

Which way from left to right? The issue basis of citizens' ideological self-placement in Western Europe

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Abstract

This paper analyses the relation between citizens' left–right orientation and their preferences on more concrete economic and sociocultural issues. It suggests that this relation should be non-linear. Economic issue preferences should be associated with stronger differences among left-wing citizens (e.g., between extreme-left and centre-left citizens) than among right-wing voters. The reverse pattern should characterize the relation between sociocultural issues and ideological self-placement. The analysis of 19 elections in five West European countries offers strong support for hypothesis that left–right ideology and political issues are not related in a linear way.

Keywords

Left–right scale, political issues, political space, Western Europe

Introduction

The left–right scale is very salient in political (science) discourse. It is the most widely used reference to qualify political positions (Benoit and Laver 2006) and is frequently used by politicians, political pundits, political scientists, and citizens. The pervasiveness of the left–right scale supports the idea that citizens’ issue preferences and parties’ political positions are structured by a single dimension. If citizens and political elites can meaningfully describe preferences and positions using the left–right scale, it means that the main political conflicts and issues should align in a single dimension.

However, the prevalence of the left–right concept and the assumption of a single dimension of political conflict seem to be at odds with much evidence from research on the dimensionality of the political space. Several authors demonstrate that two dimensions (at least) are necessary to explain the structure of issue positions in Western Europe – at the level of parties (Albright 2010; Hix 1999; Warwick 2002), voters (Kitschelt 1995; van der Brug and van Spanje 2009), or both (Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2008). Most common in this literature is to distinguish between an economic and a sociocultural dimension (Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002; Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2006). The economic dimension corresponds to the traditional class cleavage and opposes pro-state and pro-market views. The sociocultural dimension in West European countries in the late 1990s and early 2000s has been shown to combine mainly issues of cultural liberalism and attitudes towards immigration (Dalton 2010; Kriesi et al. 2008; van der Brug and van Spanje 2009).

Determining that issue positions are structured by two largely independent dimensions leads to a puzzling situation. One may wonder how citizens can orient themselves in a two-dimensional political world by referring to a single left–right dimension. If economic and sociocultural issues are, to a large extent, independent from one another, the left–right scale should not be sufficient to meaningfully summarize citizens’ issue positions. On the other hand, if the left–right scale really captures the main conflicts structuring citizens’ issue preferences, then we should not find that these attitudes are indeed structured by two independent dimensions, as much research shows.

Can these contradictory views about the structure of citizens’ political preferences be reconciled? This paper suggests that this is indeed possible. The argument rests on a different conception of how citizens’ left–right positions relate to their attitudes towards more concrete

economic and sociocultural issues. The traditional interpretation of the left–right scale is that it represents a linear combination of various political issues (Huber 1989; Knutsen 1995). If the left–right scale is related to traditional economic issues, such as attitudes towards welfare state expansion, citizens should become increasingly opposed to welfare state expansion as they move from left to right. Similarly, if the left–right dimension also captures preferences towards non-economic issues, such as gender equality, citizens who are farther on the right should be more strongly opposed to gender equality. The standard conception of the left–right scale assumes that these relations are linear. This implies that a move from the leftmost to the centre position on the ideological scale will result in the same changes in terms of citizens’ attitudes as a move from the centre to the rightmost position. This paper suggests, instead, that the relations between citizens’ issues preferences and their left–right positions *should be nonlinear*. The strength of the association between ideology and specific issues should vary depending on the exact location on the left–right scale.

This hypothesis is derived from two arguments. First, much literature has shown that citizens’ interpretation of the left–right scale depends on the conflicts they observe in their political system (Huber 1989; Inglehart and Klingemann 1976; Knutsen 1998). From this point of view, left and right can be seen as abstract concepts that citizens interpret in relation to the political parties that claim or are ascribed these ideological positions and to the political issues that divide them. Second, research on the nature of political divides in Western Europe shows that the main lines of conflicts or ideological principles that structure party positions may differ between the left and the right. Parties tend to form “triangular” configurations (see also Cochrane 2013; Grunberg and Schweisguth 1997; Kriesi et al. 2006): The policy differences between left-wing parties are not the same as between right-wing parties. Left-wing parties differ strongly from one another on economic issues, with extreme left-wing parties being much more supportive of a strong role for the state in the economy. As for sociocultural issues, by contrast, the differences are less pronounced. Both moderate and extreme left-wing parties tend to support “libertarian” positions. Between right-wing parties, on the other hand, there are large differences in the sociocultural dimension, but smaller differences in the economic dimension. Moderate right-wing parties tend to support rather libertarian positions, while extreme right-wing parties strongly reject them. In economic terms, by contrast, all right-wing parties lean towards free-market solutions rather than state intervention.

These findings lead to the hypothesis of nonlinear relations between citizens' left–right positions and their issue preferences. Citizens on the extreme left should support pro-state policies much more strongly than centre-left citizens. Among right-wing citizens, by contrast, differences in economic preferences should be smaller. The reverse pattern should hold for sociocultural issues. Extreme-right citizens should display much more authoritarian attitudes than centre-right citizens, while the differences should be smaller among left-wing citizens.

This hypothesis suggests a different interpretation of the substantive meaning of citizens' left–right positions. It may also solve the apparent paradox about the dimensionality of the political space. While the left–right scale is, by definition, one-dimensional, its “shape” in a two-dimensional representation of the political space may not correspond to a straight line (Daalder 1984; Weisberg 1974). Rather, it could correspond to a curve or a broken line, with the various left-wing positions being more widely spread on the economic than on the sociocultural dimension, and the various right-wing positions being relatively homogeneous on the sociocultural dimension but farther apart on the economic dimension.

This paper tests this hypothesis using data from 19 national election studies of the 1990s and early 2000s from five West European countries: France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The next section reviews the literature on the nature of the left–right scale and its relation to more concrete political issues. Section three discusses in more detail how the associations between left–right and issues should depend on the configuration of party positions, and it presents the hypotheses. The data and the variables' operationalization are introduced in section four, followed by a presentation of the main results. These offer strong support for the suggested pattern of associations between issues and ideology, particularly for economic issues and attitudes towards cultural liberalism. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for our understanding of the left–right scale.

Left–right ideology and the structure of citizens' issue positions

The left–right ideological scale is a central reference when describing the structure of citizens' political attitudes. It is often the only dimension used to describe the positions of voters or parties. The use of a left–right dimension of political competition is pervasive in the political science literature. Most citizens, at least in West European democracies, are willing to position themselves on this scale (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976; Mair 2007), and citizens

as well as political experts use it to locate political parties. In a variety of political contexts, there seems to be a shared understanding of what left and right mean (Benoit and Laver 2006). Yet, it is difficult to give a *general* definition of the substantive meaning of this ideological divide (Mair 2007). Most authors agree that it is related to preferences towards redistributive issues and towards the role the state should play in the economy (Hellwig 2008). But the left–right divide is related to other issues as well. It functions as a kind of “super-issue” and integrates political conflicts over many different issues, both economic and non-economic (Fuchs and Klingemann 1989; Inglehart and Klingemann 1976). The variety of political issues should boil down to a single dimension of political competition. This strong integrative capacity also implies that the issues associated with the left–right dimension – and hence the meaning of this ideological divide – can vary across time and space (Benoit and Laver 2006; de Vries, Hakhverdian, and Lancee 2013; Fuchs and Klingemann 1989; Huber and Inglehart 1995).

The continuing dominance of the left–right concept is surprising when considering recent findings on the dimensionality of the political space. Several studies have shown that two dimensions structure citizens’ attitudes towards political issues in West European democracies (Kitschelt 1994; Kriesi et al. 2008; van der Brug and van Spanje 2009). There is some variation across authors in the exact definition of these dimensions, but most scholars distinguish between an economic and a sociocultural dimension. The variation in the nature of these dimensions is mainly due to differences across countries and over time in the way in which the various issues are bundled. This is particularly true of the sociocultural dimension, whose character has changed over time (Dalton 2002; Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002; Kriesi et al. 2008; van Deth and Scarbrough 1995). However, for the countries and in the time period considered in this analysis (i.e., France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom in the 1990s and early 2000s), the political space has been shown to be structured in a similar fashion (Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008). The economic dimension corresponds largely to the traditional class cleavage (Lipset and Rokkan 1967) and represents an opposition between the state and the market (Kitschelt 1994). The sociocultural dimension is mainly structured by citizens’ attitudes towards cultural liberalism and immigration (Kriesi et al. 2006, 2008; van der Brug and van Spanje 2009).

The widespread use of a left–right scale and the finding that citizens’ issue positions are structured by two dimensions lead to a paradoxical situation. The results pointing to a two-

dimensional structure of voters' attitudes mean that the economic and sociocultural issue dimensions are largely independent of one another. It should not be possible to predict citizens' preferences on a sociocultural issue, such as immigration, simply by knowing where they stand on economic issues. Thus, if voters' attitudes really are structured by two dimensions, one-dimensional models should be misleading. Reducing the diversity of political positions to a single scale implies a loss of important information. Yet, the widespread use of the left–right scale in politics and in political science clearly shows that this concept is still meaningful.

Relating issue attitudes and ideological orientations

A crucial step towards solving this potential paradox is to reconsider one of the central assumptions usually made when relating the left–right scale to more specific political issues. In the above reasoning, it was implicitly assumed that left–right ideology and issue positions are linearly related. That is, positions on the left–right scale are conceived of as a linear combination of attitudes towards more specific economic and sociocultural issues. This assumption is virtually always made when analysing the relation between left–right ideology and issue preferences (e.g., Budge and Robertson 1987; Huber and Inglehart 1995; Huber 1989). It implies that a change of a given magnitude along the left–right scale will always result in the same changes in terms of issue preferences. Differences in issue preferences, regarding, for example, immigration or high income taxation, should be of the same magnitude when moving from the leftmost to the middle position of the ideological scale as when moving from the middle to the rightmost location.

This is illustrated in the left-hand panel of Figure 1, which represent a two-dimensional political space, with an economic and a cultural dimension. This is a relatively standard model of the political space, with dimensions similar to those defined by Kitschelt (1994) or Kriesi et al. (2008). In Figure 1, the left–right scale runs from a pro-State and culturally liberal position, corresponding to the left end of the scale, to a pro-market and culturally conservative profile that characterizes the right end of the scale. Depending on the relative importance of economic and cultural issues, the slope of this line could be flatter or steeper. But as long as left–right is represented by a straight line, it is implicitly assumed that it relates in a linear way to the more specific political issues defining the economic and cultural dimensions. The left-hand panel of Figure 1 thus summarizes the paradoxical situation exposed above. If citizens' political preferences are meaningfully represented by such an ideological scale, they

would indeed be one-dimensional. Such a left–right scale would capture most of the variation in citizens’ political positions. The cultural and economic issues would be very strongly correlated with one another and they would not build two distinct dimensions.

[Figure 1 about here]

The assumption of linear relations between left–right ideology and issue positions appears, however, to be problematic – at least for the countries and the time period considered here. We know from previous research that citizens’ interpretation of the left–right scale depends in part on the nature of the political conflicts in their political system (Huber 1989; Inglehart and Klingemann 1976; Knutsen 1998). For citizens, the meaning of the left–right scale should thus depend on what divides the political actors that claim to be left-wing or right-wing or who are ascribed such positions in the media or political debates. In the countries and time period considered in this paper, there is evidence that parties’ positions tend to form triangular configurations (Kriesi et al. 2008). Among right-wing parties, differences in political positions are more pronounced on sociocultural than on economic issues. For instance, radical-right parties tend to adopt much more extreme positions on immigration or minority rights than centre-right parties; on economic issues, by contrast, the differences between them are less strongly pronounced. At the same time, there are strong differences in economic positions when moving from extreme-left to centre parties, while these parties offer more homogeneous positions on immigration and other issues linked to the sociocultural dimension. Such a tripolar structure has particularly been emphasized in the French case (Bornschiefer and Lachat 2009; Grunberg and Schweisguth 1997, 2003), but it can be observed in other countries as well (Kriesi et al. 2008). Based on a large number of countries, the “map” of party positions provided by van der Brug and van Spanje (2009: 324) suggests a similar pattern, with a virtually empty quadrant for positions combining a left-wing economic orientation with a culturally conservative position.

These arguments lead me to reassess the hypothesis that citizens’ left–right ideology and political issue positions are linearly related. Instead, the strength of this relation is expected to vary between different ideological positions. When represented in the two-dimensional political space, the left–right scale should correspond to a curve, rather than a straight line. An example for such a pattern is illustrated in the right-hand panel of Figure 1. The left–right dimension still runs from the upper left quadrant to the lower right one. But it is almost

horizontal in the left-hand portion and becomes very steep in the right-hand portion. This captures this paper's two central hypotheses. The relation between economic issue positions and left–right ideology is expected to be stronger among left-wing than among right-wing citizens (Hypothesis 1). For sociocultural issues, the reverse pattern is expected: The corresponding issue preferences should relate more strongly to ideological preferences among right-wing citizens than among left-wing citizens (Hypothesis 2). For these hypotheses to be supported the “shape” of the left–right scale does not need to correspond exactly to the picture in Figure 1; Figure 1 is meant only to be illustrative. The central point is simply that economic issue preferences have a *stronger impact on ideology among left-wing than right-wing respondents*, whereas the impact of cultural issue preferences is *stronger on the right than on the left*.

Of course, these hypotheses do not imply the absence of systematic differences, in terms of issue preferences, between left-wing and right-wing citizens. Quite to the contrary, individuals on the left of the political spectrum should differ strongly from right-wing citizens *on both economic and sociocultural issues* (Hypothesis 3). This, again, should reflect the differences between parties and other political actors. Left-wing parties, on average, are clearly more state-oriented and more libertarian than right-wing parties. This third hypothesis is not new, and it fits with the literature showing that the left–right scale is related to many different issues (e.g., Huber 1989; Knutsen 1998). It will, however, also be tested below, to provide some benchmark with which to compare the results of the separate analyses of left-wing and right-wing citizens.

Before introducing the data and methods with which these hypotheses are tested, it is important to rule out one possible misinterpretation. This paper's hypotheses do not imply that the left–right ideological scale has a different meaning for different groups of citizens. It does not mean, for instance, that left-wing citizens interpret all left–right differences more in terms of economic issues and that right-wing citizens interpret them more in terms of sociocultural issues. Rather, the concept of the left–right scale suggested in this study should be the same for all citizens, whatever their ideological preference. Simply put, differences between left-wing ideological positions should not be interpreted in the same way as differences between right-wing ideological positions.

Data and methods

To test the hypotheses about the meaning of the left–right scale, this study examines the relations between voters’ issue preferences and ideological self-placement in five countries: France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. I use data from all election studies from the mid-1990s up to 2007.¹ The choice of these countries and this time period is influenced by previous research findings on the configuration of parties’ issue positions. In the five countries analysed here, this configuration has been shown to be triangular in the 1990s and early 2000s (Kriesi et al. 2008). Elections held after 2007 are not included, since the financial crisis that started at the end of that year may have significantly altered the configuration of party positions.

For each of these election surveys, I analyse the relations between citizens’ placement on the left–right scale and their attitudes towards the central issues of the economic and sociocultural dimensions. Citizens’ positions on the left–right scale were measured similarly for all five countries. In each survey, respondents were first told that left and right were concepts often used to describe political attitudes or classify political actors. They were then invited to indicate their own position, using a seven-point scale (France, 1995 and 2002), 10-point scale (the Netherlands, 1994, 1998, and 2003; Germany, 1994), or 11-point scale (Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the remaining elections in the Netherlands, France, and Germany).

While questions about left–right orientations are formulated in roughly similar terms across countries, more specific attitudinal items can vary widely. A direct comparison of attitudes is therefore difficult. Comparisons can be made easier by grouping issue items into more general categories, such as attitudes towards economic liberalism or immigration. One or more indicators for such categories are available in a large number of election studies. This approach allows one to build a smaller number of summary indicators and is the strategy used in this study.²

¹ The list of election studies used can be found in Table A1 in the supplementary material.

² An alternative procedure would be to go even further in the process of aggregating issue questions and to build only two issue dimensions, corresponding to the economic and sociocultural dimensions. However, this requires assuming that specific issue categories are *linearly* related to these summary economic and sociocultural dimensions. This assumption cannot be tested, since the underlying economic and sociocultural dimensions cannot be measured directly. As a consequence, any findings based on this alternative procedure could be put into question.

This study distinguishes between five issue categories, capturing the types of issues that are most strongly related to the two dimensions of the political space. For the economic dimension, attitudes toward the welfare state and toward economic liberalism are included. For the sociocultural dimension, this study includes attitudes toward cultural liberalism and toward restrictive immigration. These two groups of issues have been shown to be the most important ones to characterize voter preferences on the sociocultural dimension for the countries and time period considered here (Dalton 2010; Kriesi et al. 2008). Finally, attitudes toward European integration are also considered. Such attitudes are neither purely economic nor purely sociocultural. They contain both economic/utilitarian and cultural or identity-related components (Boomgaarden et al. 2011; Bornschier 2010). Nonetheless, previous empirical analyses have shown that attitudes towards the process of European integration align more strongly with sociocultural than economic issue preferences (e.g., Hooghe, Marks, and Wilson 2002). Attitudes towards the European Union (EU) are thus expected to discriminate more strongly between right-wing than between left-wing citizens.

When one of these issue categories is represented by a single indicator in an election study, the standardized version of that indicator is used to measure voters' attitudes. When several indicators are available, they are summarized with principal component factor analysis. With few exceptions, this produces a single factor. When the analysis leads to a two-factor solution for a given set of indicators, the corresponding subsets of items are factor-analysed separately to build two summary measures. This happens mostly with the "cultural liberalism" category, for which a second category is necessary in six elections. The indicators for the "restrictive immigration" category also form two dimensions in the 1998 Dutch election study. The list of items used to operationalize each of these categories and the results of the corresponding factor analyses are available in an online appendix. Depending on the country and election survey, two to five issue categories can be measured. All of these issue variables are standardized and they are coded so that a higher value corresponds to the expected pro-market or authoritarian position.³

In most cases, all variables come from a post-election survey or from the same wave of a panel study.⁴ When data stem from multiple waves of a panel study, left–right self-placement is measured after or at the same time as issue positions. The 2001 British election panel study

³ More precisely, a higher value corresponds to the following positions: For economic liberalism, less welfare state, less cultural liberalism, more restrictive immigration, and less support for European integration.

⁴ Table A1 in the appendix indicates the type of survey and the wave in which the variables were measured.

is the only exception: Left–right orientations are measured in the second wave, whereas issue preferences are based on questions from a posterior self-completion questionnaire. Thus, in that case the dependent variable is measured before the independent variables. Conclusions based on that study should be made with caution.

I use regression models to analyse whether the relations between issue preferences and ideological orientation differ between left-wing and right-wing citizens. The left–right scale is regressed on issue preferences separately for respondents on each side of the ideological scale. The dependent variable in these models is thus a “half left–right scale”. This is a three-point scale in the 1995 and 2002 French election studies and a five-point scale in all other cases.⁵ Since this variable is ordinal, the models are estimated with ordered probit regressions.

For each election, a third model is estimated, in which the dependent variable is a dummy, indicating whether a respondent is left-wing or right-wing. This will permit showing how the determinants of one’s ideological placement on the left vs. right differ from the determinants of one’s exact location *within* each of these groups. The corresponding models are estimated with probit regressions.

All analyses are performed separately for each election study. Since no hypothesis about country differences or differences over time was formulated, one can argue that pooling the data would be a more appropriate strategy. This is, however, not possible with the data at hand, since both the measurement of the dependent variable (number of categories of the left–right scale) and the set of available issue categories vary across election studies.

Results

Tables 1 to 5 present the estimated results, country by country. For each election, the results of three models are presented: two ordered probit regressions with either the left half or the right half of the ideological scale as the dependent variable, and a probit regression with a left-versus-right dummy as the dependent variable. The papers’ main hypotheses, regarding differences between left-wing and right-wing citizens in how issues and ideology are related, can be tested by comparing the results of the first two models. The third model, in contrast, allows testing Hypothesis 3. Starting with the latter, the results clearly show that the contrast

⁵ When the left–right scale has an uneven number of categories, respondents in the middle category are excluded from these analyses.

between left and right is related to citizens' preferences on a large number of issues. Right-wing citizens differ on many issues, both economic and non-economic, from left-wing citizens. Preferences on economic issues are always related to this contrast, with a single exception (preferences toward the welfare state in the 2001 UK election). Most sociocultural items are also related to the left–right contrast. This is the case for all variables measuring attitudes toward cultural liberalism and for most of those related to immigration (16 of 19 items are significant). Preferences regarding EU integration are less systematically related to the left vs. right contrast, with 11 of 17 variables having a significant impact on ideological self-placement. These results offer strong support for Hypothesis 3 and confirm findings from previous research.

[Tables 1–5 about here]

Most important for this paper's hypotheses, however, is to analyse the associations between issue preferences and ideology within each of the two broad ideological groups. The results of models 1 and 2 in the various elections show that the exact ideological position among both left-wing and right-wing citizens is related to a smaller number of issues. Furthermore, it is generally not the same issues that are relevant on the left as on the right. In all but one election, some issue categories have a significant impact in one group of voters but not in the other.⁶ Furthermore, such differences most often point to substantially large contrasts. Many variables with a strong effect in one group of voters are almost entirely irrelevant in the other group. The 1995 French presidential election is a case in point (Table 1). Economic liberalism is the variable with the strongest impact among left-wing respondents, but it has no impact among right-wing voters. Left-wing voters who are more strongly opposed to economic liberalism locate themselves farther away from the centre of the ideological scale. Among citizens on the right, by contrast, the positioning between the centre right and the far right is unrelated to economic issue preferences. The reverse pattern applies to the effect of attitudes towards immigration: It strongly influences the ideological location of right-wing citizens but has no impact at all among left-wing citizens. This is just one example of a pattern that can be observed in a large number of elections.

These results offer strong support for the premise that the determinants of ideological positioning are not the same for left-wing and right-wing citizens. Do these differences

⁶ The exception is the 2005 German election, for which only two issue categories can be measured.

generally match the expected contrast between economic and sociocultural attitudes? As far as economic attitudes are concerned, the observed differences offer strong support for Hypothesis 1. Economic attitudes have a very strong impact on the ideological positioning of left-wing respondents (i.e., whether these citizens position themselves on the centre left or on the far left). In all but one election, one or both economic variables exert a significant impact on ideological position in this group of respondents. The exception is the 1997 British election, where collinearity between the economic liberalism and welfare state variables leads them to be both non-significant.⁷ In line with hypothesis 1, the impact of economic preferences is however much weaker among right-wing respondents. In twelve elections, attitudes toward the welfare state and economic liberalism have *no impact at all* on the ideological position of right-wing respondents.⁸ Furthermore, in four additional cases, one or two of the economic variables have a significant impact, but the overall effect of economic variables is weaker than among left-wing respondents (1994 German election, 1998 Dutch election, 1999 and 2007 Swiss elections). Thus, hypothesis 1 is clearly supported in 16 elections from a total of 19, including all French, British, and Swiss cases. In the 1994 and 2006 Dutch elections (Table 3), in contrast, hypothesis 1 can be rejected. In these two cases, the impact of economic variables is of similar magnitude in both ideological groups. These are the only two elections in which the traditional assumption of a linear relation between (economic) issues and left–right ideology is supported. The last case is the 2005 German election (Table 2). It is particular in the sense that attitudes toward the welfare state are related to ideology in both groups of voters, but the relation goes in different directions. Having more favourable attitudes toward the welfare state (that is, a lower value of this variable), is associated with a position further left among left-wing respondents, but with a position further right in the other ideological group. Thus, in that election, neither hypothesis 1 nor the traditional assumption about the issues–ideology relation are supported. Nonetheless, considering all elections, there is strong support for this paper’s hypothesis that left–right ideology is more strongly related to economic issue preferences among left-wing than among right-wing citizens.

The impact of sociocultural issue on ideology also differs between left-wing and right-wing respondents in most elections. These differences, however, do not always fit with Hypothesis

⁷ The correlation between these variables is 0.46. Both items are close to being significant, with p-values of 0.052 and 0.062, respectively. When one of these variables is excluded from the model, the other turns out to be clearly significant.

⁸ This is the case in all French and British elections, in the 1998 and 2002 German elections, in the 2002 and 2003 Dutch elections, and in the 1995 and 2003 Swiss elections.

2. Attitudes toward cultural liberalism can be included in 16 out of 19 elections. In two of these, they are not significantly related to ideological self-placement in any of the two ideological groups (France 2002 and UK 1997). Among the remaining elections, two cases (2002 and 2003 Dutch elections) fit with the traditional assumption of linear relations, showing that the relation between attitudes toward cultural liberalism and left–right ideology is the same on both sides of the ideological divide. The number of elections that fit with Hypothesis 2 is much larger. In nine of the races examined here, preferences on issues of cultural liberalism exert a stronger impact on ideology among right-wing citizens than among left-wing respondents.⁹ In the last three cases (the 1994, 1998 and 2002 German elections), neither the traditional assumption of constant effects, nor Hypothesis 2, are supported. Cultural liberalism is significantly related to ideological self-placement among left-wing, but not among right-wing respondents. These cases thus display non-linear relations, but not following the pattern expected by this paper’s hypothesis. The pattern of relations between attitudes toward cultural liberalism and left–right ideology is thus distinct in Germany. In the other countries, however, support for Hypothesis 2 (with respect to cultural liberalism) is strong. In France, Switzerland, and the UK, this hypothesis is supported in all elections in which attitudes toward cultural liberalism have some impact on the ideological position of left-wing or right-wing citizens. In the Netherlands, Hypothesis 2 is supported in three elections out of five.

Attitudes toward immigration can be measured in all elections, but the 2005 German contest. In most cases, these attitudes are significantly related to ideological self-placement in at least one group of respondents (the two exceptions are the 1997 and 2001 British elections). The usual assumption that such attitudes are linearly related to ideological self-placement is supported in six elections.¹⁰ Support for this assumption is thus stronger than in the case of cultural liberalism or economic attitudes. Nonetheless, there are more elections in which the strength or direction of immigration attitudes varies between left-wing and right-wing respondents. Such differences can be observed in ten elections, eight of which fit with Hypothesis 2, by showing that immigration attitudes exert a stronger impact on the right than on the left.¹¹ The other two elections revealing a non-linear pattern are the 1994 Dutch

⁹ These cases are the 1995 and 2007 French elections, the 1994, 1998, and 2006 Dutch elections, the 1995, 1999, and 2007 Swiss elections, as well as the 2001 UK election.

¹⁰ 1994 and 2002 in Germany; 1998, 2002, and 2003 in the Netherlands; 2003 in Switzerland.

¹¹ With respect to attitudes toward immigration, Hypothesis 2 is supported in the following cases: France in 1995, 2002, and 2007; Germany in 1998; the Netherlands in 2006; Switzerland in 1995 and 1999; the UK in 2005.

election and the 2007 election in Switzerland. In the first of these, attitudes toward immigration only matter among right-wing respondents, but the direction of this relation is the opposite of what Hypothesis 2 predicts: right-wing citizens who favour more restrictive immigration rules are more likely to be centrist. In 2007 in Switzerland, finally, the magnitude of the impact of attitudes toward immigration is similar in both groups, but the direction is reversed. Support for restrictive immigration leads to a more extreme ideological position, among both left-wing and right-wing citizens.

The third sociocultural issue is European integration. There is no corresponding indicator in two elections, and in six additional cases, these attitudes do not exert any significant impact in any of the two groups of respondents.¹² In the remaining elections, there is very little support for the traditional assumption of constant effects. The 2005 German election is the only case in which attitudes toward European integration exert a significant impact in both groups, of the same magnitude and direction. In contrast, there are ten elections in which the magnitude or direction of the relation between European attitudes and ideological self-placement differs between left-wing and right-wing citizens. In half of these cases (the 2003 and 2007 Swiss elections, as well as all three British elections), the impact of European attitudes is stronger on the right than on the left, in line with Hypothesis 2. In the remaining five elections, the relation between European attitudes and left–right position differs between the left and the right, but not in a way that corresponds to Hypothesis 2. As a matter of fact, this last group of elections show a pattern that is more characteristic of economic issues. As emphasized before, European attitudes entail both a sociocultural and an economic component. In these elections, the latter seems to be dominant. Thus, in French elections, left-wing citizens who are more strongly opposed to European integration are more likely to position themselves at the extreme left. On the right of the ideological spectrum, European attitudes have either no effect (1995 and 2002 election), or an effect in the opposite direction (in 2007). A similar pattern can be observed in the 2002 election in Germany and in 2006 in the Netherlands.

Discussion

It is generally assumed that the left–right dimension integrates a large number of more specific economic and sociocultural issues. The findings presented here do not question this integrative property of left–right ideology. The models distinguishing between only two

¹² As can be seen in Tables 1 to 5, this is the case in the 1998 German election, the 1994, 1998, and 2002 Dutch elections, and the 1995 and 1999 Swiss elections.

groups, left-wing versus right-wing, reveal a strong impact of most issue categories on citizens' ideological location. Yet, this study demonstrates that the issues associated with citizens' position *within* each of these two groups are not the same on the left as on the right. Economic issue preferences are strongly related to the ideological self-placement of left-wing citizens. Respondents on the far left tend to oppose economic liberalism and to support the welfare state more strongly than centre-left citizens. In contrast, among right-wing citizens, there usually is no such relation. Moderate right-wing citizens are not more or less supportive of economic liberalism or welfare than those on the far right. The results related to sociocultural issues were less clear-cut. In most elections, there was strong evidence for non-linear relations between socioeconomic issue preferences and left–right self-placement. This means there is only limited support for the traditional assumption about the issue–basis of citizens' ideological positions. However, not all instances of non-linear relations matched the expectation of Hypothesis 2. In some cases, these country- and issue-specific results may be related to the particular issue positions of certain parties. One example is the strong divide between French left-wing parties on the European issue, which can explain why EU attitudes are strongly associated with ideology among left-wing citizens. Given the relatively small number of cases considered here, it is difficult to integrate party-level variables in the analysis, but such a research design, combining individual-level and party-level or country-level characteristics, could be a promising avenue. It would allow a more detailed test of this paper's central claim that the meaning of the left–right divide depends on the configuration of parties' issue positions.

The presence of nonlinear relations between left–right ideology and political issues has important implications. In particular, it means that it may be problematic to infer issue preferences from left–right self-placement, and vice versa. Changes along the left–right scale do not always mean the same in terms of issue preferences. In the traditional conception of the left–right scale, a move towards the right end of the ideological scale in a given context always means the same in terms of issue preferences. When left–right ideology is associated with attitudes towards economic liberalism, for instance, a move towards the right always implies a more positive attitude towards economic liberalism, whatever the starting position and the size of the move. In a situation similar to that of the 1995 French election, in contrast, a move towards the right cannot be interpreted unambiguously in terms of changes in attitudes towards economic liberalism. The two are strongly related among left-wing citizens but not at all among right-wing citizens. Being more on the right, thus, has no unequivocal meaning in

terms of issue positions; it always depends on which positions are compared. Far-right voters are more on the right than both left-wing and moderate right-wing voters. Although these far-right voters are likely to be economically more liberal than the former, their economic attitudes should not differ much from those of the latter group.

These findings mean that one must be cautious when inferring differences in issue preferences from ideological differences. They also point to potential problems in the reverse exercise. If the relations between issue preferences and ideology are nonlinear, it is potentially misleading to infer ideological preferences from one's issue positions. Changes in attitudes towards a specific issue may be associated with changes in ideological preferences for some voters but not for others.

Of course, these potential problems in the analysis of citizens' ideological preferences do not mean that measures of left-right self-placement are problematic per se. On the contrary, the above results underscore the integrative capacity of the left-right dimension. Left-right ideological positions seem to reflect both the two-dimensional nature of citizens' issue preferences and what seems to be a one-dimensional "space" of electoral competition. This result is encouraging from the standpoint of democratic representation. The unidimensionality of electoral competition is considered to be a central condition for a functioning system of political representation (Mair 2008; Thomassen 1994; Thomassen and Schmitt 1997). If several dimensions structure voters' preferences and party positions, it becomes difficult for parties to claim a clear mandate from their electorate (Mair 2008). The two-dimensionality of the political space in Western Europe, emphasized by several studies, could thus be a negative development. By showing how a single left-right dimension can be reconciled with a two-dimensional political space, the present study undermines fears of a dysfunctional political representation in West European countries.

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Figure 1. Two examples of one-dimensional alignments in a two-dimensional space

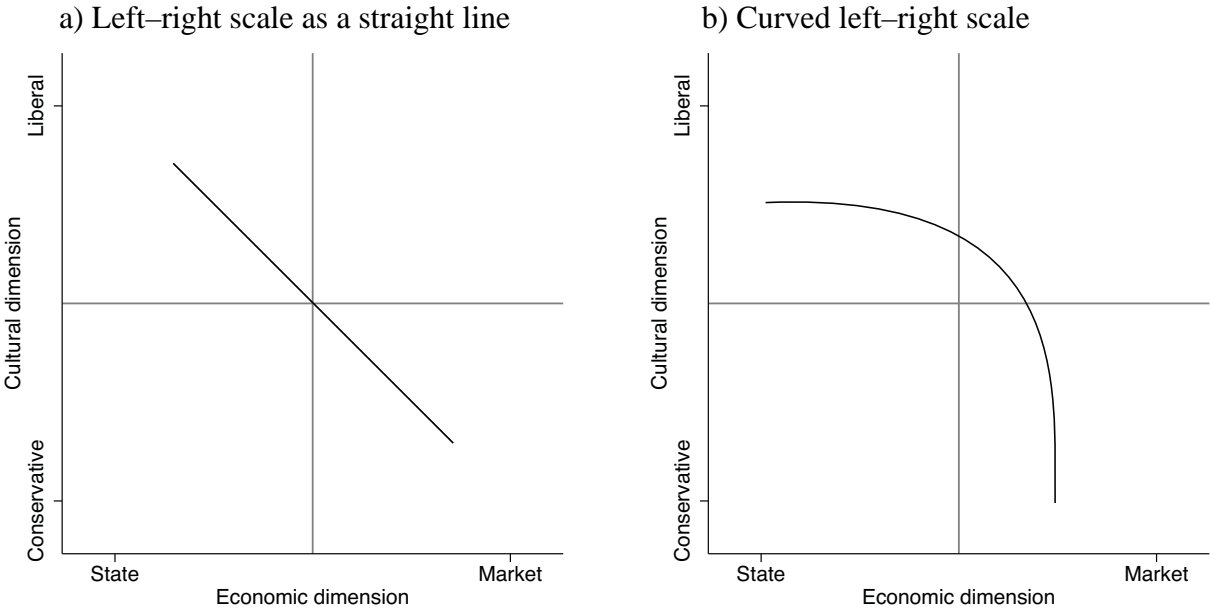


Table 1. Impact of issue positions on ideological self-placement: France.

	1995			2002			2007		
	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left–right dummy	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left–right dummy	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left–right dummy
Welfare state							0.14**	–0.06	0.37***
Economic liberalism	0.26***	0.02	0.67***	0.25***	–0.01	0.69***	0.18***	0.08	0.42***
Cultural liberalism	0.01	0.09*	0.25***	–0.04	0.06	0.26***	–0.02	0.16**	0.31***
Traditional values				0.01	0.04	0.15***			
National identity							0.11**	0.11**	0.18***
European integration	–0.10**	0.05	0.06	–0.16***	–0.06	–0.06	–0.16***	0.17***	–0.09*
Anti-immigration	–0.02	0.36***	0.37***	0.14*	0.36***	0.20***	0.10*	0.30***	0.40***
Constant			0.05			–0.20***			–0.19***
Cut point 1	–1.12	0.19		–1.30	0.42		–1.82	–0.37	
Cut point 2	–0.18	1.30		–0.25	1.35		–1.39	0.56	
Cut point 3							–0.72	1.33	
Cut point 4							0.22	1.77	
Log-likelihood	–1,022.3	–1,040.7	–1,098.7	–844.4	–579.2	–743.8	–1,208.2	–1,082.6	–801.3
McFadden R ²	0.02	0.04	0.27	0.02	0.05	0.30	0.03	0.06	0.31
N	1,055	1,103	2,158	901	653	1,554	905	780	1,685

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Models for left–right dummy are estimated with probit regressions. Models for the half left–right scales are estimated with ordered probit regressions.

Table 2. Impact of issue positions on ideological self-placement: Germany.

	1994			1998			2002			2005		
	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left-right dummy	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left-right dummy	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left-right dummy	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left-right dummy
Welfare state	0.16***	0.02	0.11***							0.17***	-0.17***	0.08**
Economic liberalism	0.08*	0.09*	0.21***	0.24***	0.00	0.28***	0.18***	0.08	0.28***			
Cultural liberalism	0.09**	0.05	0.14***	0.23***	0.11	0.34***	0.20***	0.11	0.37***			
European integration				0.00	-0.09	-0.04	-0.11*	0.09	-0.01	0.09***	0.11**	0.19***
Anti-immigration	0.22***	0.25***	0.27***	0.14**	0.28***	0.31***	0.29***	0.25***	0.33***			
Constant			-0.37***			-0.66***			-0.34***			-0.38***
Cut point 1	-1.69	-0.01		-2.10	-0.18		-2.11	-0.22		-0.96	-0.67	
Cut point 2	-1.11	0.77		-1.42	0.72		-1.38	0.55		-0.79	0.14	
Cut point 3	-0.41	1.40		-0.47	1.43		-0.48	1.28		-0.20	0.50	
Cut point 4	0.19	2.01		0.30	1.92		0.31	1.83		0.28	0.79	
Log-likelihood	-1,606.1	-846.9	-1098.3	-952.6	-366.2	-502.8	-726.6	-428.6	-474.5	-2,386.4	-1,373.9	-1,628.8
McFadden R ²	0.03	0.02	0.07	0.04	0.03	0.14	0.05	0.03	0.15	0.01	0.01	0.02
N	1,152	655	1,807	718	275	993	538	312	850	1,653	907	2,560

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Models for the left-right dummy are estimated with probit regressions. Models for the half left-right scales are estimated with ordered probit regressions.

Table 3. Impact of issue positions on ideological self-placement: The Netherlands.

	1994			1998			2002		
	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left-right dummy	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left-right dummy	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left-right dummy
Welfare state				0.27***	0.14**	0.15***			
Economic liberalism	0.22***	0.22***	0.38***	0.12*	0.09*	0.37***	0.27***	0.06	0.34***
Cultural liberalism	0.21***	0.35***	0.29***	0.17***	0.31***	0.40***	0.24***	0.18***	0.46***
Ethnic minorities	0.05	0.32***	0.36***						
Euthanasia									
Foreigners									
European integration	-0.08	-0.05	-0.17***	-0.03	0.01	-0.05	-0.07	0.05	0.07
Anti-immigration	0.03	-0.16*	0.02	-0.00	0.11*	0.10*	0.17**	0.21***	0.38***
Enfranch. foreigners				0.13**	-0.08	0.14***			
Constant			-0.04			-0.05			
Cut point 1	-1.77	-0.18		-1.97	-0.22		-2.43	-0.50	
Cut point 2	-1.31	0.61		-1.34	0.73		-1.72	0.56	
Cut point 3	-0.47	1.72		-0.44	1.73		-0.84	1.50	
Cut point 4	0.36	2.05		0.36	2.20		0.16	1.95	
Log-likelihood	-827.2	-734.3	-663.9	-1002.3	-887.4	-802.4	-674.3	-844.9	-610.4
McFadden R ²	0.04	0.05	0.18	0.05	0.04	0.19	0.06	0.03	0.24
N	595	573	1,168	731	700	1431	535	635	1,170

(continued on next page)

Table 3. Impact of issue positions on ideological self-placement: The Netherlands (continued).

	2003			2006		
	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left–right dummy	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left–right dummy
Welfare state				–0.02	0.17***	0.19***
Economic liberalism	0.31***	0.03	0.37***	0.29***	0.08*	0.40***
Cultural liberalism	0.13**	0.20***	0.16***	0.04	0.06	0.28***
Ethnic minorities						
Euthanasia	0.15**	0.04	0.22***			
Foreigners				0.05	0.20***	0.32***
European integration				–0.13**	–0.00	–0.18***
Anti-immigration	0.32***	0.34***	0.50***	0.11*	0.21***	0.32***
Enfranch. foreigners						
Constant			–0.19***			0.28***
Cut point 1	–1.85	–0.38		–1.69	–0.52	
Cut point 2	–1.22	0.43		–1.24	0.62	
Cut point 3	–0.31	1.62		–0.56	1.70	
Cut point 4	0.35	2.15		0.38	2.26	
Log-likelihood	–926.2	–693.5	–654.7	–890.4	–1,092.5	–775.9
McFadden R ²	0.07	0.04	0.20	0.03	0.04	0.24
N	663	527	1,190	633	872	1,505

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Models for the left–right dummy are estimated with probit regressions. Models for the half left–right scales are estimated with ordered probit regressions.

Table 4. Impact of issue positions on ideological self-placement: Switzerland.

	1995			1999			2003			2007		
	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left–right dummy	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left–right dummy	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left–right dummy	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left–right dummy
Welfare state	0.32***	0.05	0.49***	0.26***	0.19***	0.45***	0.29***	0.07	0.51***	0.22***	0.16***	0.45***
Economic liberalism				0.13*	–0.08	0.17***				0.25***	0.03	0.26***
Cultural liberalism	–0.01	0.16**	0.34***	0.02	0.22***	0.41***				0.16**	0.31***	0.52***
European integration	0.08	–0.01	0.16***	0.02	0.09	0.19**	–0.06	0.18***	0.32***	0.08	0.13**	0.39***
Anti-immigration	0.01	0.23***	0.31***	0.05	0.12**	0.22**	0.25***	0.26***	0.51***	–0.19**	0.17***	0.15**
Constant			0.17***			0.25***			0.12**			0.33***
Cut point 1	–1.58	–0.41		–1.40	–0.42		–1.17	–0.60		–1.38	–0.46	
Cut point 2	–1.36	0.34		–1.09	0.41		–0.96	0.38		–1.14	0.32	
Cut point 3	–0.86	1.15		–0.49	1.32		–0.38	1.23		–0.51	1.23	
Cut point 4	0.01	1.38		0.33	1.54		0.42	1.43		0.28	1.41	
Log-likelihood	–673.1	–826.8	–549.1	–710.2	–860.7	–528.9	–772.3	–814.8	–540.0	–665.3	–902.6	–483.2
McFadden R ²	0.02	0.03	0.27	0.03	0.04	0.30	0.03	0.03	0.30	0.04	0.05	0.36
N	514	579	1,093	487	622	1,109	528	582	1,110	467	645	1,112

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Models for the left–right dummy are estimated with probit regressions. Models for the half left–right scales are estimated with ordered probit regressions.

Table 5. Impact of issue positions on ideological self-placement: The United Kingdom.

	1997			2001			2005		
	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left–right dummy	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left–right dummy	Scale: left half	Scale: right half	Left–right dummy
Welfare state	0.19	0.06	0.38***	0.09	–0.08	0.01	0.36***	–0.06	0.12*
Economic liberalism	0.17	–0.07	0.37***	0.18*	0.01	0.40***			
Cultural liberalism	0.06	0.11	0.15*	0.11	0.22**	0.33***			
National identity	0.05	0.14	0.15*						
European integration	–0.00	0.15*	0.22***	–0.06	0.18*	0.24***	0.04	0.19***	0.36***
Anti-immigration	0.02	0.02	0.07	0.07	0.13	0.05	–0.16	0.15**	0.21***
Constant			0.05			0.06			0.51***
Cut point 1	–1.59	–0.51		–1.81	–0.32		–1.72	–0.28	
Cut point 2	–1.16	0.37		–1.42	0.45		–1.43	0.60	
Cut point 3	–0.51	1.05		–0.74	1.02		–0.75	1.43	
Cut point 4	0.30	1.27		0.14	1.30		0.11	1.80	
Log-likelihood	–798.8	–819.2	–567.1	–483.7	–566.6	–420.1	–651.8	–1,210.6	–814.7
McFadden R ²	0.02	0.02	0.27	0.03	0.03	0.21	0.03	0.02	0.12
N (weighted)	553	572	1,125	367	396	763	519	923	1,442

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

Models for the left–right dummy are estimated with probit regressions. Models for the half left–right scales are estimated with ordered probit regressions. The observations are weighted to compensate for the overrepresentation of respondents from Scotland and Wales.