The Making of Radical-Right Voters: Persuasion and Contrast Effects in a Dynamic Political Context

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Under what circumstances do first-time radical-right party (RRP) voters become more identified with the right-wing label? Also, when do they perceive the center-right party as more left wing and evaluate it more negatively? To answer these two intertwined questions, this article leverages the dynamic political context of Germany during the 2013–17 election cycle. In this election cycle, the political arena became abruptly polarized, as the refugee crisis took place and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) broke into 13 subnational parliaments. Using a unique longitudinal dataset, I find that first-time AfD voters experienced a persuasion effect in such a polarized environment, as they became slightly more right wing. In addition, I find a contrast effect among these voters, as they came to perceive the Christian Democratic Union as more left wing and judged it more negatively. These findings have important implications for understanding the psychological processes of first-time RRP voters in a multiparty system, as they show how a polarized environment can shape RRP voters' ideological identity and motivate them to see the mainstream center-right party as an outgroup.

KEY WORDS: contrast, ideological identity, persuasion, polarization, radical right, refugee crisis

In recent years, political psychologists have adopted social identity theory to study ideology in the U.S. context (Devine, 2015; Malka & Lelkes, 2010; Mason, 2018; Popp & Rudolph, 2011). The key insight of these studies is that citizens use ideological labels to categorize themselves and out-group partisans. Some scholars even point out that citizens categorize rival partisans as an outgroup, although they share similar issue positions and lack coherent policy preferences (Claassen et al., 2015; Ellis & Stimson, 2012). Accordingly, ideological labels, like liberal/conservative or left/right, can be regarded as a source of identity and can thus motivate political perception and judgment (Mason, 2018).[1] However, even though social identity theory suggests that an identity is dynamic (Huddy, 2001), little is known about the contexts in which voters become more attached to an ideo-logical identity. The current literature likewise pays little attention to how voters perceive the main-stream party when they become more self-identified with an ideological label.

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[1] Although this article adopts the identity-based approach to ideology, this does not mean it rejects the issue-based approach to ideology, which basically argues ideology can constrain a person's position on different issues. Reviewing the huge amount of research on the latter approach is beyond my scope here. Interested readers can refer to Section A in the online supporting information for a brief outline of the issue-based approach to ideology.

The aim of this article is to fill these gaps by studying whether and how a dynamic political context can induce these two intertwined psychological processes in a multiparty system, with a special focus on first-time radical-right party (RRP) voters. Specifically, I analyze whether a polarized environment can drive the first-time RRP voters to become more attached to the right-wing label. This right-wing shift in ideological self-placement is called the persuasion effect. In addition, I investigate whether first-time RRP voters perceive the neighboring mainstream center-right party as an outgroup. This latter process is called the contrast effect. Studying these two microlevel psychological processes is crucial, as it helps us to better understand under what circumstances RRP voters strengthen their ideological identity and perceive the mainstream center-right party as rivalry in a multiparty system.

Throughout this article, I use the case of Germany during the 2013–17 election cycle to study whether the persuasion effect and the contrast effect existed among the first-time RRP voters in a polarized environment. In this election cycle, the political arena became abruptly polarized because there was a refugee crisis in 2015, and the Alternative for Germany (AfD) consecutively broke into 13 subnational parliaments. AfD's success within this short period, together with the refugee crisis, brought ideological identity into the forefront of political conflict in two ways. For one thing, the AfD adopted a xenophobic stance on the immigration issue, which other parties shied away from. For another, different media and parties labeled AfD as an "extreme right" party because of its affiliation with the far-right political movement Pegida. The polarization in political debates raised the salience of ideological labels at the electorate level. As such, the dynamic political context in Germany is a good context for testing whether the first-time RRP voters experienced a persuasion effect and a contrast effect. Using a unique longitudinal data, my analysis demonstrates that these two effects do exist. That is, first-time AfD voters shifted their ideological self-placement slightly to the right. Also, first-time AfD voters, who defected from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), perceived the CDU as more left wing and evaluate it in a more negative light, relative to the loyal CDU voters.

The contribution of this article is threefold. First, it helps us to comprehend the microlevel psychological foundations of first-time RRP voters in a multiparty system for a crucial case. Germany is a crucial case because, for decades, it had been treated as an exception in terms of RRP success. Second, the findings of this article echo the notion that the ideological self-placement of RRP voters and their judgment of the mainstream right party are tinted with rationalization bias. But crucially, it advances the literature by arguing that the rationalization bias is not static but situational—a polarized environment can change the rationalization bias among first-time RRP voters. Third, this article brings together the recent works on the refugee crisis (Dinas et al., 2019; Gessler et al., 2021; Hangartner et al., 2019; Schaub et al., 2020) and those on the impact of RRP election outcomes (Bischof & Wagner, 2019; Bursztyn et al., 2017; Valentim, 2021). My research joins these two strands of work by showing that RRP success in concatenated subnational elections, together with a political crisis, can contribute to a polarized environment, which shapes RRP voters' rationalization bias.

The article is organized as follows: In the coming section, it describes the theoretical approach to studying the change in rationalization bias among first-time RRP voters within a polarized environment. Based on the literature review, I derive specific hypotheses concerning the persuasion effect and contrast effect. Next, I describe why the case of Germany is a good case to study these two effects. Then, I delineate the structure of the longitudinal data and the identification strategies, which is followed by the results of the empirical analyses. The article concludes by summarizing the findings and examining its limitations and implications.

Rationalization Bias Embedded in Ideological Identity: Persuasion and Contrast

To understand how first-time RRP voters become more attached to the right-wing label and how they adjust their perception of the mainstream center-right party, my article relies on the notion of
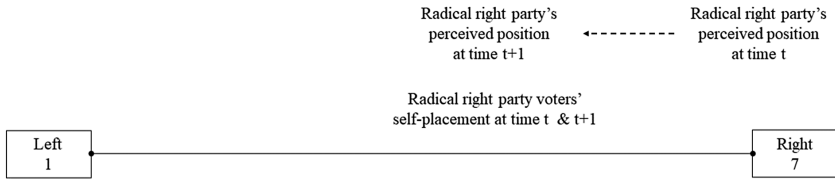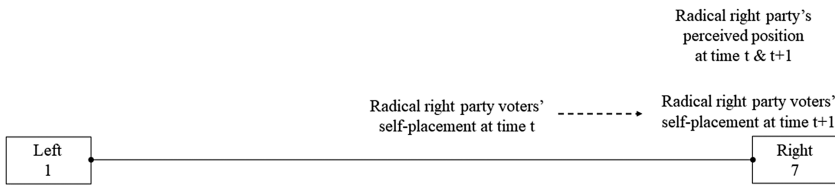
Figure 1. Projection effect.

Figure 2. Persuasion effect.

rationalization bias in electoral studies, which is analogous to the "ingroup/outgroup bias" in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Turner et al., 1987). Studies of rationalization bias suggests that voters first choose or have preferences for a party and then adjust their own position or their perceived position of different parties in order to fit their choice or preference (Conover & Feldman, 1982; Krosnick, 1990; Markus & Converse, 1979). Rationalization bias occurs not only in different issue domains; it can also take place in the ideological space (Bølstad, 2020; Calvo et al., 2014; Dahlberg, 2013; Drummond, 2010). The rationale behind this alignment of choice/preference and perception is to avoid cognitive dissonance (Leeper & Slothuus, 2014).

Studies of rationalization bias in the left/right scale focus on two kinds of effects: the assimilation effect and the contrast effect. The assimilation effect argues that voters are likely to place a party that they choose/prefer closer to their own position, and this effect can be further differentiated into two types, namely the projection effect and the persuasion effect. The former mechanism suggests that voters project their ideological position onto the party that they choose/prefer (Merrill et al., 2001; van der Brug, 2001). For example, if one person is a moderate right-wing voter and has an affinity with RRP, they would perceive RRP as being closer to their own position, just as Figure 1 shows. The persuasion effect is the other way round: Voters adopt certain ideological position of the party that they choose or prefer (Abramowitz, 1978; Brody & Page, 1972; Cohen, 2003; Lenz, 2013). Just as Figure 2 illustrates, RRP voters move toward the perceived position of RRP. To ascertain whether the projection effect or the persuasion effect is more likely, researchers need to rely on longitudinal data that traces the same voters' left/right self-placement and the perceived position of their chosen/preferred party over time.

In this article, I suggest that the persuasion effect is more likely to occur than the projection effect among first-time AfD voters. One reason for this is provided by Conover and Feldman's (1982) argument that persuasion is more likely to occur than projection if the policy stance of a party is distinct (p. 229). Since the AfD is the only party that consistently emphasized right-wing topics like immigration and crime during the refugee crisis (Grande et al., 2019), the AfD's political stance should be rather distinct in the ideological space. Because of its clearly identifiable anti-immigrant stance, I anticipate AfD's first-time voters to be more likely to experience the persuasion effect on average. Also, the persuasion effect echoes the idea that elite polarization over cultural issues can shape mass polarization. Recent research on polarization in the United States found that, when political elites hold polarized opinions over cultural issues, partisans strengthen their ingroup identity (Gidron et al., 2020, pp. 41–43;

Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Sides et al., 2019). Although these studies tended to focus on the partisan identity, I expect that elite polarization should strengthen ideological identity as well. For this reason, the right-wing ideological identity among first-time AfD voters should have become stronger.

Moreover, the expectation of a persuasion effect finds support in the recent literature that discusses the impact of RRP's electoral success on ideological polarization or political attitude (Bischof & Wagner, 2019; Bursztyn et al., 2017; Valentim, 2021). This strand of literature argues that an electoral breakthrough of an RRP can result in a legitimation effect and change social norms. Due to the institutional recognition and the reduction in stigmatization, RRP voters are more likely to move further to the ideological extremes (Bischof & Wagner, 2019). Because the AfD crossed the thresholds of 13 concatenated subnational elections in the 2013–17 national election cycle, I expect these electoral successes should have contributed to an increase in right-wing ideological identification among first-time AfD voters. Based on the above theoretical underpinnings, this article formulates the following hypothesis:

> *H1* (*persuasion effect in left/right placement*): In comparison to voters for other parties, first-time AfD voters in the 2017 federal election are more right wing in their self-placement than they did in 2013.

On the other hand, the contrast effect can be traced back to the political psychology literature, which argues that people tend to overestimate the differences between those falling into different categories (Krueger & Rothbart, 1990; Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963). It describes a categorization process in which voters position the party that they do not prefer further away from themselves, in terms of both issue positions and the left/right scale (Collins, 2011; Drummond, 2010; Granberg, 1987; Granberg & Brown, 1992; Vegetti & Širinić, 2019). Thus, the contrast effect would lead us to expect that first-time RRP voters perceive an outgroup party to be further away from themselves than they really are.

Yet which party is treated as an outgroup by first-time RRP voters? I suggest that the mainstream center-right party is considered the outgroup party, based on both theoretical and empirical reasons. Regarding the theoretical reason, research on categorical perception demonstrates that voters in multiparty systems differentiate parties that are supposed to be on the same side of the ideological divide (Nicholson et al., 2018). That is, if voters are choosing between two different parties on the left, they perceive the two left-wing parties as dissimilar. This discrimination logic likewise applies when voters have to choose two different parties on the right (Bølstad & Dinas, 2016), especially when the parties do not have a cooperative relationship (Adams et al., 2021). Outgroup discrimination between two similar options is nothing novel in electoral politics. This idea has long been suggested by Downs (1957), who claimed that parties in multiparty systems "will strive to distinguish themselves ideologically from each other" (pp. 126–127). Similarly, as noted by Bowler (1990), "party competition will take place and/or be at its fiercest between adjacent parties rather than between ostensibly opposing parties such as Christian Democrats and Communists" (p. 69). Thus, this article expects first-time RRP voters to accentuate the differences between the mainstream center-right party and the RRP on the left/right scale by positioning the former in a more left-wing position, just as Figure 3 portrays.
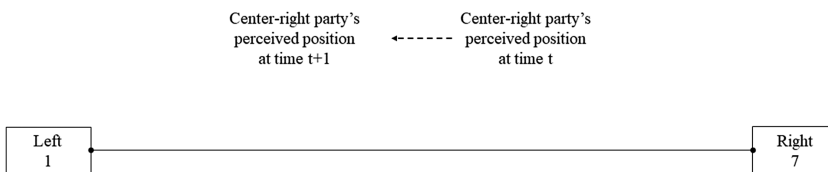

Figure 3. Contrast effect.

There are empirical reasons why this expectation is plausible, primarily based on the AfD's differentiating rhetoric and the fact that the CDU is always the AfD's target to pick a fight with. During the refugee crisis in 2015, Angela Merkel, the then chancellor and then party leader of the CDU, decided to accept refugees who had transited through Europe. By relentlessly criticizing the refugee policy and the CDU's cosmopolitan stance, the AfD significantly increased the salience of the immigration issue among the German electorate, and this issue became a polarizing topic (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Franzmann et al., 2020; Giebler et al., 2019). Recent research on elite polarization has shown that when party elites are polarized over certain issues, partisans' hostility towards an outgroup is more likely to increase (Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Skytte, 2021; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017). For this reason, first-time AfD voters should become more hostile towards the CDU and perceive the CDU as an outgroup in the ideological space. Therefore, I expect first-time AfD voters in the 2017 federal election to assign the CDU in 2017 to a more left-wing position than in 2013, even though the traditional literature tends to classify the CDU as belonging to the right-wing camp.

H2a (*contrast effect in left/right placement*): First-time AfD voters in the 2017 federal election perceive the CDU in 2017 as more left wing than they did in 2013.

Also, if first-time RRP voters adjust the ideological position of the mainstream center-right party, this psychological process should have implications for the disaffection with the outgroup party. The reason for this is that left/right ideological labels are political categories that are superimposed on top of party labels (Huddy et al., 2015; Mason, 2018). Similarly, the literature of polarization suggests that there is an association between strengthening of ideological identity and animosity towards outgroup parties (Helbling & Jungkunz, 2020; Reiljan, 2020; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Webster & Abramowitz, 2017; Westwood et al., 2018). This implies that if the perceived left/right distance between the self and an outgroup party increases, voters should evaluate the outgroup party in a more negative way. Taken together, if first-time AfD voters become more right wing and simultaneously categorize the CDU as more left wing, one should expect the contrast effect to be manifested in these voters' judgment of the CDU as well: They would view the CDU more negatively.

H2b (*contrast effect in party evaluation*): First-time AfD voters in the 2017 federal election evaluate the CDU more negatively than they did in 2013.

The Case of Germany

Before going into the details of the dataset, I briefly explain why my research leverages the case of Germany to study the persuasion and contrast effects. The reason is fourfold. The first reason concerns the fact that Germany has a multiparty system. As mentioned in the introduction, previous research using social identity theory to study ideology tends to focus on the United States, where ideological labels and partisanships often overlap due to its two-party system (Huddy et al., 2015). So a multiparty system can help us to disentangle the two and observe how they interact in a polarized environment.

The second reason is about the German political culture. Unlike voters in other Western European countries, voters in Germany hesitate to identify themselves with the extreme right due to its association with Nazism (Bauer et al., 2017), and the conservative avoid the term "right" (Mader & Schoen, 2017, p. 211). Because of the taboo of the right-wing label, Germany represents a hard case in testing for the persuasion effect. Third, the 2015 refugee crisis raised the salience of ideological labels in the public mind. As AfD politicized the immigration issue
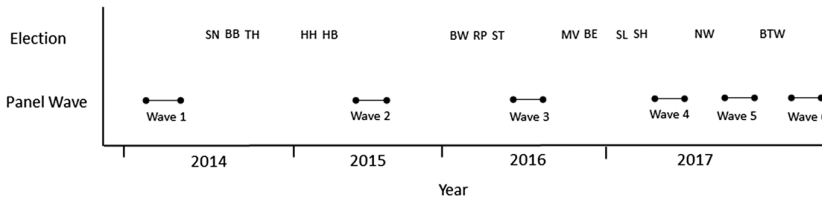
Figure 4. Data structure of GESIS panel. Abbreviations of the election denote the following: BW, Baden-Württemberg; BE, Berlin; BB, Brandenburg; BTW, federal election; HB, Bremen; HH, Hamburg; MV, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern; NW, North Rhine-Westphalia; RP, Rhineland-Palatinate; SL, Saarland; SN, Saxony; ST, Saxony-Anhalt; SH, Schleswig-Holstein; TH, Thuringia.

and other parties responded antagonistically, ideological labels were more often used to classify political competitors. As the literature on social identity theory suggests, people are more likely to categorize themselves in a particular label when that category sticks out and occurs more frequently (Hogg, 2005; Turner et al., 1987). Thus, the ideological label "right" should be more strongly connected to the AfD voters' identities, and their judgments of the outgroup party should more likely be affected in this polarized environment.

The last reason pertains to the unique features of the German political system. Both its federal and subnational electoral systems have a 5% electoral threshold.[2] And compared to other European countries, its subnational parliaments have a much more powerful jurisdiction. Because of these institutional settings, AfD voters should think that the ideological label "right" is more socially acceptable once the AfD could pass the subnational electoral hurdle. In other words, when AfD could consecutively break into subnational parliaments, these electoral successes were likely to signal that there was a change in the norm, and this would then affect AfD voters' perception of the right-wing label.

Data

To test for the persuasion and contrast effects, I make use of the panel provided by GESIS (2019), which traces the same respondent throughout the 2013–17 election cycle. The dataset is reshaped into six waves, as shown in Figure 4. I leverage the fact that subnational elections and the refugee crisis fall in between waves to estimate both effects. The panel consists of two cohorts. The first was recruited before the 2013 federal election with 7,599 respondents, while the second has 2,124 respondents, which were recruited in 2016. In total, there are 9,723 respondents in the dataset. In terms of retention rate, the first cohort still retains up to 42.0% of the respondents ($N = 3,189$) in wave 6, whereas the second cohort retains 66.9% of the respondents ($N = 1,420$) in wave 6. Table 1 shows further details about the overall retention rates and the variables used at different waves. In all regression analysis, I use the design weight provided by GESIS due to the different sampling strategies in the two cohorts.

Measurements

The key variable of the persuasion effect in left/right placement is the ideological self-identification. From wave 1 to 5, the surveys ask respondents "In political matters people talk of 'the left' and 'the

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[2]There are some nuances between the federal electoral system and the subnational electoral system in terms of vote-seat distribution formulae and whether the list vote is open or closed. Despite these subtle differences, the electoral systems of the two levels are largely congruent in terms of the 5% hurdle and being mixed-member proportional system.

Table 1. The Data Structure of the GESIS Panel

	N (Retention Rate)	Variables Used
Wave 1	4,839 (63.7%)	Ideological self-identification; perceived ideological position of different parties; demographic measures[a]; region of residence (East/West Germany); political interest
Wave 2	4,173 (54.9%)	Ideological self-identification; party evaluation; demographic measures; political interest
Wave 3	3,734 (49.1%)	Ideological self-identification; party evaluation; cultural attitude; demographic measures; political interest
Wave 4	4,975 (51.2%)[b]	Ideological self-identification; cultural attitude; demographic measures; region of residence (East/West Germany); political interest
Wave 5	4,691 (48.3%)	Ideological self-identification
Wave 6	4,609 (47.4%)	Perceived ideological position of different parties

[a]Demographic measures include age, gender, education, and income of the respondents.
[b]After wave 3, 2,124 new panelists were recruited to counter panel attrition. The reported retention rates refer to the enlarged sample of 9,723 respondents from wave 4 onward.

right'. Where would you place yourself on this scale from 'left' to 'right'?" The variable has a 1–7 left/right scale, where higher values denote more right-wing placements ($M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.21$).[3] In addition, the longitudinal data has several constructs measuring the respondents' cultural attitude. In waves 3 and 4, respondents are asked to what extent they agree or disagree with the following statements, and all items have a 4-point scale, where 1 means "Fully disagree" and 4 means "Totally agree":

- I value cultural diversity in Germany because it is useful for the country ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.79$).
- A society with a high degree of cultural diversity is more capable of tackling new problems ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 0.81$).
- In general, I have positive attitudes about people from different cultural backgrounds ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.71$).
- I like people from different cultural backgrounds ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.69$).

These constructs are useful in detecting whether the first-time AfD voters' position on these cultural issues has changed and become more structured in between waves.

Concerning the contrast effect in left/right placement, the variable of interest is the perceived ideological position of the CDU. In waves 1 and 6, the surveys ask respondents "If you use this scale from 'left' to 'right', where would you place the CDU?" The answer is a 1–7 left/right scale, where higher values denote more right-wing placements ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.27$). Talking about the contrast effect in party evaluation, there are three multidimensional items tapping into respondents' evaluation of the CDU in waves 2 and 3. The first item is the negative partisanship against CDU party member. The surveys ask respondents "If someone reveals the CDU/CSU membership during a conversation, I start seeing him as a political enemy." The answer is set at a 7-point scale, where 1 means "Does not apply at all" and 7 means "Fully applies" ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.95$). The second item is the affinity with the CDU, and the surveys ask respondents to what extent "I am a firm supporter of the CDU/CSU." The scale is the same as the first item ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 1.95$). The last item is the candidate orientation. The surveys ask respondents how much they like Angela Merkel. The answer is set at a 7-point scale, where 1 means "Nothing at all" and 7 means "Very much" ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.93$).

In terms of control variables, the dataset includes political interest (5-point scale; $M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.92$), region of residence (West Germany = 77.62%, East Germany = 22.38%), demographic measures, including age ($M = 47.52$, $SD = 15.00$), gender (Men = 49.29%, Women = 50.71%),

[3]The summary statistics of the variables are based on the average across different waves.

income (15-point scale; $M = 8.17$, $SD = 3.65$), and education (nine levels). The details of the panel, the approach to handle missing data, and the summary statistics of all variables at different waves are reported in Part B of the online supporting information.

Model

To identify the persuasion effect, I estimate the effect of AfD's breakthrough into the subnational parliaments and the effect of the refugee crisis on respondents' left/right self-placement. According to the theoretical expectation, elite polarization during the refugee crisis and AfD's breakthrough into subnational parliaments can shift first-time AfD voters in a right-wing direction. In the analysis, I compare the change in self-placement of first-time AfD voters in the 2017 federal election, relative to that of non-AfD voters. Because this research is primarily interested in how first-time AfD voters in the 2017 federal election come to identify with the right-wing label, voters who voted AfD in both the 2013 and 2017 federal elections are excluded in the estimation.

The model of the persuasion effect can be formalized as follows:

$$LR_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 Landtag_{it} + \beta_2 AfD_i \times Landtag_{it} + \beta_3 crisis_t \qquad (1)$$
$$+ \beta_4 AfD_i \times crisis_t + \beta_5 crisis_t \times Landtag_{it}$$
$$+ \beta_6 AfD_i \times crisis_t \times Landtag_{it} + v_i + \varepsilon_{it},$$

where $i = 1…N$ respondents in the dataset; $t = 1…5$ indicates the wave number. LR_{it} is the dependent variable, namely, the left/right self-placement of respondent i in wave t. $crisis_t$ is a dummy that switches on for the post-refugee crisis waves. AfD_i is a dummy switched on if respondent i is a first-time AfD voter in the 2017 federal election and 0 otherwise. $Landtag_{it}$ is a variable that measures the effect induced by AfD's breakrough in subnational parliament, and the value of $Landtag_{it}$ is the number of subnational parliaments entered by AfD in wave t divided by 16. For instance, the value of $Landtag_{it}$ is 0 in wave 1, since AfD had not broken into any subnational parliament in wave 1. In wave 2, the value of $Landtag_{it}$ would then be $\frac{5}{16} = 0.3125$, for AfD had crossed the hurdles of five subnational parliaments; in wave 3, its value becomes $\frac{5+3}{16} = 0.5$, and so on and so forth.

In this model, β_1 and $(\beta_1 + \beta_2)$ estimate how subnational parliament breakthrough affects the left/right self-placement among non-AfD voters and first-time AfD voters respectively before the refugee crisis. β_3 and $(\beta_3 + \beta_4)$ estimate the impact of the refugee crisis on left/right self-placement among non-AfD voters and first-time AfD voters accordingly. β_5 and $(\beta_5 + \beta_6)$ estimate the changes in left/right self-placement among these two groups of voters that are induced by subnational parliament breakthrough in the post-crisis period. One key assumption of this model is that all voters are equally affected by AfD's entry into subnational parliaments. To relax this strict assumption, I rerun the panel regression separately for the East German and West German subsamples in the robustness check.[4] And to estimate the change in cultural attitude, the constructs of cultural attitude mentioned above are substituted as dependent variables. An individual fixed-effect model is used in the estimation, for this research is interested in the change in self-placement within person.

The identification strategy of the contrast effect is different. Recall that the contrast effect focuses on whether the first-time AfD voters would put CDU in 2017 as more left-wing and see CDU in a more negative light than in 2013. However, to ascertain this left-wing categorization and negative evaluation of CDU are not simply due to CDU's liberal approach in migration policy but AfD voters'

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[4]An alternative identification strategy is to estimate the effect of AfD's subnational parliament breakthrough *within a state*. Accordingly, one creates a dummy $Landtag_{ist}$ that switches on when AfD broke into the parliament of state s. *This alternative strategy assumes there is no spillover effect of AfD's subnational parliament breakthrough from one state to another.* Nonetheless, this research cannot use this identification strategy because the GESIS dataset does not provide the state in which respondents live.

disaffection with CDU, it requires a baseline group for comparison. That is why I compare the changes in perceived position and evaluation of CDU between AfD voters in 2017 federal election who voted the CDU in 2013 (i.e., CDU defectors to AfD) and CDU voters in 2013 and 2017 federal elections (i.e., loyal CDU voters).[5] As a remark, more than 25% of the AfD voters in the 2017 federal election are CDU defectors in the dataset.

The contrast effect employs a typical difference-in-differences estimation, and the model equation can be written as follows:

$$DV_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 wave_t + \beta_2 AfD_i + \beta_3 AfD_i \times wave_t + X'_{it}\beta + \varepsilon_{it}, \tag{2}$$

where the DV_{it} is the perceived position and different evaluation items of CDU across respondent i in wave t. $wave_t$ is a dummy switched on if the survey is conducted at subsequent wave. AfD_i is a dummy switched on when respondent i is AfD voter in the 2017 federal election. X_{it} is the individual-level control variables at wave t. In this model, β_1 estimates the shift in perceived position/evaluation of CDU reported by the loyal CDU voters. β_2 estimates the perceived position/evaluation of CDU reported by the CDU defectors to AfD at previous wave. β_3 is the coefficient measuring the contrast effect, for it estimates the shift in perceived position/evaluation of CDU reported by the CDU defectors to AfD relative to the loyal CDU voters. In the OLS regression, the observations are restricted to the CDU defectors to AfD and the loyal CDU voters, and all errors are clustered at the individual level.

Result

Persuasion Effect

To begin with, we look at the change in left/right placement among non-AfD voters and first-time AfD voters throughout the 2013–17 national election cycle. To facilitate interpretation, I simulate Figure 5 panel (a) based on the regression result (full result is reported in Table S3.1 in the online supporting information). The figure shows the left/right placement over the number of subnational parliaments entered by AfD. In the simulation, the intercepts of both the first-time AfD voters and that of non-AfD voters are imputed based on the panel regression.

From panel (a), we can first notice there is a difference in left/right self-placement between the two groups of voters (0.94 units), before AfD had broken into any subnational parliaments and the refugee crisis had taken place. This is expected because the first-time AfD voters and non-AfD voters had different ideological identification to start with. Next, talking about the change in left/right placement among non-AfD voters, we cannot see any substantive shift over this dynamic political context. Contrarily, among the first-time AfD voters, there is a small right-wing shift, and the shift is nonlinear over time. When AfD entered the first five subnational parliaments, the left/right identification of these AfD voters remained stable. Yet, these voters became slightly more identified with the right-wing label after the three subnational elections that took place during the refugee crisis. Afterward, the left/right identification of first-time AfD voters becomes once again steady in the subsequent five subnational elections. This right-wing shift that takes place during the crisis is in line with the theoretical expectation of the persuasion effect in left/right placement, for the success in these concatenated regional elections provided AfD with more opportunities to polarize the immigration issue, rendering the ideological label more salient.

[5]The terms "loyal CDU voters" and "CDU defectors to AfD" are simply used for abbreviation. As CDU always form a party list with its sister party in Bavaria (i.e., Christian Social Union, CSU), the vote-choice option in the survey is the party list CDU/CSU.
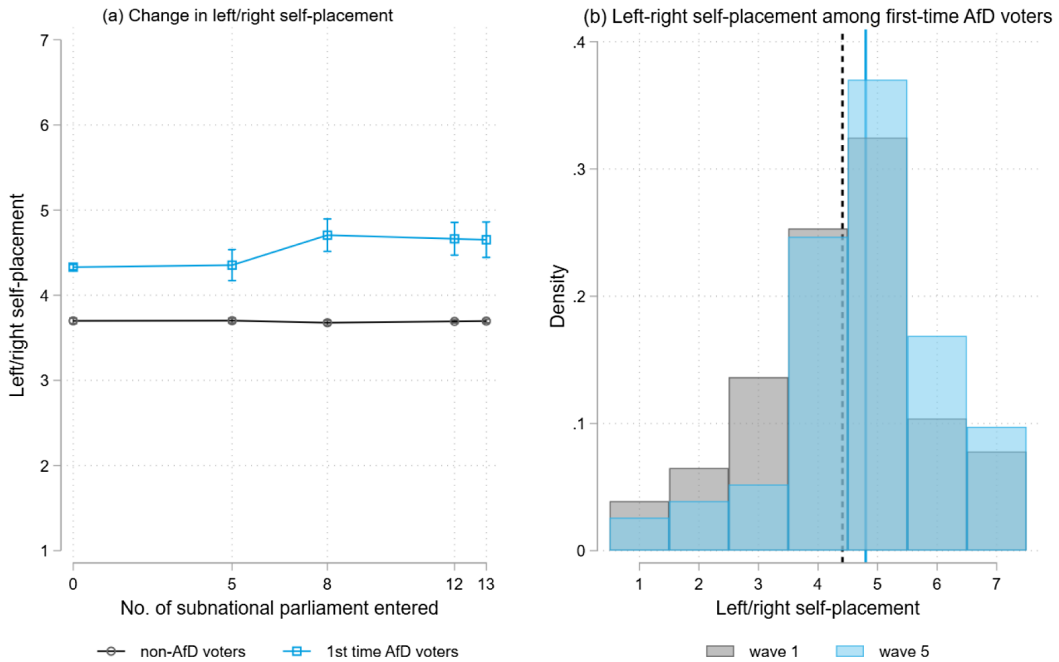
Figure 5. Persuasion effect: (a) Change in left/right self-placement among first-time AfD voters and among non-AfD voters (b) Distribution of left/right self-placement among first-time AfD voters in waves 1 and 5.

I also create Figure 5 panel (b) that illustrates the distribution of left/right self-placement among the first-time AfD voters in waves 1 and 5. In this histogram, only those first-time AfD voters who stay from wave 1 to wave 5 are included ($N = 130$), and the dotted line denotes the mean position of this sample in wave 1 while the solid line marks the mean position in wave 5. One can clearly observe a small right-wing shift in their ideological placement—from 4.41 to 4.80 on a 1–7 scale—and the shift is statistically significant ($p < .001$). As a robustness check, I run the regression using fixed-effects ordinal logit model (Table S3.2, Model 1, in the online supporting information), rerun the panel regression separately for the East German and West German subsamples (see Figures S3.1 and S3.2), and this right-wing shift still holds. Overall, these findings show that, although the magnitude change in right-wing self-placement is small, there is a persuasion effect among first-time AfD voters in a polarized environment.

Having established that the first-time AfD voters become more identified with the right-wing label, one may be curious about whether the right-wing shift in self-placement is driven by a change in cultural attitude. Moreover, one may suspect that these AfD voters are more structured in terms of their position on different cultural issues (Converse, 2006; Free & Cantril, 1967). Therefore, I test whether their cultural attitude has become more xenophobic over time and whether the correlation of different items related to the cultural dimension has increased over time among the first-time AfD voters.

The results cannot provide much support for these conjectures. I find that the change in cultural attitude among the first-time AfD voters reaches a conventional level of statistical significance in only one of the four items (i.e., positive attitudes towards other cultures). On the other hand, surprisingly, the change in cultural attitude among non-AfD voters is statistically significant in three of the four items (Table S3.1, Models 2–5, in the online supporting information). In substantive terms, the non-AfD voters are on average less likely to think that high cultural diversity can tackle new problems (0.23 units, $p < .001$), has less positive attitude towards other cultures (0.22 units, $p < .001$), and

are less likely to like people from different cultural backgrounds (0.17 units, $p < .01$). The analysis remains substantively the same when I use fixed-effect ordinal logit model in estimation (Table S3.2, Models 2–5). These results corroborate the findings of Schaub et al. (2020), which demonstrate that there is a convergence of immigration attitude among right- and left-leaning individuals in Germany after the refugee crisis. Next, in testing the correlation of these cultural items over time among the first-time AfD voters, the change is statistically significant in only one out of six pairwise comparisons (Table S3.3). So despite the small right-wing shift in ideological self-placement, one cannot conclude that the first-time AfD voters become more xenophobic and their cultural attitudes become more structured.

Lastly, to further substantiate the findings of the persuasion effect, I check whether projection effect takes place simultaneously with the persuasion effect. Thereby, I use the perceived position of AfD as the dependent variable and run the same regression as stated in Equation (2) (see Table S3.4 in the online supporting information). The result does not provide support for the projection effect. Recall that the projection effect expects that first-time AfD voters perceive AfD as more moderate over time. But as shown in Figure 6, the estimation merely indicates that the AfD voters are more likely to position AfD as more left-wing in comparison to non-AfD voters, no matter at wave 1 (0.36 units, $p < .05$) or at wave 6 (0.44 units, $p < .001$). However, when one compares the change of perceived position of AfD from wave 1 to wave 6 among the first-time AfD voters, it shows that they position AfD as more right wing as well (0.80 units, $p < .001$), rather than in the left-wing direction.

Contrast Effect

Moving on to the contrast effect, I now compare the two groups of voters—CDU defectors to AfD and loyal CDU voters. In wave 1, I find that most covariates of the two groups are similar to one another, including their left/right self-placement, political interest, age, gender, and income. Defectors to AfD are only more likely to live in East Germany (0.12 units, $p < .05$) and less likely
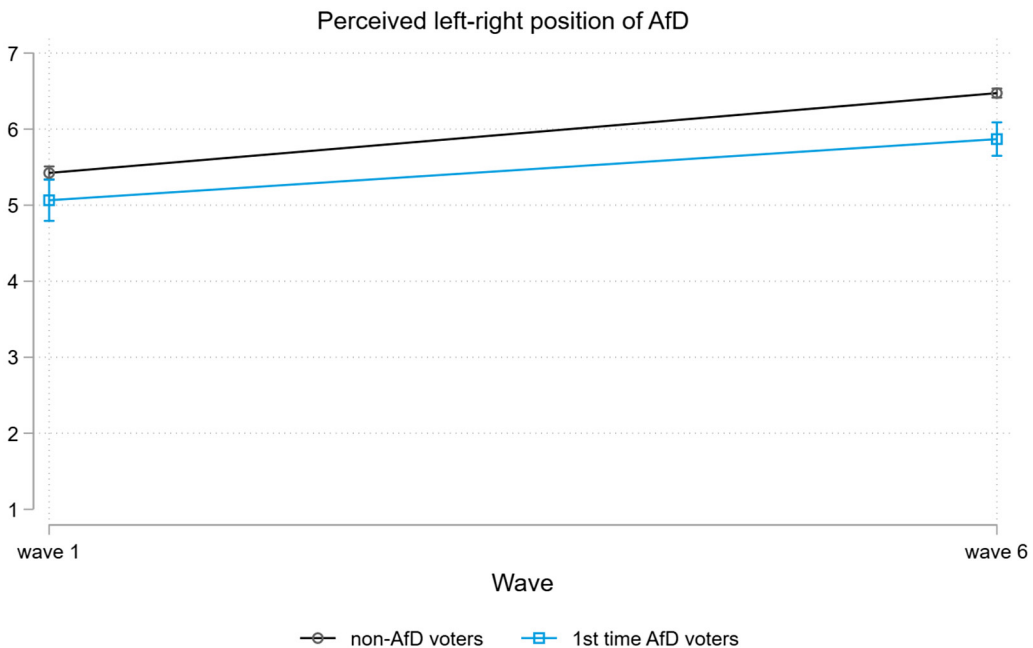

Figure 6. Change in perceived left/right position of AfD among first-time AfD voters and non-AfD voters. All covariates are controlled at the mean level.

Table 2. Contrast Effect in Left/Right Placement and in Party Evaluation

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Defectors to AfD	0.01 (0.19)	0.20 (0.19)	−0.72* (0.31)	−0.67** (0.24)
Wave 6	−0.15* (0.07)			
Defectors to AfD*wave 6	−0.69** (0.23)			
Wave 3		−0.09 (0.07)	−0.23* (0.11)	−0.40*** (0.06)
Defectors to AfD*wave 3		0.71** (0.22)	−0.59+ (0.32)	−2.10*** (0.39)
Constant	4.91*** (0.61)	1.23*** (0.34)	7.75*** (0.64)	6.43*** (0.52)
Observations	1,072	834	834	834
R-squared	0.12	0.07	0.09	0.26

Note. DV of Model 1: Perceived left/right position of CDU; DV of Model 2: Seeing CDU/CSU party member as enemy; DV of Model 3: Firm supporter of the CDU/CSU; DV of Model 4: Candidate orientation towards Angela Merkel. Entries are coefficients of OLS. Clustered standard errors are shown in parentheses. The control variables are omitted due to space limitation. Sample restricted to CDU defectors to AfD and loyal CDU voters.
+$p < .10$
*$p < .05$
**$p < .01$
***$p < .001$.

to have university degree (0.13 units, $p < .05$), compared to loyal CDU voters (see Table S3.5 in the online supporting information for all covariates).

Regarding the estimation of contrast effect in left/right placement, we look at Model 1 of Table 2. As aforementioned, the contrast effect in left/right placement suggests the CDU defectors to AfD would put CDU in 2017 in a more left-wing direction than in 2013 than the loyal CDU voters. The results of Table 2 are in line with this expectation. First, loyal CDU voters on average perceive CDU as slightly more left wing (0.15 units, $p < .05$) in such dynamic political context. Although this left-wing shift is expected given the CDU's refugee policy, this is still an interesting finding. On top of that, it reveals that, in comparison to loyal CDU voters, CDU defectors to AfD position CDU as more left wing by 0.69 units on average ($p < .01$).

To visualize the contrast effect, I create Figure 7 panel (a) that shows the differences in perceived position of CDU across the two waves for these two groups of voters. It is obvious that at wave 1, the perceived position of CDU among two group of voters are indistinguishable from one another. Yet, in this polarized environment, CDU defectors to AfD are more prone to put CDU in a more left-wing position than loyal CDU voters. In addition, looking at the distribution of the perceived position of CDU at wave 6 (see Table 3), there are 37.52% of the CDU defectors to AfD that categorize CDU into the left-wing camp (i.e., below 4 points of the 1–7 scale), whereas only 12.05% of the loyal CDU voters do so. This finding provides further support for the contrast effect in left/right placement, as these first-time AfD voters categorize the neighboring mainstream center-right party into the opposite ideological camp.

Regarding the contrast effect in party evaluation, we turn to the results reported in Models 2–4 in Table 1. As expected, the CDU defectors on average evaluate the CDU more negatively than the CDU loyal voters after AfD broke into multiple subnational parliaments during the refugee crisis. As shown in panels (b)–(d) of Figure 7, CDU defectors to AfD and those of loyal CDU voters already differ slightly at wave 2 in terms of being a firm supporter of the CDU/CSU and their evaluation towards Merkel. But after AfD had passed through three concatenated subnational elections in between waves 2 and 3, all the party evaluation measures of the two group of voters further depart from one another. In comparison with loyal CDU voters, CDU defectors to AfD becomes more likely to see the party member as enemy in wave 3 (0.71 units, $p < .01$). Moreover, relative to the loyal CDU voters, defectors to AfD are less likely to view themselves as a firm supporter of the CDU/CSU (0.59 units, $p < .10$). And it is noteworthy that, compared
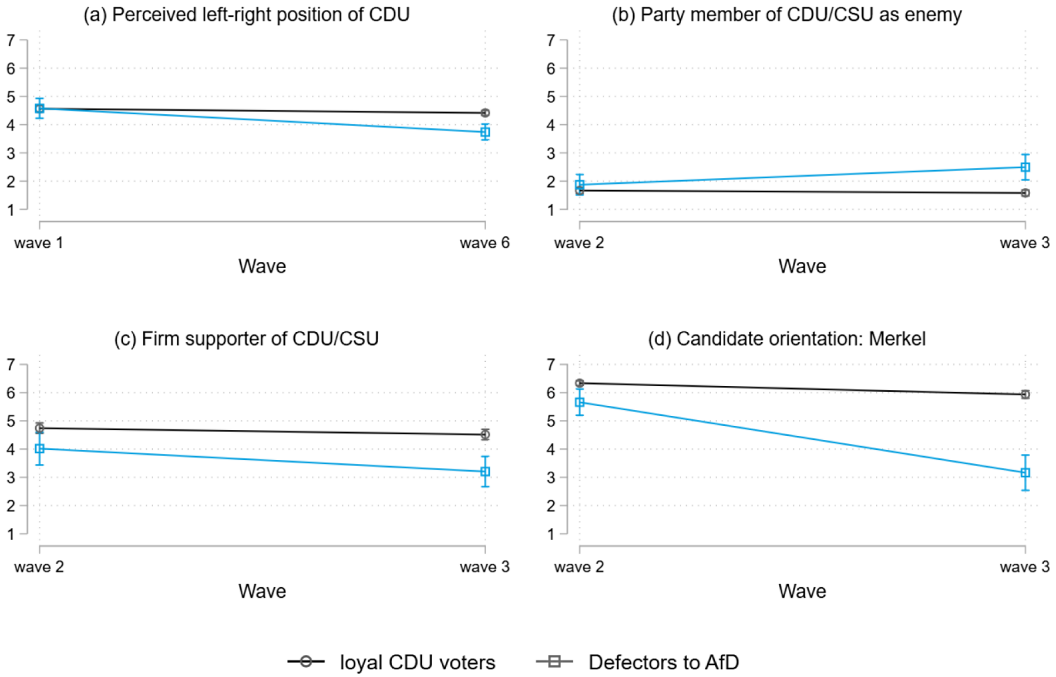
Figure 7. Contrast effect in left/right placement and party evaluation among CDU defectors to AfD and loyal CDU voters. All covariates are controlled at the mean level.

Table 3. The Distribution of Perceived Position of CDU at Wave 6 Among Loyal CDU Voters and CDU Defectors to AfD

	Loyal CDU Voters	CDU Defectors to AfD
1 (Left)	2.07	6.72
2	3.28	9.02
3	6.70	21.51
4	42.84	48.26
5	34.18	11.55
6	6.98	1.06
7 (Right)	3.94	1.89
Total (%)	100	100
Total (N)	674	90

to wave 2, loyal CDU voters in wave 3 are also slightly less likely to view themselves as firm supporters (0.23 units, $p < .05$). The strongest change is the negative view towards Merkel: Loyal CDU voters view the party leader more negatively in wave 3 (0.40 units, $p < .001$). But in comparison with the loyal CDU voters, defectors to AfD see her in a much more negative light (2.10 units, $p < .001$). These findings are in line with the expectation of contrast effect, which maintains that the outgroup is judged more negative when the boundary between ingroup (AfD) and outgroup (CDU) becomes more salient in a polarized environment.

For the robustness check, I conduct a placebo test for the contrast effect. OLS regression is rerun again, but in Equation (2), the perceived position of CDU at wave 6 is replaced by the perceived position of CDU during the pilot phase (before wave 1). The result shows that the placebo test is safely passed, as CDU defectors to AfD do not position CDU as more left-wing in earlier periods (See Table S3.6 in the online supporting information).

Conclusion

Building on the identity-based approach to ideology, this article investigates whether and how a polarized environment shapes first-time RRP voters' ideological identity and their perception of the mainstream center-right party in a multiparty system. To test the hypotheses of the persuasion effect and contrast effect, I leverage the case of Germany during the 2013–17 election cycle. In this election cycle, the refugee crisis and AfD success in 13 concatenated subnational elections contributed to an abruptly polarized environment. Using a unique longitudinal dataset, I find that first-time AfD voters identify themselves as slightly more right wing. Also, CDU defectors to the AfD perceive the CDU as more left wing and evaluate it in a more negative light. These findings shed important light on the microlevel psychological foundation of RRP voters in Germany, which had been treated as an exception in terms of RRP success for decades.

More broadly, my research also advances the identity-based approach to ideology. It highlights that, in a polarized environment, the rationalization bias of first-time RRP voters is subject to change. Even though the taboo of the right-wing label has been strong in Germany (Bauer et al., 2017; Mader & Schoen, 2017), first-time AfD voters still became slightly more right wing in their ideological identification in this dynamic political context. Moreover, a significant portion of AfD voters perceived the position of the CDU as left wing, although conventional wisdom put the two parties on the same side of the ideological continuum. Taken together, these findings speak to the fact that ideological labels are malleable political categories in a polarized environment. As such, my research makes a connection to recent research on how party conflicts shape voter's perceived ideological position of a party (Adams et al., 2021; Somer-Topcu et al., 2020). Relatedly, my article enriches the literature that investigates how elite polarization strengthens partisans' ingroup identity and outgroup hostility as well (Gidron et al., 2020, pp. 41–43; Rogowski & Sutherland, 2016; Sides et al., 2019).

Throughout this article, I suggest that the polarized environment was contributed by a refugee crisis and the RRP's success in concatenated subnational elections. By doing so, this article brings together recent works on the impact of the refugee crisis and those on the impact of RRP's election outcomes. For one thing, studies on the refugee crisis already investigate how the crisis has affected far-right voting and citizens' attitude on refugees and immigrants (Dinas et al., 2019; Gessler et al., 2021; Hangartner et al., 2019; Schaub et al., 2020). But so far, the impacts of the refugee crisis on citizens' left/right self-identification and on their perception of the outgroup party are not yet well-studied. Hence, my research fills this gap by investigating how this crisis impacted first-time RRP voters' ideological identifications and their animosity towards the neighboring center-right party. For another, this research contributes to the burgeoning literature on how RRP electoral results lead to ideological polarization or change in political attitude (Bischof & Wagner, 2019; Bursztyn et al., 2017; Valentim, 2021). But unlike extant studies which tend to focus on first-order national elections, this article illustrates that the electoral results of second-order elections can bring about comparable changes too. Overall, my research unites these two strands of work by showing that the electoral results of concatenated subnational elections, when combined with a political crisis, can shape the ideological identity of first-time RRP voters and affect how they judge the mainstream center-right party.

Overall, this article highlights the role of a polarized environment in explaining the change in political identity and perceptions of an outgroup party among first-time RRP voters in a multiparty system. Nevertheless, it is not without limitations. First, even though the persuasion effect in left/right placement is statistically significant, it is rather small in magnitude. Also, due to a lack of measurements, I cannot test whether there is a persuasion effect in party evaluation among first-time AfD voters. Although one can speculate that an increase in right-wing ideological identification implies a more positive view of the AfD, this need not be the case. And even if there is an increase in affinity with the AfD among its first-time voters, we do not know the magnitude of

this change. Hence, more studies are needed to investigate how a change in ideological identity is associated with the ingroup party evaluation in a polarized environment within a multiparty system.

In addition, the polarized environment of my research is specific in nature, as there was a refugee crisis and the AfD could continuously polarize the immigration issue due to its success in subnational elections. Although several European countries also experienced refugee crises, the findings of this article may not be generalizable to other kinds of crisis. For instance, would first-time RRP voters also experience a persuasion effect and a contrast effect in an economic crisis, in which economic issues are likely to become polarizing topics? Similarly, have these voters experienced a change in rationalization bias during the pandemic crisis, in which citizens and political elites are polarized over the restriction of civil liberties? These are important questions that cannot be answered by this study. Thus, future research should investigate whether there is a change in rationalization bias among first-time RRP voters in other kinds of crisis.

Lastly, because of data availability, my article focuses on the persuasion effect and the contrast effect among first-time RRP voters; it does not look at the psychological processes among first-time radical-left voters. This is because the radical-left party in Germany had long entered the national party system, and there is no longitudinal data available to trace the making of radical-left voters in a polarized environment. Therefore, future studies could certainly explore the change in rationalization bias among first-time radical-left party voters in European countries, where new radical-left parties emerged during the Eurozone economic crisis. Examples include Podemos in Spain and Syriza in Greece. So my research should open avenues for studying the persuasion effect and the contrast effect among first-time voters in other party families as well.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web site:

Table S2.1. Variable Description

Table S2.2.1. Left/right Self-Placement

Table S2.2.2. Perceived Position of Parties

Table S2.2.3. Cultural Attitude

Table S2.2.4. Evaluation of CDU/CSU

Table S2.2.5. Control Variables

Table S3.1. Persuasion Effect on Left/Right Self-Placement and Cultural Attitude

Figure S3.1. Persuasion effect in East Germany: (a) Change in left/right self-placement among first-time AfD voters and among non-AfD voters (b) Distribution of left/right self-placement among first-time AfD voters in waves 1 and 5.

Figure S3.2. Persuasion effect in West Germany: (a) Change in left/right self-placement among first-time AfD voters and among non-AfD voters (b) Distribution of left/right self-placement among first-time AfD voters in waves 1 and 5.

Table S3.2. Persuasion Effect on Left/Right Self-Placement and Cultural Attitude (Ordinal Logit Model)

Table S3.3. Correlation of Different Pairs of Cultural Attitude Constructs and their Differences Across Waves

Table S3.4. Projection Effect: Effect of Subnational Parliament Entry on the Perceived Left/Right Position of AfD

Table S3.5. Difference in Covariates between CDU Defectors to AfD and Loyal CDU Voters in Wave 1

Table S3.6. Placebo Test for the Contrast Effect in Left/Right Placement

For the replication materials, please visit the Harvard dataverse and search the title of this paper.