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Greater Confusion in the Voter Market in Germany: Differences Between Subjective and Value-Based Categorization on the Left-Right Axis

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Zusammenfassung

In den letzten Jahren war häufig von einem Rechtsruck in der Gesellschaft die Rede (O. Decker et al., 2016). Bevölkerungsrepräsentative Umfragedaten belegen diese These jedoch nicht. Weder die Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften (ALLBUS) noch der European Social Survey zeigen für die letzten Jahrzehnte signifikante Veränderungen in der Selbstpositionierung der Befragten auf der Links-Rechts-Skala. Dies wirft die Frage auf, ob es sich bei dem behaupteten gesellschaftlichen Rechtsruck um ein soziologisches Wahrnehmungsphänomen handelt, das durch die intensive öffentliche Debatte verstärkt wird, oder ob Zweifel an der Validität der politischen Selbstpositionierung auf der Links-Rechts-Skala angebracht sind. Der vorliegende Artikel befasst sich mit der letzteren Frage. Unsere Analysen ergaben, dass bei 31 % der Befragten in unserer Stichprobe eine Divergenz zwischen der subjektiven Positionierung auf der Links-Rechts-Skala und einer wertbezogenen Positionierung besteht. Wir erörtern, welche Variablen diese Divergenz erklären können und welche Konsequenzen daraus für die kommunikationswissenschaftliche Forschung gezogen werden können.

Keywords: Links-Rechts-Skala, subjektive Positionierung, wertbasierte Positionierung, politische Werte

Summary

In recent years, there has been frequent talk of a shift to the right in society (O. Decker et al., 2016). However, population-representative survey data do not substantiate this thesis, with neither the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) nor the European Social Survey showing any significant changes in respondents' self-positioning on the left-right axis over the past decades. This raises the question of whether the purported societal shift to the right is a sociological perceptual phenomenon that is magnified due to intense public debate, or whether doubts about the validity of the question on political self-positioning on the left-right scale are warranted. The present article addresses the latter issue. Our analyses revealed a divergence between subjective positioning on the left-right axis and value-based positioning for 31% of respondents in our sample. We further discuss which variables may explain this divergence and what consequences can be drawn for research in communication science.

Keywords: left-right scale, subjective positioning, value-based positioning, political values

To express their basic political stance, people often describe themselves as “left-wing” versus “right-wing”, or “liberal” versus “conservative”, as is more common in the US American democratic system (Conover & Feldman, 1981; Kroh, 2007). For decades, this heuristic and its simple measurement in the form of a left-right scale has also been used in survey-based research to assess respondents’ political orientation or ideology. As one of the most commonly employed measures in political science and public opinion research, it has proven to be a robust predictor and guiding principle of people’s political attitudes and behavior (Barnes, 1971; Corbetta et al., 2009; Fuchs & Klingemann, 1990; Geser, 2008; Huber, 1989; Inglehart & Klingemann, 1976; Klingemann, 1972; Kroh, 2007; Lesschaeve, 2017). Accordingly, the left-right scale is applied in many national and cross-national large-scale surveys such as the *German General Social Survey (ALLBUS)*,^[1] the *World Values Survey*,^[2] or the *European Social Survey*^[3] (Zuell & Scholz, 2019).

The measurement of political orientation/ideology based on the left-right scale is also used in political communication research, mainly to characterize different media publics and to shed light on fragmentation and polarization processes (e.g., Dvir-Gvirsman, 2017; Steppat et al., 2021; Tsfati et al., 2014; Xu & Peterson, 2017). In a similar vein, the left-right scale is also part of large-scale surveys on the use of news and digital media such as the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report*^[4] or *News Media and Political Attitudes in Western Europe*, conducted by the Pew Research Center.^[5] In these and similar studies, different news media outlets are also located on the left-right spectrum.

Research that employs the left-right scale should be able to provide information about the distribution of the population on the political spectrum and to reveal changes in this regard, such as the widely discussed supposed shift to the right throughout European societies (O. Decker et al., 2016). However, studies that include the left-right scale (where the end points of the scale are “1” for left and “10” for right) have not supported this thesis. In the *European Social Survey*, for example, the mean value for left-right self-positioning remained at around 5 between 2002 and 2020, with a relatively constant standard deviation (European Social Survey). Moreover, data from the *ALLBUS* for the period between 1980 and 2021 (GESIS - Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften, 2021, 2022) even suggest a shift to the left in society, with a significant change in the mean value from around 6 (5.89 in 1980 and 6.08 in 1982) to 5 (5.08 in 2016, 4.93 in 2018, and 4.86 in 2021). This contrary assumption of a shift to the left is supported by data indicating a global wave toward more liberal values (Pinker, 2018). Against this background, our study addresses the following question: To what extent do respondents’ subjective categorization and an external categorization based on political values coincide on the left-right axis?

In the following, we present arguments in favor of a correspondence between self-assessment and external assessment on the one hand, and arguments in favor of a divergence between the assessments on the other. This discussion highlights the need for empirical clarification. By analyzing survey data, we first investigate the extent to which respondents’ self-assessment and external assessment on the left-right scale match by examining the correlation between left-right scale self-positioning and value-based positioning. Various reasons for a lack of correspondence are then analyzed, which lie in political attitudes, sociological characteristics describing a person’s habitus, and characteristics of media exposure. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for political communication research.

Why We Should Not Rely on the Left-Right Scale

As argued above, the left-right scale still enjoys great popularity across different research areas and disciplines. Nevertheless, for some time, concerns about the limitations of the left-right scale have been raised, both from a content-related and a methodological perspective.

Content-Related Concerns

According to the seminal cleavage theory, voters' and parties' political interests can be divided based on different cleavages, which represent dominant social and cultural lines of conflict (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). In this sense, the left-right dimension reflects the socio-economic cleavage within a society, which marks a divide between citizens over economic resources (Downs, 1957; Mair, 2009). However, it has long been argued that this one-dimensional view does not adequately reflect the reality of political conflicts (Giddens, 1994; Stokes, 1963), with some researchers arguing that it might at most be seen as a "superstructure" that comprises further cleavages within a society, for example, the religious cleavage (Arzheimer & Rudi, 2007; Niedermayer, 2009).

A far more popular viewpoint is that the left-right dimension must be complemented by other dimensions in order to fully cover the political attitudes and behavior of citizens as well as political parties. For example, Inglehart (1971, 1977) suggested adding the so-called postmaterialist cleavage in order to additionally encompass cultural values. The idea of a cleavage between the poles of GAL (Green-Alternative-Libertarian) and TAN (Traditional-Authoritarian-Nationalist) also reflects a second socio-cultural dimension (Marks et al., 2002). Other scholars proposed a reliance on a three-dimensional structure, and complementing the left-right dimension and the socio-cultural dimension with a cleavage that is linked to globalization: cosmopolitanism vs. communitarianism or integration vs. demarcation, respectively (Grande & Kriesi, 2012; Koopmans & Zürn, 2019). Thus, all positions that correspond to the positions of welfare state, liberalism, and internationalism of the three lines of conflict are summarized as cosmopolitan attitudes, and all positions that correspond to the positions of market liberalism, authoritarianism and nationality are categorized under communitarian attitudes. Nowadays, however, some political parties' positioning is at cross-purposes with this dichotomy. For instance, it has been demonstrated that the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) as well as the newly founded Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance (BSW) in Germany, and their voters, simultaneously represent left-wing and right-wing positions, but categorize themselves as left-wing (BSW) or right-wing (FPÖ) (O. Decker et al.; Zaslove, 2004). Wagner (2023) sums up this positioning away from known attitude syndromes very well in an essay entitled "lechts oder rinks" (light or left). This new lack of clarity therefore also has an impact on voter categorization.

Methodological Concerns

To date, the majority of research has used correlation analyses to assess whether self-classification on the left-right scale correlates with preferences for political parties or corresponds with political attitudes such as authoritarianism. In Germany, for instance, it was demonstrated that a right-wing position was associated with a party preference for the CDU/CSU and a left-wing position was associated with a party preference for the SPD or the Greens. Agreement with authoritarian values was also found to correlate with a right-wing positioning on the left-right axis (Breyer, 2015; Inglehart & Klingemann, 1976). Another study examined the measurement equivalence of the left-right scale in terms of its comparability across different groups of individuals, and found that the scale was equally applicable to people with different levels of political interest and education (Weber, 2011). However, a survey-based study examining the meanings that participants attach to the concepts of "left" and "right" concluded that people's self-placement on the left-right scale is dependent on their education and what they associate with "left" and "right" (Bauer et al., 2017). Further studies have investigated the scale's comparability across countries, concluding, overall, that the meaning of "left" and "right" is not uniform across countries but is rather country- and culture-specific (Jahn, 2011; Rudi, 2010; Zuell & Scholz, 2019). A similar conclusion can be drawn regarding the scale's comparability across time, with studies suggesting that people's understanding of "left" and "right" changes over time and appears to be influenced by the prominence of specific issues (Giebler et al., 2021; Jahn, 2011; Kitschelt & Hellemans, 1990; Vries et al., 2013). In summary, while some studies support the validity of the left-right scale, a larger number of studies cast doubt on its validity.

Overall, these studies suggest that a correspondence between subjective self-assessment and external assessment, measured via voting behavior, attitudes towards values such as authoritarianism, or political self-efficacy and trust in institutions, does not apply to all respondents. Indeed, correlation coefficients between self-assessment and external assessment range from .50 to .80 (e.g., Breyer, 2015).

Decline in Societal Co-Orientation

Another explanation for why people might have difficulty positioning themselves correctly on the left-right scale relates to the decreasing possibility of social co-orientation, which may itself be linked to the declining relevance of journalism. According to the normative performance expectations approach, journalism has a co-orientation function (Eurich, 2000), enabling citizens to perceive whether the positions they represent are in the majority or minority position, and whether they are to be classified as left-wing or right-wing. Against the backdrop of the transformation from a low-choice to a high-choice media environment (van Aelst et al., 2017), it is feared that a homogenization of the audience will occur and journalism will thus lose its co-orientation function, rendering it increasingly difficult for citizens to locate themselves politically (Jandura et al., 2022). This fear is reflected in discussions about possible filter bubbles and echo chambers, although an extensive overview of empirical findings revealed that these phenomena are overestimated with respect to the level of attention to media content (Stark et al., 2021). Habermas (2022) also addressed the phenomenon of echo chambers in his latest book, suggesting that the increased and primary use of social media is changing the perception of the political public sphere insofar as the separation between the private and public spheres is softening and positions are being reciprocally confirmed, bringing about a new structural change in the public sphere. Findings by Fletcher (2022) also suggest a homogenization of the audience: Based on data from the Reuters Institute Digital News Reports, he argued that the low degree of polarization in Germany can be explained by the high proportion of respondents who place themselves in the center of the political spectrum. However, the alternative explanation would be that the population places itself incorrectly on this scale.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

In view of the three areas of concern outlined above, i.e., content-related concerns, methodological concerns, and the decline in the possibility of societal co-orientation, the present study aimed to examine the validity of the left-right scale. We began by examining whether people are able to position themselves correctly on this scale, and thus posed the following research question:

RQ1: To what extent do people position themselves correctly on the left-right scale?

However, rather than limiting ourselves to a simple diagnosis, we further sought to uncover which determinants affect whether people position themselves correctly or incorrectly. Based on previous empirical findings, several hypotheses on determinants of correct or incorrect self-positioning on the left-right scale can be derived. First, research has shown that people's formal education affects how they interpret the concepts "left" and "right" (Bauer et al., 2017). Furthermore, formal education has been found to be the most important negative predictor of political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), which may also include the correct understanding of the concepts "left" and "right". Consequently, we assume that people's formal education also negatively predicts the ability to position oneself on the left-right scale, and therefore hypothesize that:

H1: The lower the level of formal education, the higher the probability of incorrect self-positioning.

There seems to be broad consensus among researchers that internal political efficacy and political knowledge are closely related to one another (e.g., Beaumont, 2011; McLeod et al., 1999). Accordingly, and based on the assumed relation between political knowledge and a correct interpretation of "left" and "right", we assume that internal political efficacy also affects the likelihood of an incorrect self-positioning on the left-right scale, and therefore hypothesize that:

H2: The lower the internal political efficacy, the higher the probability of incorrect self-positioning.

A further political variable that might determine an incorrect self-positioning on the left-right scale is an individual's belief in homogeneity of the people, which is one of the three dimensions of populist attitudes (Schulz et al., 2017). In our view, it is plausible that individuals with a strong belief in homogeneity of the people view people as being positioned not on the right or on the left but rather in the center. As a consequence, they might also see themselves as more in the political center than is actually the case. This assumption is supported by

Patzelt's (2015) findings on supporters of the PEGIDA[6] movement in Germany: Overall, respondents classified themselves as significantly less right-wing than should have been the case on the basis of their attitudes. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H3: The higher the approval of the populism dimension belief in homogeneity of the people, the higher the probability of incorrect self-positioning.

People's understanding of the concepts "left" and "right" has also been found to be affected by their political socialization, that is, whether they were socialized in the former East or West Germany (Bauer et al., 2017). In our view, it is plausible that citizens who were socialized in West Germany should be more familiar with the concepts in their current meaning and thus be more able to position themselves correctly on the left-right scale. Accordingly, we hypothesize that:

H4: Political socialization in East Germany increases the probability of incorrect self-positioning.

Additionally, we assume that the ability to position oneself correctly on the left-right scale is not only affected by individual political attitudes, but that individuals' media diet also exerts an influence in this regard. Although the empirical evidence on this matter is unclear, research suggests that algorithmically curated media, such as social media, may lead to 'customized' information environments (e.g., Beam, 2013; Dylko et al., 2017a, 2017b; Zarouali et al., 2020). However, it can be assumed that social co-orientation is not as pronounced when using social media compared to the consumption of traditional journalistic media (Jandura et al., 2022). As a consequence, people who consume such media may have difficulties in correctly interpreting the concepts of "left" and "right", due to a lack of co-orientation. Furthermore, research suggests that the use of social media is negatively associated with political knowledge (Cacciatore et al., 2018; Lee & Xenos, 2019). As stated above, we assume that political knowledge includes knowledge of the concepts of "left" and "right". Against this background, we hypothesize that:

H5: The use of algorithmically curated media increases the probability of incorrect self-positioning.

Lastly, we assume that the consumption of public broadcasting contributes to a correct understanding of "left" and "right" because it allows for the very co-orientation that social media prevents (Jandura et al., 2022). This is mainly due to the Interstate Broadcasting Treaty, which obliges public broadcasters to be journalistically neutral and to cover the entire spectrum of political views (Eifert, 2002). A recent study of nearly 6,000 analog and digital contributions from public broadcasters and daily newspapers in Germany found that, overall, public broadcasters are doing a good job of fulfilling their mandate (Udris et al., 2023). The consumption of public broadcasting may thus result in a better understanding of the political spectrum, leading to fewer difficulties in positioning oneself on this spectrum. As our final hypothesis, we therefore propose that:

H6: The consumption of public broadcasting increases the probability of correct self-positioning.

Method

Sample

To test our research questions and hypotheses, we conducted a secondary data analysis of a dataset collected in the context of studies on political-communicative milieus and their communication practices (Kösters & Jandura, 2019; Weiß, 2009). As with any secondary analysis, the procedure begins with a comparison between the requirements for an "ideal" dataset based on the literature review (target) and the operationalizations available in the dataset (as-is). The available dataset is based on an online survey conducted by the market research institute Respondi in July 2020. Appropriate quotas were applied for age, sex, education, occupation, and federal state. After cleaning the data of speeders and straightliners (Jandura, 2018) and subsequent weighting to compensate for data-cleaning-related biases in the sample, the present analyses were based on $N = 2,801$ respondents.

Operationalizations

Dependent variable

For the self-positioning on the left-right scale (hereinafter: subjective positioning), we used the following question from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2022): "Some people talk about 'left', 'right', and 'centre' to describe parties and politicians. With this in mind, where would you place yourself on the following scale?", with the response options "1" strongly left, "2" fairly left, "3" slightly left of center, "4" center, "5" slightly right of center, "6" fairly right, "7" strongly right. The use of the scale from the RDNS had two advantages. First, it enabled us to compare the data from our sample with those from Reuters, in order to draw conclusions about sample quality, and second, the scale is frequently used in communication research. In the present study, the mean value on the 7-point scale was 3.87 ($SD = 1.15$, skewness = -0.04 , kurtosis = 0.17).

Independent variables

To determine correct or incorrect self-positioning, we measured respondents' self-positioning based on approval of political values (hereinafter: value-based positioning). This value-based positioning was operationalized based on the three basic lines of societal conflict addressed in the literature review (see above). For the (1) socioeconomic conflict line, we measured participants' agreement with three positions, each contrasting between the welfare state pole and the market liberal pole. The exact question wording can be found in Appendix A1. To circumvent the problem that respondents may have interpreted the response options differently, we decided to dichotomize the responses, and thus differentiated between agreement with the welfare-state vs. market liberal pole and agreement with the liberal vs. authoritarian pole of the first two lines of conflict. The responses were condensed into an index with a range of 0 (no market liberal position mentioned) and 3 (three market liberal positions mentioned). The mean value of the index was 1.27 market liberal positions ($SD = .99$). The (2) political-cultural conflict line was recorded in a similar way. Here, too, there were three positions contrasting between a liberal and an authoritarian pole. The mean value for liberal positions was 1.70 ($SD = .85$) (Kösters & Jandura, 2019). For both dimensions, high values indicate support for the values of the welfare state and liberalism, which are to be found on the left. The (3) globalization-related conflict line represents a question on group-based xenophobia from the Center Study (Achour et al., 2021). Here, we recorded participants' agreement with nine items. An exploratory factor analysis ($KMO = .851$, varimax rotation, eigenvalue criterion, explained variance 61%) resulted in a two-factor solution comprising a variable depicting group-related xenophobia on the one hand and a variable representing the assessment of cultural diversity on the other. (4) Additionally, the following variables were included as determinants of a possible misperception of self-positioning on the left-right axis:

(1) Political efficacy (PE) was measured using the Political Efficacy Short Scale (Beierlein et al., 2012), which consists of the two subscales internal and external political efficacy, each containing two items rated on a scale ranging from 2 (very high) to 8 (very low). In the present study, internal political efficacy ($\alpha = .78$) showed a mean value of 4.21 ($SD = 1.39$) and external political efficacy ($\alpha = .83$) showed a mean value of 6.08 ($SD = 1.42$).

(2) Education, assessed using seven items, was aggregated into a three-item scale. The distribution was as follows: 26% low education (Hauptschulabschluss / Volksschulabschluss, lower-track school-leaving qualifications), 39% middle education (Realschule, medium-track school-leaving qualifications), 35% high education (Abitur, higher-track/grammar school-leaving qualifications).

(3) Respondents' political socialization was determined by asking whether they had lived in East or West Germany prior to German reunification or, in the case of younger respondents, in which federal state they lived. From these two variables, a new variable with four categories was formed, which recorded geographic place of residence and socialization (124 respondents living in Berlin were excluded). 15% ($n = 403$) of the respondents lived in East Germany and were also socialized there, 3% ($n = 81$) lived in East Germany but were socialized in the West, 10% ($n = 264$) lived in West Germany but were socialized in the East, and 72% ($n = 1,972$) lived in West Germany and were also socialized there. For the analysis of the effects of political socialization, only the 2,375 respondents who lived in East or West and were also socialized in the same geographical area were

included.

(4) To assess participants' propensity to populism, we used two dimensions of populism, measured by six variables each: the sub-dimensions of the demand for popular sovereignty ($\alpha = .86$) and the belief in the homogeneity of the people ($\alpha = .84$), in line with Schulz et al. (2017).

(5) Respondents' media consumption was measured based on the following question regarding regular use of media brands from the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman et al., 2022). "Thinking back over the past week, which of the following media titles did you use on three or more days to access news and information offline (i.e., television, print media, and other traditional media)?" For the purpose of the present study, the question was extended to include non-traditional/online media. The individual media brands were grouped into the media genres of public service media (reach: 71%), tabloid media (44%), algorithmically curated media, i.e. all specified social media offerings (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), as well as news aggregators (e.g., gmx.de, t-online.de) (35%), local media (25%), international media (11%), right-wing media (5%), and left-wing media offerings (4%). Media consumption was recorded dichotomously.

(6) The sociodemographic characteristics age and sex complete the list of available variables.

Results

The presentation of the results is structured according to the order of the research question and the hypotheses. To answer RQ1, regarding the extent to which people position themselves correctly on the left-right scale, we correlated the subjective positioning, measured on the 7-point scale ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.15$, skewness -0.04 , kurtosis 0.17), with the four indicators of the value-based positioning. Weak positive linear correlations emerged. In each case, the subjective positioning correlated weakly with the socioeconomic conflict line, in the expected direction ($r = -.32^{**}$). The more left-wing the respondents positioned themselves, the more strongly they favored welfare state redistribution. The correlation with the political-cultural conflict line was of a similar size ($r = -.37^{**}$). The more left-wing the respondents positioned themselves, the more strongly they advocated liberal positions. These correlations were also shown for the globalization-related basic conflict. The more left-wing the respondents positioned themselves, the more positively they rated cultural diversity ($r = .41^{**}$) and the more negatively they rated group-based xenophobia ($r = -.29^{**}$).

Overall, the weak to medium correlations point to divergences between subjective positioning and value-based positioning, which we therefore examined in greater detail in the next step. For this purpose, we formed terciles from each of the four metric scales for value-based positioning, which were aligned following data transformation. Respondents from the first tercile in each case (scale value 1) represent left-wing attitudes, while respondents from the third tercile in each case (scale value 3) represent right-wing attitudes. Subsequently, a point-sum index was formed, with a range from 4 (respondents are in the tercile representing the left positions for all scales) to 12 (respondents are in the tercile representing the right positions for all scales). Next, we compared this newly created index assessing value-based positioning with respondents' subjective positioning, defining three cases as reflecting correspondence between subjective and value-based positioning: (1) Respondents show both a value-based (value range 4 to 6) and subjective (value range 1–3) positioning on the left. (2) Respondents show both a value-based (value range 7–9) and subjective (value range 3–5) positioning in the center. (3) Respondents show both a value-based (value range 10–12) and subjective (value range 5–7) positioning on the right. Based on these criteria, 69% of the sample showed a match between subjective and value-based positioning. All other combinations (31%) were defined as incorrect self-positioning. It should be noted that these criteria can be described as rather soft, since a relatively large amount of deviation was allowed for a self-positioning to be described as correct.

To gain a deeper understanding of the 31% of the sample diagnosed with incorrect self-positioning, we looked at the direction of respondents' incorrect positioning, and found two tendencies, one toward the center and one toward the left. The tendency toward the center represents respondents who are positioned on the left (13%) or on

the right (9%) based on their values, but who subjectively position themselves in the center. The tendency toward the left represents respondents who are positioned in the center based on their values, but who subjectively position themselves on the left (9%).

A subsequent correlation analysis (see Table 1), differentiated according to whether subjective positioning was consistent or inconsistent with value-based positioning, revealed that among respondents with consistent self-positioning, the correlation coefficients increased from a medium to a strong positive linear relationship (socioeconomic conflict line: $r = .48^{**}$, political-cultural conflict line: $r = .56^{**}$, globalization-related conflict line: assessment of cultural diversity: $r = .56^{**}$, globalization-related conflict line: assessment of group-related xenophobia: $r = -.40^{**}$). In the case of inconsistent self-positioning, by contrast, no significant correlations emerged between self-positioning and the indicators representing political values (socio-economic conflict line: $r = -.05$, political-cultural conflict line: $r = -.07$, globalization-related conflict line: assessment of cultural diversity: $r = .05$, globalization-related conflict line: assessment of group-related xenophobia: $r = -.06$). We interpret this finding as an indication that our separation between respondents with correct and incorrect self-positioning was successful. We attribute the fact that the correlations between subjective positioning and value-based positioning were not higher among respondents with consistent self-positioning to our less stringent indicator for differentiation.

Table 1

Correlation Coefficients Between Self-Positioning and Political Values

Conflict line	All	Self-	Self-
		positioning consistent with political values	positioning inconsistent with political values
Socioeconomic	.32***	.48**	.05
Political-cultural	.37**	.56**	.07
Globalization-related: cultural diversity	.41**	.56**	.05
Globalization-related: group xenophobia	-.29**	-.40**	.06

Note. ** $p < .01$.

Based on these findings, we sought to clarify what determines correct or incorrect self-positioning. The hypotheses were tested using a logistic regression model, including all relevant variables and controlling for other relevant third variables as well as some additional sociodemographic characteristics. Overall, although the model only explained 9% of the variance, our findings support the following hypotheses (see Table 2):

H1: The lower the level of formal education, the higher the probability of incorrect self-positioning.

The regression model revealed a significant correlation between low formal education and a self-positioning that was inconsistent with respondents' political values. This supports the previous finding that a low formal education is associated with lower political knowledge (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

H2: The lower the internal political efficacy, the higher the probability of incorrect self-positioning.

This correlation was also confirmed for political self-efficacy. People who find it difficult to talk about political issues or to form an opinion, and people who talk about political issues comparatively rarely, show a lower tendency to position themselves on the left-right axis according to their own political values.

H3: The higher the approval of the populism dimension belief in homogeneity of the people, the higher the probability of incorrect self-positioning.

The regression model also revealed a significant positive correlation between approval of the populism dimension belief in homogeneity of the people and an incorrect self-positioning. This finding, along with the finding that people with incorrect self-positioning tend to locate themselves either more toward the center or more toward the left (see above), supports the assumption that people with a strong belief in homogeneity of the people locate both others and themselves more in the center than is actually the case.

H5: The use of algorithmically curated media increases the probability of incorrect self-positioning.

The significant positive correlation between the use of algorithmically curated media offerings and an incorrect self-positioning on the left-right scale supports assumptions of a lack of possibility for co-orientation in society due to a politically one-sided compilation of information.

The present findings did not support the following hypotheses:

H4: Political socialization in East Germany increases the probability of incorrect self-positioning.

Respondents' political socialization in either East or West Germany had no significant influence on a self-positioning on the left-right axis that diverges from their political values. Thus, the findings of Bauer et al. (2017) were not confirmed in the present study and we found no group-specific (East/West) divergent positioning. The relatively higher incidence of divergent self-positioning in Eastern Germany must be explained by the socio-structurally different composition of the population.

H6: The consumption of public broadcasting increases the probability of correct self-positioning.

Contrary to our assumption, the consumption of public broadcasting had no significant effect on a self-positioning on the left-right axis that was consistent with political values. This finding can be interpreted in line with Fuhse's (2004) argument that left-right as a heuristic for differentiating between governing and opposition parties is at least challenged by the three grand coalitions in Germany. Future research should conduct content analyses to examine the extent to which political value systems are represented by the various public broadcasters.

Table 2

Determinants of Incorrect Self-Positioning

Predictor	<i>B</i>	EXP (<i>B</i>)	<i>p</i>
Constant	.53	1.698	.379
Age	.00	.997	.538
Education	-.11	.898	.017
Gender	-.28	.756	.017
East/West	-.18	.833	.151
External political efficacy	.04	1.046	.286
Internal political efficacy	.12	1.132	.008
Belief in homogeneity of the people	-.06	.943	.000
Consumption of tabloid media offerings	.18	1.194	.126
Consumption of local media	-.09	.914	.525
Consumption of algorithmically curated media offerings	-.31	.732	.008
Consumption of left-wing media offerings	.35	1.420	.314
Consumption of right-wing media offerings	-.13	.874	.672
Consumption of public service media offerings	-.14	.871	.287
Consumption of international media offerings	.14	1.152	.485

Note. Coding of incorrect self-positioning: 0, coding of correct self-positioning: 1.

Discussion

The starting point of our study was the observation that the subjective left-right self-positioning is used both in studies from the field of structural audience description (Schweiger, 2007) and as an independent variable in the field of reception and impact research (e.g., Hölig et al., 2020). In the face of the “new confusion” of basic social conflicts that can be observed due to the increasing plurality and heterogenization of society (F. Decker, 2018; Habermas, 1985), it is relevant to ascertain whether subjective positioning on the left-right axis is still a valid measurement tool today, or whether other indicators of respondents’ political positioning need to be determined. The results can be summarized according to the following points:

(1) For just under seven in ten respondents (69%), a correspondence between subjective and value-based positioning on the left-right axis was established. These respondents correctly positioned themselves on this scale despite the new lack of clarity. This finding supports the assumption that the validity of the scale remains high (e.g., Corbetta et al., 2009; Lesschaeve, 2017).

(2) Just under a third (31%) of the sample were unable to subjectively locate themselves correctly on the left-right axis. Two different patterns can be discerned, insofar as respondents with left and right positions showed a tendency toward the center and respondents with attitudes that could rather be described as in the center showed a tendency toward the left.

(3) The variables established in the political science and political sociology literature, namely low formal education, low political self-efficacy, and high belief in homogeneity of the people, led to a lower degree of correct self-positioning, although only to a weak extent in view of the low explanation of variance. In contrast, no effect was found for political socialization.

(4) From a communication research perspective, we examined the extent to which consumption of various media offerings has an influence on incorrect self-positioning. The assumption that the use of public broadcasting is accompanied by more correct self-positioning, due to its internally plural reporting, was not confirmed. This finding can be explained by studies by Tsfati and Cappella (2005), which concluded that exposure alone is not a sufficient indicator of content perception. In contrast, the assumption that consumption of algorithmically curated media offerings leads to incorrect self-positioning was confirmed, supporting the notion that this form of news selection leads to a loss of the co-orientation function of political journalism (Jandura et al., 2022). However, to obtain more nuanced results in terms of media use, it would be necessary to consider not only whether people consume one type of media or another, but also which they consume primarily. In other words, comparing different types of media repertoires would presumably yield more detailed results on the effects of media consumption on political self-positioning.

The present study is subject to some limitations, which are discussed in terms of methodological and theoretical considerations. From a methodological perspective, attention should be drawn to the coverage error resulting from the sampling (offliners & respondents over 69) and to the potentially error-prone recording of media consumption via self-report (Scharkow, 2019). Follow-up studies should therefore utilize other sampling approaches (e.g., population-representative) and other survey methods (e.g., tracking methods). With regard to indicators for capturing value-based positioning on the left-right axis, in addition to the migration dimension, the denationalization dimension that correlates with it should be taken into account in the case of the globalization-related conflict line (Wilde et al., 2019). In the secondary data analysis, this operationalization was not available. Furthermore, to differentiate between correct and incorrect self-positioning, different strict indicators would need to be tested.

From a theoretical perspective, our indicator of correct self-positioning evades an answer to the question of what left values actually are. There are two competing answers to this question, comprising an emphasis on a “newer left” and the insistence on “old leftist” values, which can have an influence on subjective self-positioning. While Kriesi et al. (2006) assume that the globalization-related line of conflict can be mapped on the one-dimensional left-right axis, the debate regarding the Old and New Left (e.g., Inglehart & Flanagan, 1987; Wagenknecht, 2021) demonstrates that being on the left does not necessarily imply that an individual is cosmopolitan. The criterion used in the present study takes this discussion into account inasmuch as holding a moderate position on the variables representing the basic globalization-related conflict, while holding a leftist position on the traditional lines of conflict, still leads to a correct self-positioning on the left spectrum. A further limitation of the present study lies in the use of the tercile criterion to determine the assignment to objective positions. The approach should be further validated by the use of flexible position measures (Jungmann et al., 2021) or by differentiation based on cut-off values collected in representative surveys.

Overall, our study shows that for the majority of the population, the established left-right scale is still a valid procedure for the assessment of political orientation. However, a considerable proportion of the population shows

difficulties in using this approach for their political self-positioning. While the left-right scale might still be seen as a simple measure to roughly classify people's political orientation, it is imperative that we take its limited validity into account. According to our findings, in order to accurately rank the population on the political spectrum, additional indicators are need. Otherwise, diagnoses such as the supposed shift to the right in society remain speculative, if not wrong.

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Endnotes

[1] <https://www.gesis.org/allbus/allbus>.

[2] <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org>.

[3] <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org>.

[4] <https://www.digitalnewsreport.org>.

[5] <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/collection/news-media-and-political-attitudes-in-western-europe>.

[6] The acronym PEGIDA stands for “Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes” (Engl.: Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident”) and is an Islamophobic, xenophobic, ethnic, racist and far-right organization.