased attachment to the CSU and the AfD among CDU identifiers opposing immigration. In comparison, the left-wing parties SPD, Greens, and the Left faded into the background, as they all stuck with their pro-immigration stance. However, identifiers of these left-wing parties who opposed immigration may still have experienced a weakening or erosion of their party attachments due to the increased salience of their parties’ positions during the crisis.

Data and Methodology

We use two different types of survey data to test whether party identifiers who perceived a large or increasing distance between their and their parties’ positions ignored the resulting dissonance, followed their party’s position, or adapted their party attachments to reflect their own positions. We first look at long-term trends in identifiers’ and parties’ positions, drawing on a series of quarterly cross-section

online surveys conducted between September 2009 and December 2017 as part of the German Longitudinal Election Study (Track09-17_Cum). We then use data from the cumulated GLES campaign panels 2009–2013 (CampPanel09-13) and 2013–2017 (CampPanel13-17) to analyze intra-individual change during the two crises. As no survey waves were fielded between September 2009 and June 2013, no data was collected during the height of the debt crisis in 2011/2012. Because we are interested in the long-term consequences of societal challenges rather than just in the short-term repercussions, this gap is not problematic for our analyses. In addition to the regular campaign waves, the campaign panel 2013–2017 includes two intermediate survey waves in 2014 and 2015, the latter of which coincides with the climax of the refugee crisis.

Across all data sets, we measure party identification using the German standard item, which asks respondents whether they have leaned toward a political party for an extended period of time and, if so, which party they have leaned toward. The strength of party identifications was measured with an item asking respondents how strongly or weakly they leaned toward this party altogether (“very strongly” to “very weakly”). The intermediate survey waves in 2014 and 2015 only offered the joint option “CDU/CSU” for the party identification item, and the subsequent survey waves offered the separate options “CDU” and “CSU” as well as the joint option. To harness the large number of respondents who chose the joint option, respondents from Bavaria, where the CSU competes, were added to the category “CSU,” while respondents from all other states were subsumed under the category “CDU.” Evidently, party identification is not restricted by state boundaries. Therefore, we re-ran all analyses without the respondents who chose the joint option and point out divergent results throughout the analysis.¹

In an attempt to provide a fine-grained analysis of effects exerted by crisis-induced dissonance between policy preferences and perceived party positions, we also consider changes in partisan attitudes and behaviors that fall short of but may lead to changes in party identification. Accordingly, we measure respondents’ general evaluations of the parliamentary parties. Recorded on an eleven-point scale ranging from “very negative view” to “very positive view,” this measure is more likely to reflect situational influences and thus to reveal first cues for developments that may result in changing party identifications. For our analyses, all scales were converted to a range between 0 and 1. Another indication for the waning influence of party identifications are supporters who cast their ballot for a party they do not identify with. Therefore, we included a measure for respondents’ vote choice, which asked respondents to indicate which party they had voted for in the past election. As self-reported recall questions are prone to bias, we use the vote choice

¹ In our data, on average some 15 percent of the self-reported CDU identifiers reside in Bavaria and on average about 11 percent of the self-reported CSU identifiers reside in other states.

reported in the first post-election wave instead of the current wave to measure panel respondents' vote choice.²

To measure respondents' policy positions during the European debt crisis, we use an item asking whether European integration should be promoted toward implementing a European government in the near future, or whether European integration already went too far. As this measure is hardly ideal to capture respondents' attitudes toward the Euro rescue, we also use an item directly asking respondents whether Germany should participate in the European financial aid for indebted EU member states, with responses ranging from "for German participation" to "against German participation." Unfortunately, this second item is available in the campaign panel 2009–2013 only after the crisis, and we therefore have to draw on the first item for time-series analyses.³ Respondents' policy positions during the European refugee crisis were queried using two items asking whether immigration restrictions should be tightened or relaxed and whether foreigners should assimilate completely into German culture or live according to their own culture. The responses for the position items were given on an eleven-point scale in the tracking surveys and on a seven-point scale in the panels, but were converted to a range between 0 and 1 for the analyses. Parties' perceived policy positions were measured analogously with items asking where the respondent thinks each party stands on an issue.

To test whether identifiers' policy positions and party attachments changed during the two crises, we subtracted identifiers' pre-crisis ratings of policy positions and parties from their post-crisis ratings, thereby capturing the difference from before to after the crisis. In addition, we created dummy variables indicating whether respondents abandoned their party identification, changed their party identification to another party, or voted for another party during the crisis. We distinguish short-term⁴ changes occurring between the last pre-crisis wave and the first post-crisis wave from long-term changes emerging between the first wave of a cumulated panel and the post-election wave of the next campaign over four years later.

In addition to changes over time, we also measure the distance between identifiers' and parties' perceived positions at one point in time. For reasons of data availability, these measures differ for the two crises. To measure policy proximity during the debt crisis, we calculated the absolute distance between identifiers' and parties' positions on German aid for indebted EU member states and weighted it by

² The survey item on vote choice offered the joint option "CDU/CSU" instead of separate options because the CSU only competes in Bavaria, where the CDU does not run.

³ The correlation between the two measures is around 0.57 in any given survey wave.

⁴ Of course, short-term effects are rather "long" in the campaign panel 2009–2013, as there is a gap of nearly four years between the last pre- and the first post-crisis survey wave.

the personal importance of the issue.⁵ Thus, higher values indicate larger distances and higher issue importance. To measure how the refugee crisis impacted the policy proximity of identifiers and parties, we first calculated the distance between identifiers' and parties' positions on immigration for each survey wave. We then subtracted the pre-crisis distance from the post-crisis distance to determine if identifiers and parties moved apart on immigration. Here, we use an unweighted measure, as issue importance was not recorded for this item. As respondents' own positions on immigration were queried in twice as many survey waves as the perceived positions of parties, we take advantage of this richer data by using an additional indicator measuring identifiers' average pre-crisis positions on immigration at the cost of not being able to test the direct impact of identifiers' perceptions.

The European Debt Crisis

Do party identifiers adopt their party's position or adjust their party attachment when their party identification contradicts their policy preferences? Or do they simply endure the dissonance? To answer these questions regarding the Euro crisis, we inspect citizens' and parties' positions relating to the debt crisis before, during, and after its occurrence, and then analyze intra-individual changes. The time-series data show that citizens' mean positions on European integration and German aid for indebted Eurozone states are very stable over the period of the debt crisis. The average respondent continuously leaned slightly against furthering European integration, with minimal fluctuations of 0.04 points around the mean (mean value tracking surveys: 0.60, panel: 0.58; not shown here, see Online Appendix 2). Respondents' attitudes toward German aid for other Eurozone member states were similarly stable over time. With mean positions of 0.38 in the tracking surveys and 0.39 in the panel, the average respondent was rather reluctant to spend German tax money on rescuing the Euro (results not shown, see Online Appendix 3). Altogether, despite the severity of the crisis, attitudes toward the Euro crisis remained strikingly stable.

However, this impression of stability may be misleading, as supporters of different parties may have moved in different directions on these issues, with shifts balancing in the aggregate. Such contrary movements would contradict our expectation that identifiers of all parties except the Left should move toward furthering European integration and endorsing German aid if identifiers followed their parties' positions. On the other hand, identifiers' positions should not move at all if they reconsidered their party attachments based on their positions. To test whether

⁵ Since the item on German aid is available only after the crisis, we had to rely on post-crisis data here instead of comparing the pre- and post-crisis distance.

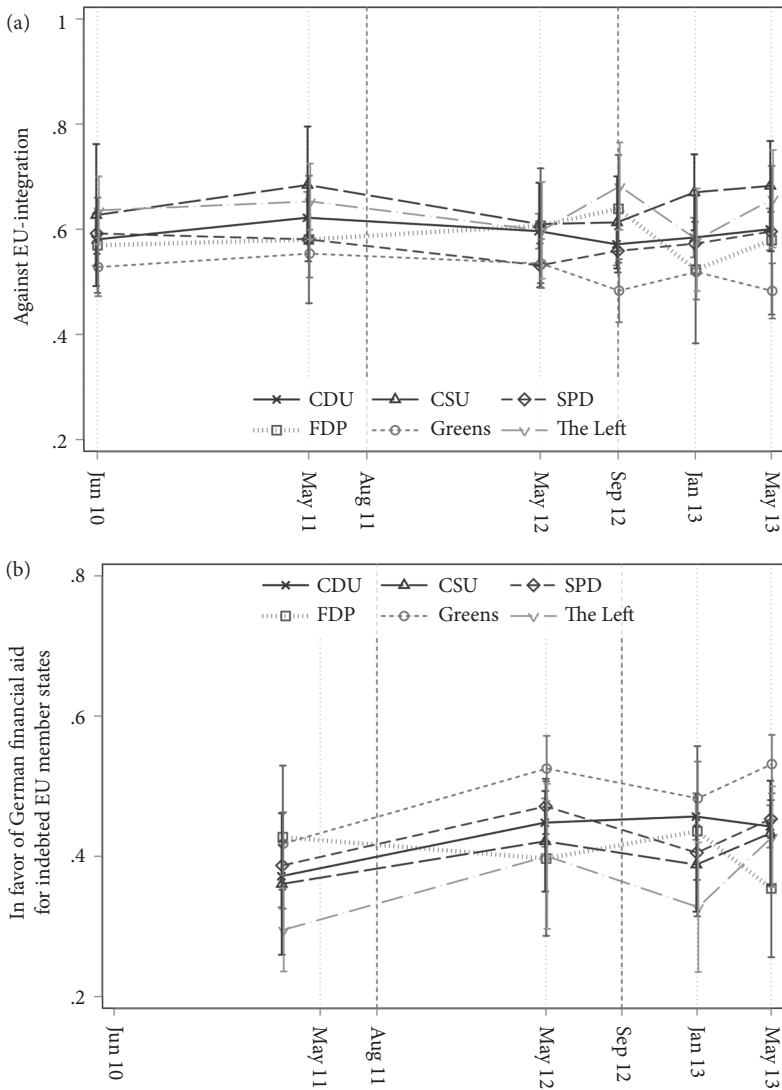


Fig. 5.1 Current party identifiers' mean positions toward the Euro rescue

Notes: The dashed vertical lines depict the beginning and the end of the most salient phase of the debt crisis; vertical bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Source: Track09-17_Cum.

the aggregate stability conceals shifts among party identifiers, we separate the mean positions on European integration and German aid by respondents' party identification. In line with our expectations, the upper panel of Figure 5.1 shows that the changes in party identifiers' positions on European integration were minimal (less than 0.1 points on a scale from 0 to 1). The same holds for German

aid (bottom panel of Figure 5.1).⁶ Replicating the analysis with panel data yields substantively identical results, with no significant changes in party supporters' positions on European integration and German aid (Online Appendix 4). In short, the aggregate stability does not conceal, but rather reflects, the stability of positions among the supporters of each party.

Comparing the support for European action among party identifiers yields two interesting observations. First, the average level of support does not differ markedly between adherents of different parties. Using support for German aid in the tracking surveys as an example, we see that identifiers of the Greens, who were most in favor of German aid, have an average position of 0.48. They are thus just slightly more supportive than adherents of the Left, who were least supportive and whose mean position is still 0.33. Second, considering that the Left opposed the Euro rescue due to the likely ramifications for recipient countries' welfare systems and that its adherents were the most skeptical toward European integration and German aid, the relative level of support among party identifiers could well reflect the political actions of their parties. Such an interpretation would suggest that identifiers aligned their positions with those of their party.

So far, we have explored the positions of current party identifiers. However, identifiers who felt that their party chose the wrong strategy during the debt crisis may have abandoned their party identifications. In that case, the positions of pre-crisis identifiers would differ from those of current identifiers, which we can test by comparing the positions of respondents who identified with a party in July 2009, well before the debt crisis, with the positions of respondents who identified with a party in the survey wave when their position was recorded (hereafter current identifiers). Table 5.1 illustrates that the average positions of pre-crisis identifiers do not appreciably differ from those of current identifiers, providing no indication for a recomposition of parties' support bases during the crisis.

To further test our argument, we compared the share of party identifiers who were for or against German aid over the course of the crisis. Figure 5.2 shows that, as expected, CDU, SPD, FDP, and Greens had more identifiers who supported German aid, whereas the majority of the adherents of the Left and the CSU opposed German aid. However, the trends for party identifiers who were for or against German aid diverge only minimally, if at all, during the debt crisis. The results remain stable when we use party approval ratings as the dependent variable (results not shown, see Online Appendix 5). Hence, the results do not support the notion that identifiers who were dissatisfied with their parties' approval of German aid relinquished their party attachments. In summary, the descriptive results on citizens' positions do not offer any indication that the debt crisis induced

⁶ The slightly larger changes among supporters of the Greens and the Left are still far from substantive and likely due to the smaller number of respondents who identify with these parties.

Table 5.1 Current and pre-crisis party identifiers' mean positions on European integration

Party	August 2009		August 2013	
	Current	Pre-crisis	Current	Pre-crisis
CDU	0.552	0.537	0.601	0.598
CSU	0.581	0.641	0.594	0.653
SPD	0.552	0.565	0.562	0.560
FDP	0.516	0.473	0.505	0.449
Greens	0.431	0.444	0.510	0.504
The Left	0.625	0.581	0.593	0.616

Source: CampPanel13–17.

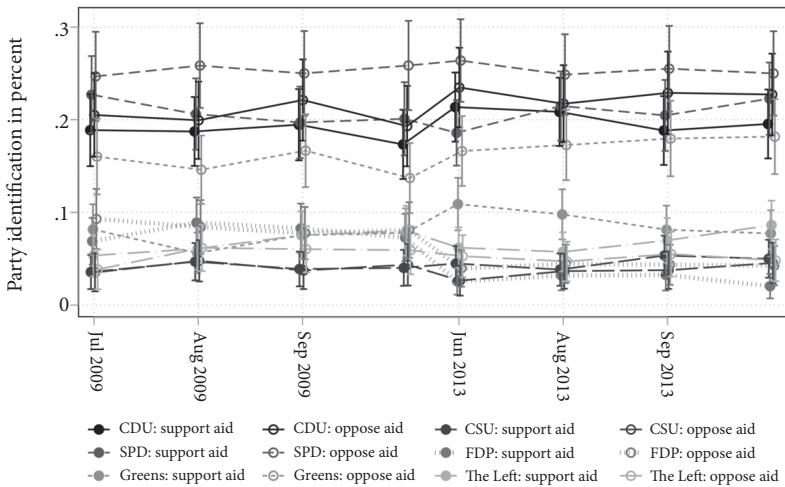


Fig. 5.2 Party identification among supporters and opponents of German financial aid for indebted EU member states

Notes: Filled dots denote effects for supporters of German financial aid for indebted EU member states, hollow dots denote effects for opponents of such aid; vertical bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Source: CampPanel09–13.

identifiers to follow their parties or to reconsider their attachments based on their positions.

The finding that identifiers' positions did not affect their partisanship, or vice versa, could mean two things. Either identifiers' positions never came into conflict with the party line during the crisis, or their positions and attachments persisted despite a perceived dissonance between identifiers' and parties' stances. To determine which explanation applies to the debt crisis, we examine identifiers'

Table 5.2 Comparison of perceived party positions on German aid among all party identifiers, identifiers who are against, and identifiers who are for the Euro rescue

Party	August 2013			September 2013		
	All	Against	For	All	Against	For
CDU	0.711	0.648	0.781	0.722	0.695	0.752
CSU	0.611	0.544	0.694	0.648	0.583	0.708
SPD	0.652	0.615	0.685	0.622	0.588	0.671
FDP	0.611	0.591	0.625	0.587	0.583	0.589
Greens	0.535	0.427	0.608	0.556	0.487	0.590
The Left	0.423	0.325	0.539	0.303	0.226	0.489

Source: CampPanel13–17.

perceptions of their parties' positions over time. Table 5.2 illustrates that, in general, perceptions of parties' positions mirror parties' behavior during the debt crisis: whereas most parties cluster above the midpoint in support of German aid for indebted Eurozone states, the Left is perceived as holding a markedly more negative position toward the Euro rescue. A comparison of the positions of identifiers (Table 5.1) and their parties (Table 5.2) shows that the average stance of supporters of all parties is more negative toward German aid than the perceived party position, although the difference is marginal for supporters of the Left. This gap was to be expected as the internal opposition experienced by all parties but the Left should find expression in the mean positions of party supporters, but not in the perceptions of parties' positions, which are guided by parties' political actions.

What does this mean for identifiers who opposed their parties' reactions to the debt crisis? Did they ignore the rift between their own position and the party line? To answer this, we re-ran the analysis, separating the perceptions of identifiers who favored or opposed German aid. Table 5.2 reveals a consistent pattern in which supporters of the Euro rescue perceive parties as more inclined to help indebted Eurozone states, whereas opponents of the Euro rescue think of the same parties as more skeptical toward the Euro rescue. For instance, Left identifiers who favored German aid and whose position thus contradicted the official party line, considered the position of the Left as neutral (mean 0.52), whereas opponents of German aid perceived the Left to be squarely against German aid (mean 0.26). The same pattern is observable for the other parties, though the difference in perceptions is not always statistically significant. Over time, perceptions converge for CDU, CSU, FDP, and Green supporters, but the gap becomes significant for SPD and Left identifiers. These differences indicate that motivated reasoning occurred among party identifiers, albeit not quite as expected. Instead of bringing their attitudes in line with perceived party positions, identifiers adapted their perceptions

to reflect their own positions. Such misperceptions may have been fostered by the complex nature of the issue and the multitudinous intra-party fissures, which led to an equally complex coverage in the media that may have lent itself to, or even called for, interpretation.

Although the aggregate descriptive results provide no indication that identifiers followed their parties' positions or reconsidered their party attachments during the debt crisis, we analyzed intra-individual change in the panel data to be sure that these processes were not at work on the individual level. We first tested whether identifiers adopted the positions of their parties by regressing the distance between party identifiers' pre- and post-crisis positions on European integration on their pre-crisis party identification. Party identification did not explain intra-individual changes in attitudes toward European integration, thus offering no indication that party identifiers followed their parties' positions during the debt crisis (results not shown, see Online Appendix 6).

We then examined the possibility that identifiers reconsidered their party attachments when the party line contradicted their positions on an issue. Here, party attachment was the dependent variable to be explained by the weighted gap between identifiers' and their parties' positions toward the Euro rescue. Party attachment was measured with several indicators, including respondents' party identifications, the strength of their identification, their probability to abandon their party identification, and their probability to switch their allegiance to another party. In addition, we included respondents' party evaluations as a low-threshold indication of potential changes in party identifications. The results show that larger distances between identifiers' and parties' positions do not routinely undermine party attachments. However, the 15 percent of CDU supporters whose position on the Euro rescue is removed at least 0.5 points from the party position rate their party around 0.15 points poorer after the crisis. In this group, around 31 percent (confidence interval: 17–45 percent) abandon their party identification in the short term, and this share rises to 47 percent (confidence interval: 32–61 percent) in the long term. The 7 percent of Green identifiers with a distance of at least 0.5 to the Green position also evaluate their party around 0.21 points poorer in the long run (results not shown, see Online Appendix 7).

In conclusion, the results provide some evidence that party identifiers rated their parties less favorably or even abandoned their attachments because their positions contradicted their parties' political actions during the debt crisis, but these changes were mostly confined to supporters of the senior government party. This is in line with our expectation that effects might have been limited during the debt crisis because the crisis itself as well as the party positions pertaining to it were relatively hard to comprehend in comparison to, e.g., the European refugee crisis. Against this background, the position of the senior government party is most likely to have been perceived the clearest.

The European Refugee Crisis

To disentangle the impact of party attachments on identifiers' positions, and vice versa, during the European refugee crisis, we again examine citizens' and parties' positions over the relevant period. We then use regression analyses to capture changes on the individual level. A first look at citizens' average positions on immigration and integration (whether foreigners should assimilate) reveals that they were as steady during the refugee crisis as during the debt crisis. Neither the mean position on immigration nor the mean position on integration changed considerably between 2014 and 2017 (results not shown, see Online Appendix 8). Respondents thus consistently supported a slight tightening of immigration restrictions (mean value tracking surveys: 0.6, panel: 0.66) and extensive assimilation of foreigners to German culture (mean value tracking surveys: 0.33, panel: 0.32).

To test whether the aggregate stability conceals balanced shifts among party identifiers, we separated the mean positions on immigration by respondents' party identification. Figure 5.3 illustrates that, unlike before, the aggregate stability does conceal some changes. Among tracking respondents, both CSU and AfD identifiers shifted their positions 0.12 points toward stricter immigration policies⁷, and the same trend is visible in the results of the panel analysis, in which AfD identifiers moved 0.14, and CSU supporters moved 0.13 points toward tighter immigration restrictions. At the same time, adherents of the CDU shifted 0.06 points toward more relaxed immigration policies during the refugee crisis. These shifts are more marked when we drop the observations from the "CDU/CSU" category, increasing to 0.18 for CSU supporters and doubling to 0.12 for CDU supporters. This contradicts the widely held belief that the CDU had become too liberal for its supporters. Moreover, whereas party identifiers' positions toward the Euro rescue were rather similar, the mean positions with regard to immigration vary much more. Half the scale divides the mean positions of Green identifiers (0.41), who were still only slightly in favor of relaxing immigration policies, and adherents of the AfD (0.91), who strongly advocated more restrictive immigration policies. In between, the AfD is followed by CSU (0.74), CDU, FDP (0.62), SPD (0.53), and the Left (0.47). Thus, the shifts of CDU, CSU, and AfD supporters and the relative positioning of party identifiers both mirror the parties' behavior during the refugee crisis. With regard to our research question, this seems to fit with identifiers following their parties, rather than prioritizing their positions over their party identity.

However, these changes occurred among current party identifiers; therefore, another plausible explanation for this finding could be that identifiers with attitudes

⁷ The somewhat larger fluctuations around the mean among identifiers of the FDP and the Left are most likely due to the smaller samples for these parties and do not mark a trend in one direction.

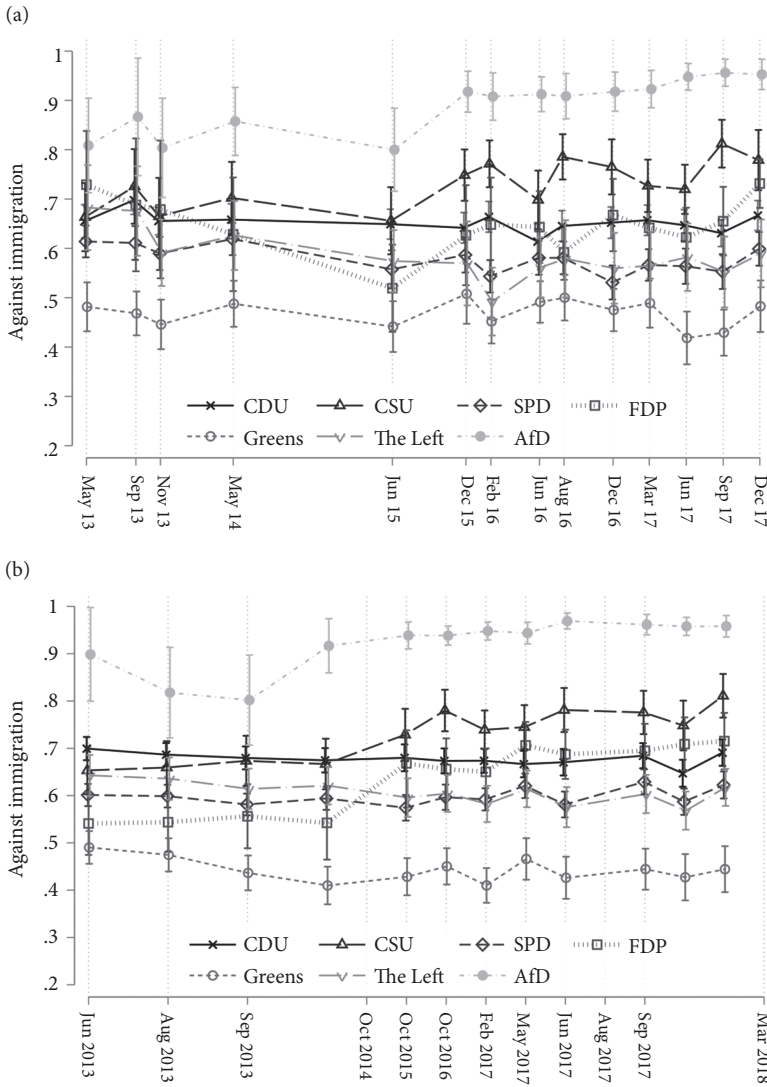


Fig. 5.3 Current party identifiers' mean positions on immigration

Note: Vertical bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Source: (a) Track09-17_Cum (b) CampPanel13-17.

that were at odds with the party line abandoned their party identifications during the refugee crisis. In this case, the mean positions of party identifiers would mirror the changes in official party positions, because party supporters would have realigned according to their positions on immigration. We explore that possibility by tracing the immigration positions of panel respondents who were party

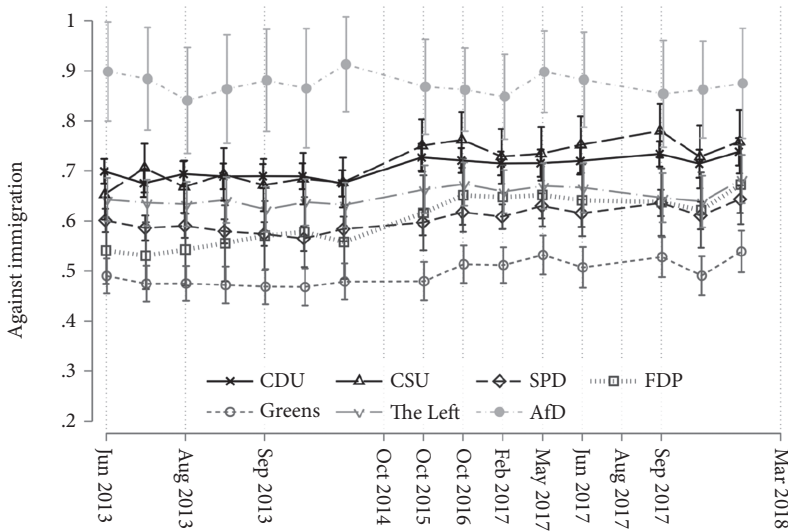


Fig. 5.4 Pre-crisis party identifiers' mean positions on immigration

Note: Vertical bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Source: CampPanel13–17.

identifiers in June 2013 but may have abandoned or switched their identification during the refugee crisis. The results in Figure 5.4 indeed contrast strongly with the results for current party identifiers displayed in Figure 5.3(b). Respondents who identified with the CSU before the crisis still moved around 0.13 points toward more restrictive immigration policies, but neither pre-crisis identifiers of the CDU nor those of the AfD substantially shifted their positions. Pre-crisis FDP identifiers, on the other hand, moved 0.14 points toward more restrictive immigration policies. In short, the attitudes toward immigration among adherents of the CDU, CSU, and AfD changed over time, reflecting shifts in their parties' policies. However, these changes were not driven by pre-crisis identifiers changing their positions on immigration, implying that the policy shifts during the refugee crisis induced party identifiers to reconsider or even switch their attachments, leading to a recomposition of these parties' support bases.

If this interpretation is correct, we should observe changes in the shares of party identifiers with opposite pre-crisis positions on immigration during the refugee crisis. Figure 5.5 contrasts the attachments of party adherents who favored either a relaxation or a tightening of immigration restrictions during the refugee crisis. This reveals that, while the slopes for the two groups are roughly parallel for CSU, SPD, FDP, and Green identifiers, the trends change for supporters of the CDU, the Left, and AfD. Among AfD adherents, the number of immigration opponents increased much faster than the number of immigration supporters, whereas the reverse is true to a lesser degree for identifiers of the Left. Among CDU identifiers,

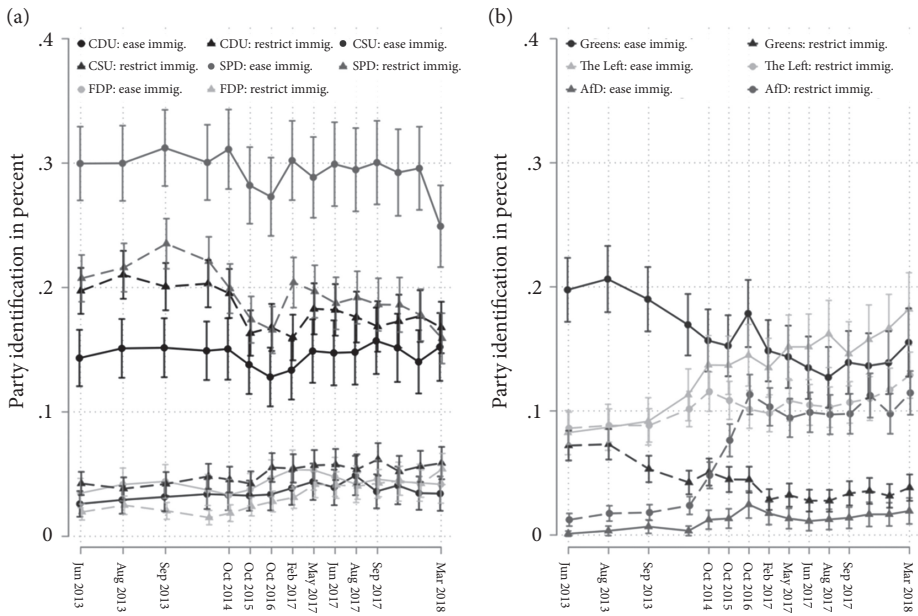


Fig. 5.5 Party identification among supporters and opponents of immigration

Note: Vertical bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Source: CampPanel13–17.

immigration supporters became as prevalent as immigration opponents during the crisis. If we only analyze self-reported CDU identifiers, excluding respondents who chose the option “CDU/CSU,” immigration supporters even overtook the majority position previously held by opponents. These diverging trends as well as the differences in the development of immigration positions among current and pre-crisis identifiers point to identifiers following the position of the CSU, but changing their attachments toward CDU, AfD, and possibly the Left to reflect their positions on immigration.

Our theoretical considerations posit that identifiers’ perceptions of their parties’ stances on specific issues are an important link between identifiers’ positions and their party attachments. To better understand how supporters’ perceptions may have influenced their positions and attachments, we explore how these perceptions changed over the course of the refugee crisis. Figure 5.6 shows that party identifiers’ average perceptions parallel the shifts in the positions of current identifiers (see Figure 5.3).⁸ In the eyes of their supporters, the CDU and the Left moved 0.16 and 0.15 points respectively toward relaxing immigration policies, whereas the CSU moved 0.13 points in the opposite direction and the AfD shifted 0.19 points

⁸ Because the positions of CDU/CSU were queried jointly and the position of the AfD was not asked at all before 2017 in the campaign panel 2013–2017, Figure 5.6 draws on data from the tracking surveys.

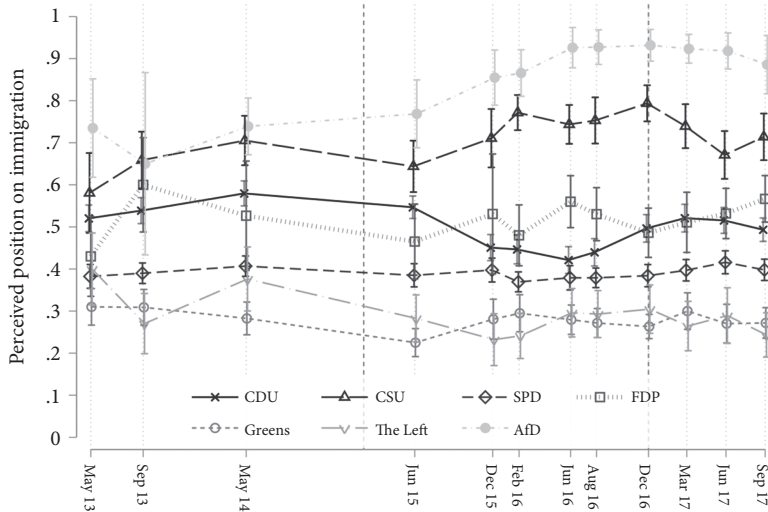


Fig. 5.6 Perceived party positions on immigration among party identifiers

Note: The dashed vertical lines depict the beginning and the end of the most salient phase of the debt crisis; vertical bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Source: Track09-17_Cum.

toward restricting immigration. In other words, identifiers did perceive changes in the behavior of their parties during the refugee crisis, satisfying the theoretical condition for parties' policy shifts to affect party attachments. Hence, the results strengthen our interpretation of the previous findings as issue-based changes of party identifications.

Do we see the same patterns of party-cued and issue-based position changes on the individual level? To further corroborate that the refugee crisis induced some party identifiers to adopt their parties' positions while prompting others to reconsider their party attachments, we analyze intra-individual changes over time using panel data. In these analyses, we distinguish long-term from short-term dynamics, comparing changes from shortly before to shortly after the crisis (June 2014–Oct 2016) with changes from long before to long after the crisis (June 2013–Sep 2017).

To determine whether identifiers followed their parties' positions during the refugee crisis, we explore in a bivariate regression analysis how well the pre-crisis identifications of party supporters explain the shifts in their immigration attitudes. As the upper panel of Figure 5.7 illustrates, party identification explains the long-term changes in the immigration positions of CSU and FDP supporters but not the positions of other parties' identifiers. To assess more directly the proposed mechanism, namely that identifiers perceive a change in their parties' positions and move their own position accordingly, we repeat the analysis using changes in the perceived party positions from before to after the crisis as our independent variable. We find that changes in the perceived positions of their parties induced

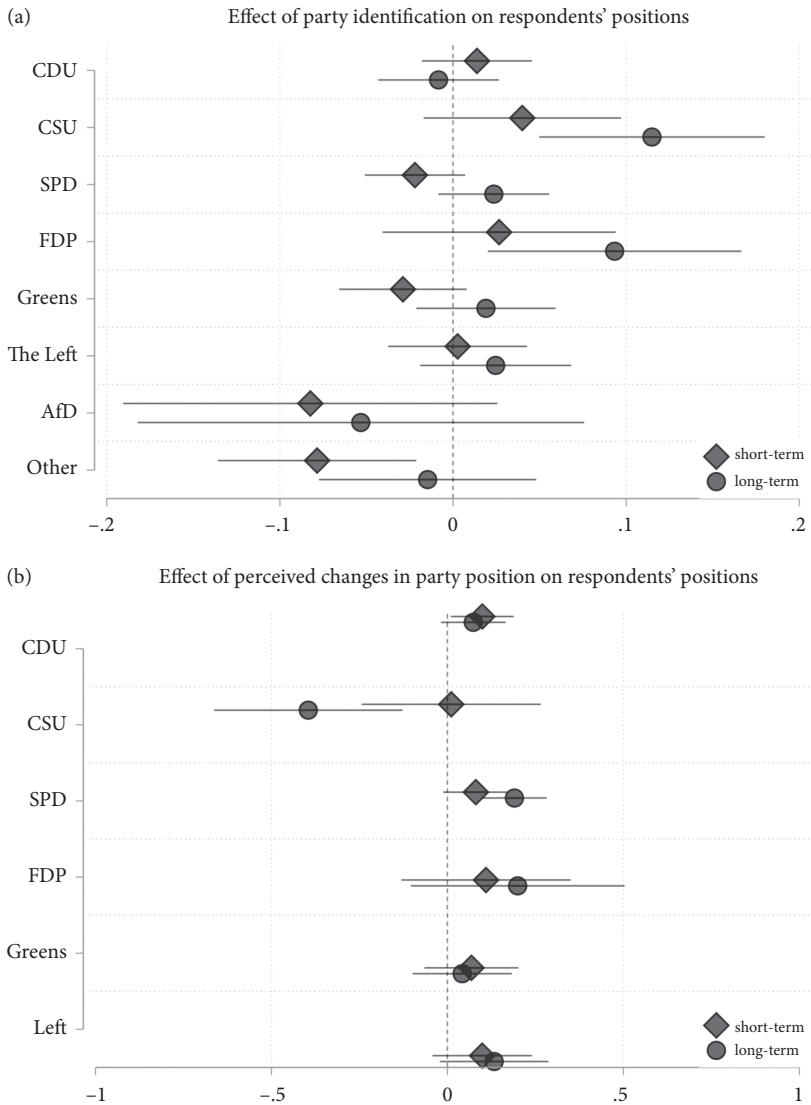


Fig. 5.7 Identifiers following their parties during the refugee crisis

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients of bivariate linear regression analyses; horizontal bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals; “short-term” refers to changes occurring between the last pre-crisis wave and the first post-crisis wave, “long-term” refers to changes occurring between the first wave of a cumulated panel and the post-election wave of the next campaign.

Source: CampPanel13–17.

CDU and SPD supporters to shift their own positions slightly in the same direction (bottom panel of Figure 5.7). For CDU identifiers, these shifts manifest during the crisis but do not last. SPD supporters seem to have reacted only after the crisis, but

shifts in their positions can be observed two years later. Curiously, the relation between a perceived change in the CSU position on immigration and the positions of CSU supporters is negative, that is CSU identifiers seem to become more positive toward immigration as the CSU shifts toward a more restrictive stance. Hence, we see some evidence that party identifiers adopted their parties' positions during the refugee crisis.

To test whether party identifiers whose positions were at odds with the party line reconsidered their party attachments, we again switch dependent and independent variables, regressing identifiers' party attachments on increases in the absolute distance between identifiers' and parties' immigration positions from before to after the crisis. In addition to a party's rating by its identifiers, identification strength, and the probability to give up or switch their attachment to another party, we also used the probability to vote for another party in 2017 as an indicator for weakening party attachments. Because the CDU was the only party to substantially shift its position during the refugee crisis, we first explore how this shift influenced CDU identifiers' attitudes and attachments. As Figure 5.8 shows, the 10 percent of the CDU identifiers for whom the distance between their position and the party line increased by at least 0.5 points on a scale from -1 to 1 tended to evaluate their own party less favorably, with ratings dropping by around 0.12 points in the short

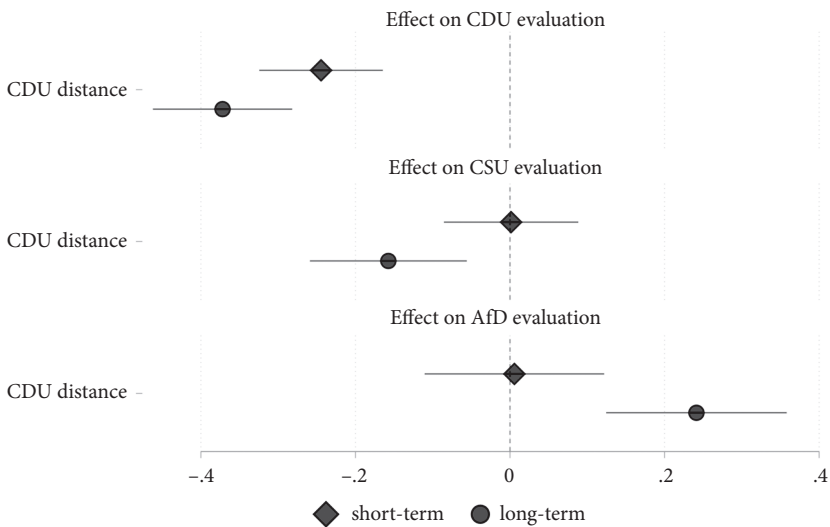


Fig. 5.8 Effect of increasing distance between CDU identifiers' and the CDU's position on immigration on party evaluations from before to after the crisis

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients of bivariate linear regression analyses; horizontal bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Source: CampPanel13–17.

term and 0.19 points in the long term. This group did not rate the CSU⁹ better or rethink the strength of their attachment but evaluated the AfD around 0.12 points more positively in the long run and was around twice as likely to vote for the AfD in 2017. These identifiers even had a 13 percent higher chance to abandon their partisanship right after the crisis and a 21 percent higher chance to do so in the long term (see Online Appendix 9 for the full analysis).

Although CDU identifiers were the most likely candidates for issue-based changes in party attachments, the refugee crisis may also have affected supporters of pro-immigration parties, as their parties' immigration preferences became more salient. Around 6 percent of the SPD identifiers, 8 percent of the Green identifiers, and 10 percent of the Left identifiers experienced an increase of at least 0.5 points in the absolute distance between their positions and the party line from before to after the crisis. As Figure 5.9 shows, the affected SPD supporters rated their party 0.06 points more negatively right after the crisis and 0.11 points more

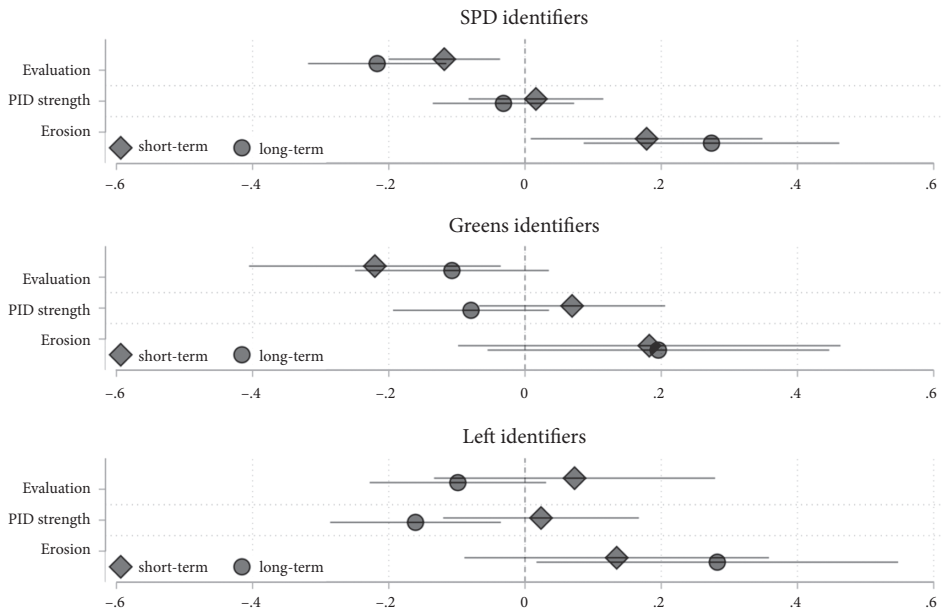


Fig. 5.9 Effect of increasing distance between party identifiers' own and the respective party's position on immigration on party attachments from before to after the crisis

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients of bivariate linear regression analyses (evaluation, PID strength) and average marginal effects from a logistic regression analysis (erosion); horizontal bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Source: CampPanel13–17.

⁹ The negative coefficient for the CSU likely stems from the fact that immigration positions were queried jointly for the CDU and the CSU before the crisis.

negatively in the long term. Moreover, they had a higher probability to abandon their attachment in both time frames. A larger absolute distance also decreased the party evaluations of affected Green identifiers by 0.11 points, reduced identification strength for affected Left supporters by 0.08 points, and doubled the latter's odds to abandon their party identification in the long run. In other words, although the CDU was the only party to reverse its course on immigration during the refugee crisis, supporters of the SPD, the Greens, and the Left likewise reconsidered their party attachments when the refugee crisis revealed that their parties' position was farther from their own than anticipated.

In the last step, we repeated the analyses above using identifiers' pre-crisis positions on immigration to explain changes in their party attachments. The observed effects confirm the findings we obtained using the absolute distance between identifiers' and parties' positions as the independent variable and are even slightly stronger. Analyzing the impact of CDU supporters' pre-crisis migration attitudes on their party evaluations, we find that the 15 percent of CDU identifiers with very strong anti-immigration positions tended to rate their party 0.14 points less favorably right after the refugee crisis and 0.22 points less favorably in the long term (Figure 5.10). Interestingly, this group evaluates the CSU 0.15 points more favorably right after the crisis, whereas assessments of the AfD improve 0.25 points but only in the long run. CDU supporters who strongly opposed immigration were

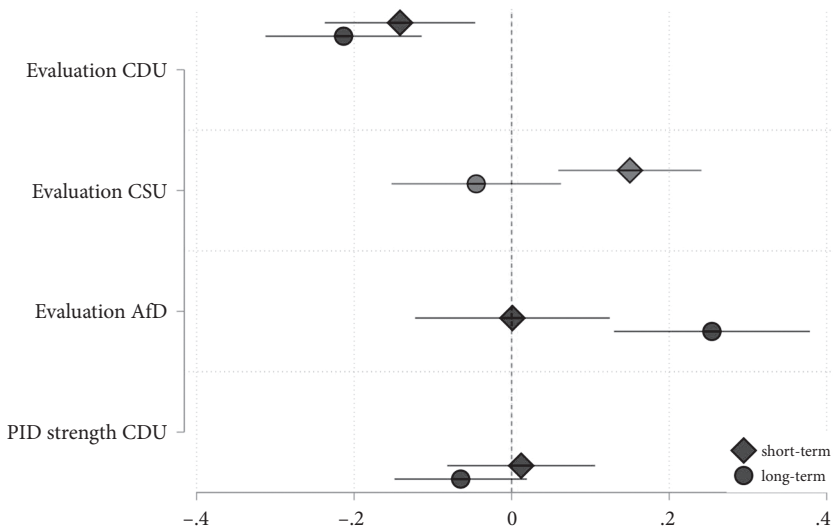


Fig. 5.10 Effect of identifiers' pre-crisis anti-immigration attitude on party evaluations from before to after the crisis

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients of bivariate linear regression analyses; horizontal bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Source: CampPanel13–17.

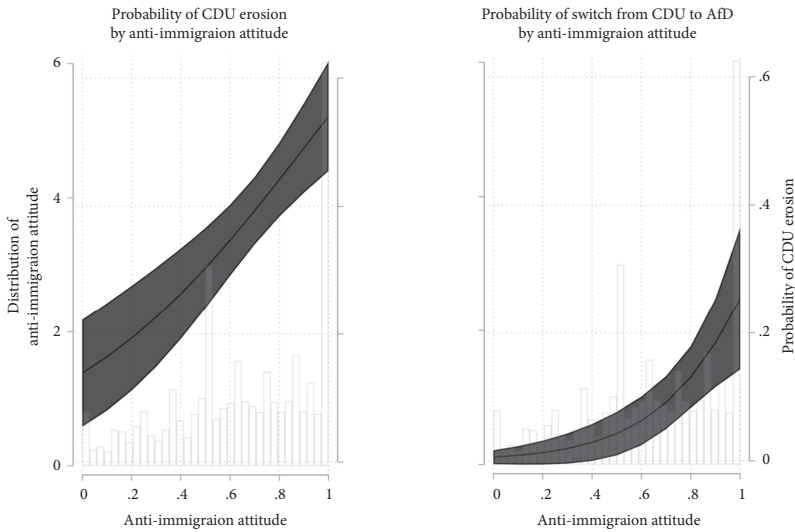


Fig. 5.11 Effect of identifiers' pre-crisis anti-immigration attitude on de- and realignment

Notes: Reported are predicted probabilities at different levels of anti-immigration attitudes; horizontal bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. The histogram shows the distribution of anti-immigration attitudes

Source: CampPanel13–17.

also 4.6 times as likely to defect at the ballot box and 5.2 times as likely to vote for the AfD in 2017 (results not shown, see Online Appendix 10). Moreover, effects extended to party identifications. Almost one out of two (44.9 percent, confidence interval: 25.9–63.8 percent) CDU supporters with very strong anti-immigration positions gave up their party identification in the long run, with around 37 percent (confidence interval: 15.9–57.2 percent) switching their identification to the AfD (Figure 5.11). Importantly, these effects are not moderated by identification strength, which means that even strong partisans were affected. In summary, the results add to the evidence that party attachments among CDU identifiers who opposed the relatively open immigration policy of Chancellor Merkel weakened or even eroded during the refugee crisis.

Using pre-crisis anti-immigration positions to explain changes in vote choice, party evaluations, and identifications of the adherents of pro-immigration parties, we find that supporters of the SPD, the Greens, and the Left, who strongly opposed immigration before the refugee crisis, all lowered their post-crisis approval of their party, at least in the long term (Figure 5.12). This is the case for around 11 percent of SPD supporters, 5 percent of Green identifiers, and 16 percent of Left adherents, all of which also had higher odds to abandon their party attachments or switch to another party. In addition, a third of the affected Left adherents (33 percent,

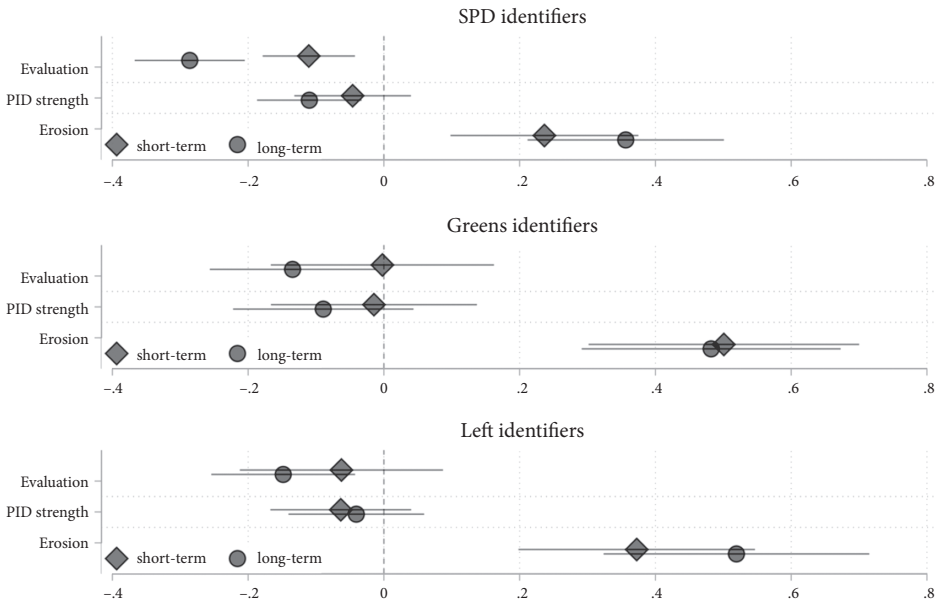


Fig. 5.12 Effect of identifiers' pre-crisis anti-immigration attitude on their party attachments

Notes: Unstandardized coefficients of bivariate linear regression analyses; horizontal bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals.

Source: CampPanel13–17.

confidence interval: 18–49 percent) defected at the ballot box in 2017. When it comes to party identification, affected SPD identifiers felt 0.1 points less attached to their party after the refugee crisis. These findings support our conclusion that the issue-based changes in party attachments induced by the refugee crisis did not only affect CDU supporters but also adherents of the SPD, the Greens, and the Left.

Conclusion

Over the last decade, the European debt and refugee crises have confronted European democracies with severe challenges that had the potential to stabilize or undermine party identifications in the electorate. Our results suggest that the debt crisis and, even more so, the refugee crisis uncovered discrepancies between identifiers' and parties' positions toward important issues and prompted identifiers to resolve this dissonance in different ways. While there is no evidence that party identifiers ignored such inconsistencies outright, supporters did readily interpret their parties' positions as matching their own during the debt crisis, when

equivocal party messages allowed them to project their own positions on their parties. Supporters thus mostly eluded the choice to adapt their positions to their attachments or vice versa.

That was not the case during the refugee crisis when shifts in party positions were perceived quite clearly, inducing adherents without strong policy positions to adopt the party line. Only the attachments of identifiers who held strong positions on the issues weakened or eroded. Thus, party identification had a stabilizing effect for supporters whose positions were less distant from the party line. However, particularly strong positions on immigration undermined party identifications to the point of supporters switching their allegiances, mostly to the AfD. Interestingly, the strength of party identifications, unlike the vehemence of policy positions, does not appear to have moderated these effects.

From a party system perspective, our findings suggest that crises foster weakening attachments as well as de- and even realignment among party identifiers who have strong policy convictions. In the German case, for instance, each crisis induced more than 5 percent of the CDU identifiers to abandon their attachment in the long term, which results in a substantial cumulative decrease. Hence, salient societal challenges have the potential to induce substantial shifts in the balance of party systems. The changes in and the erosion of party attachments appear to have been driven by two crises, which made policy attitudes salient. Broadly speaking, these policy attitudes refer to questions of national sovereignty, demarcation, international cooperation, and openness (e.g., [Kriesi et al. 2008](#); see also Chapter 10). Accordingly, our findings may be read as demonstrating two (event-specific) steps in a process of issue-based de- and realignment that made the conflict revolving around openness and demarcation (see, e.g., [Hooghe and Marks 2018](#)) more prominent in German electoral politics.