

# The Party without Qualities?

*Explaining the Left Party's Electoral Disaster  
in the 2021 German Federal Election*

---

*Jonathan Olsen*

Social Sciences and Historical Studies, Texas Woman's University

*Michael A. Hansen*

Philosophy, Contemporary History, and Political Science, University of Turku

**Abstract:** In the 2021 German federal election, the Left Party suffered its worst electoral defeat ever. Although it hemorrhaged voters to all the parties, its losses to the Social Democrats and Greens were particularly large. In this article, we examine the reasons behind Die Linke's poor electoral performance. Although a number of factors may have played small roles, we hypothesize that the most important by far was the Left Party's failure to distinguish itself in its policy positions from its chief rivals on the center left and the left. Using data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CPM) and Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES), we demonstrate the Left Party's lack of issue ownership and its distinct policy and ideological profile in 2021. Consequently, we argue that Die Linke gave voters few reasons to vote for it.

**Keywords:** Die Linke, Left Party, party identity, policy positions, political ideology, 2021 German federal election

Although the CDU/CSU's poor electoral performance was, for obvious reasons, the clear "bad news" story of the 2021 German federal election, the Left Party (Die Linke) arguably had the worst night. Not since 2002—when it was still the PDS (Party of Democratic Socialism) and its electoral fortunes were completely dependent upon eastern Germany—has the party had a worse showing. Failing to clear the 5 percent hurdle with 4.9 percent of the vote, the Left Party made it into parliament only by winning outright three constituency seats. Die Linke's power and influence in the new Bundestag will be extremely limited. Moreover, its reputation has suffered a tremendous blow, leading to a fundamental question: can the party still be electorally relevant or politically significant?



This article examines the causes behind the Left Party's electoral disaster in 2021. Having been decimated by losses to the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in the 2017 federal election (as well as Länder elections in the new states in 2016–2021), Die Linke not only failed to win back voters from the AfD in 2021, but also lost votes to parties across the board. Losses to its “sibling rivals”<sup>1</sup> on the political left and center left—the Social Democrats (SPD) and Greens—were particularly massive. Although we outline several factors said to be responsible for the Left Party's electoral performance, we hypothesize here that the most important by far was its lack of a unique profile in terms of both issue ownership and (consequently) basic party identity. This is precisely the reason that Die Linke lost a substantial numbers of voters to the SPD and Greens. Much like the protagonist of Robert Musil's famed modernist novel, the Left Party became something of a “party without qualities” in 2021. To put it more simply, Die Linke did not distinguish itself from its rivals sufficiently enough to motivate left-wing voters to cast their ballot for the party.

We begin by describing the electoral losses of the Left Party in some detail (most especially its constituency-level results), placing this into context by comparing it to the party's electoral performance in previous elections—above all, the 2017 federal election. In the next section, we briefly outline some of the possible factors influencing Die Linke's electoral results. We then turn to an examination of the party's ideological and policy profile in comparison to its chief rivals, using data from both the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) to draw some conclusions. The CPM analyzes the content of parties' electoral programs and maps policy positions for over 1,000 parties worldwide.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the CHES draws on country experts to appraise the positions of a variety of European parties on European integration and policy, as well as on ideology.<sup>3</sup>

## **Losing the East: The Left Party in the 2021 Election**

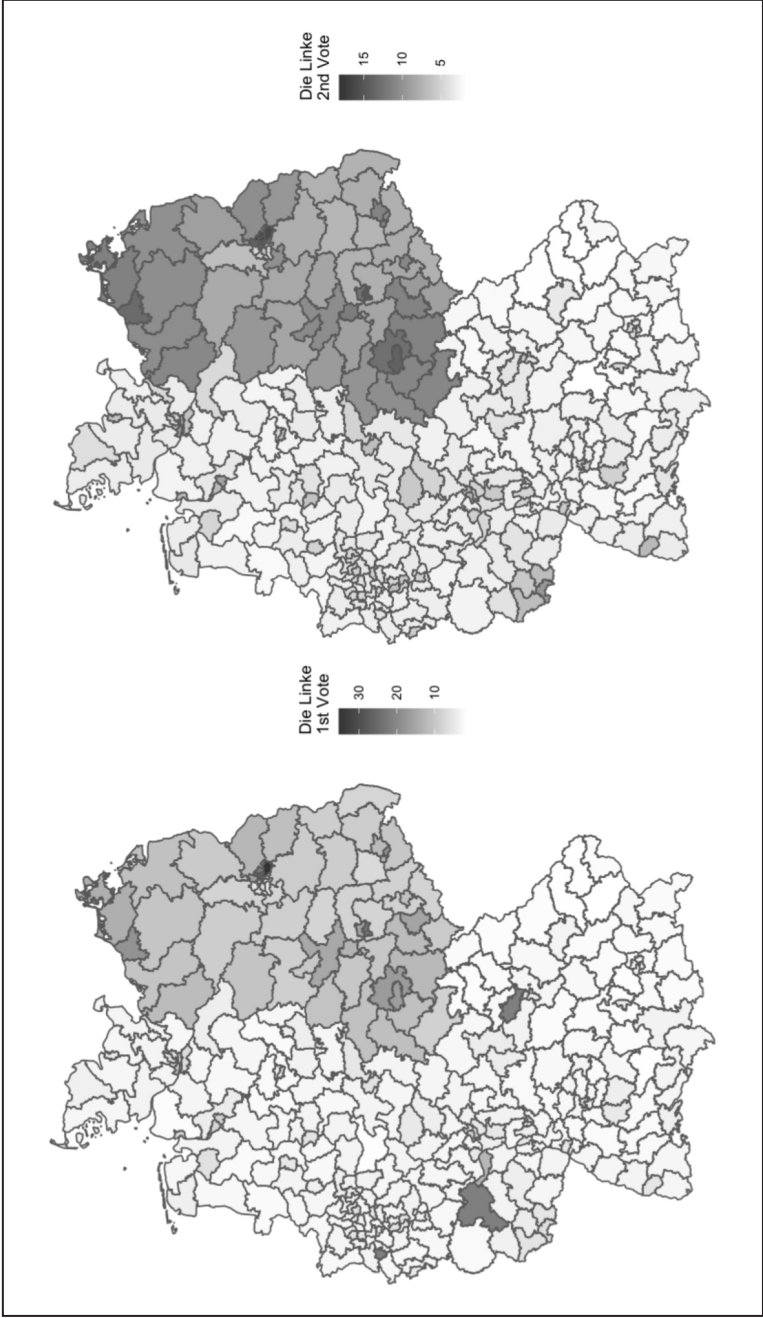
In 2021, the Left Party's share of the (2nd) vote was 4.9 percent, down 4.3 percent from its 2017 figure of 9.2 percent. In pure numbers, this was a loss of over two million votes—almost half of the party's total votes from 2017. Significantly, although in the previous federal election Die Linke increased its percentage of the vote (compared to 2013) by about half a percentage point, the 2017 election could not be called a winning election for the party by any stretch of the imagination. True, in 2017 it garnered a slightly larger percentage of the vote in western Germany than it had previously;

however, it went down significantly across all of the eastern states, losing about 20 percent of its voters from 2013. Die Linke's best result in 2017 in eastern Germany was in Mecklenburg-West Pomerania with 17.8 percent, down some 4 percent from 2013. Meanwhile, the Left Party lost even more heavily in the eastern states of Brandenburg, Saxony-Anhalt, and Thuringia in 2017, with a significant portion of its losses directly attributable to the AfD. Around 400,000 who had voted for the Left Party in the federal election of 2013 went to the AfD in 2017, the most votes lost to any other party.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, although the CDU/CSU also lost heavily to the AfD in 2017, the Left Party lost proportionally more votes to the AfD than any other party, including the Union.<sup>5</sup>

The slide across eastern Germany, which had started in eastern German state elections in 2016 and continued in 2017, gathered significant pace in 2021. Only in Thuringia and Mecklenburg-West Pomerania did the Left Party hit double digits in the 2021 election, an astonishing development for a party that had routinely obtained 20–30 percent of the vote in the new states of Germany a decade ago. Equally shocking, in 2021 Die Linke not only finished well behind the AfD in Saxony (repeating results there from 2017), but in Brandenburg it even finished behind the Greens—something that had never happened in an eastern German state election in the modern era. Although the Left Party lost some 110,000 previous voters to the AfD in the 2021 election, this loss was about a fourth of those to the AfD in 2017 and was dwarfed in 2021 by losses to the Greens (470,000) and SPD (590,000).<sup>6</sup>

To both drill down and further illustrate the trends in the 2021 election, Figure 1 displays the Left Party's first and second 2021 German federal election vote share by constituency.<sup>7</sup> In Figure 1, the darker the gray scale (with black representing the largest value), the greater the vote share for Die Linke. The map on the left presents the Left Party's first vote constituency share. As the map demonstrates, Die Linke is still less competitive in the old states (with the exception of a few constituencies) when compared to eastern Germany. In the old states, the average Left Party constituency-level vote share was around 3.5 percent. In comparison, its average constituency vote share in the new states was just above 12 percent, representing a gap of 9.5 percent. Die Linke won three constituency-level seats in the first vote (one in Leipzig and two in Berlin). The map on the right in Figure 1 tells the same story when comparing first vote share to second vote share by constituency. Here, too, the Left Party performs less well in the old states of Germany compared to the new states. The average Left Party vote share in western Germany in the 2021 election was around 3.8 percent, while in eastern Germany its vote share was just over 10 percent. As Figure 1 shows, then, Die Linke

**Figure 1:** 2021 German Federal Election: Die Linke 1st and 2nd Vote Share by Constituency



still remains more of an eastern party than an all-German one. However, the 2021 election shows that this imbalance is much less true now than in the past, a point that cannot be emphasized enough. The Left Party/PDS's one-time status as representative of eastern German interests, with a special connection to the eastern German voter, has been in decline over the past decade or so. Indeed, the gradual equalizing trend between its results in the eastern states and in the western states owes far less to a conquering of the West than a serious erosion in the East.<sup>8</sup>

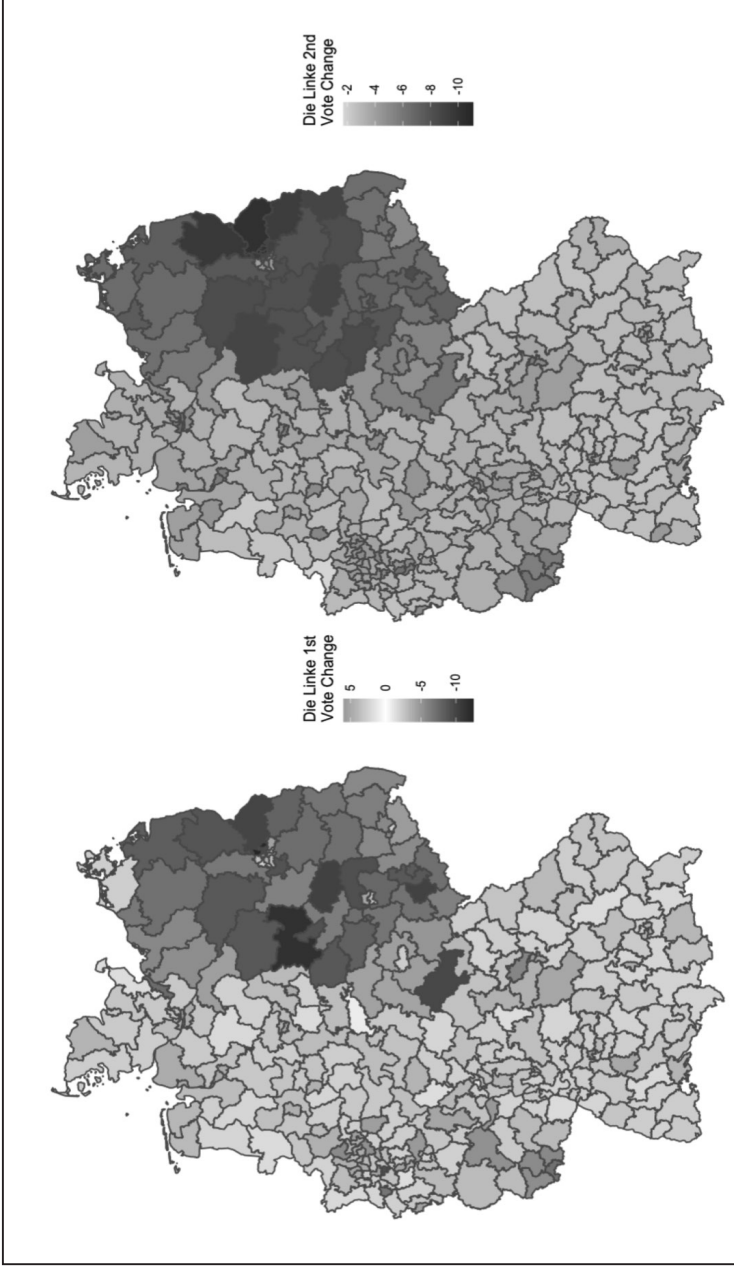
Figure 2 vividly illustrates the Left Party's first and second constituency vote share change from 2017 to 2021. Here, the darker the gray scale (with black representing the largest decrease), the greater the decrease in vote share for the party when comparing 2017 and 2021. The map on the left displays the change in vote share for the first vote. In 2021, the Left Party increased its first vote share in only one constituency. In Mainz, Rheinland-Palatinate, its vote share doubled by 6 points, from 6.4 percent to 12.4 percent. The Left Party also experienced much larger decreases in first vote share in eastern Germany compared to western Germany. The average decrease in first vote constituency share in the new states was around 7 percent; meanwhile, there was a decrease of only 2.9 percent in the old states—a full 4 point difference. An identical pattern emerges when exploring the map on the right, which displays second vote share change. Here, the Left Party demonstrated larger losses in vote share in eastern Germany. On average, Die Linke's second vote share decreased by only 3.7 percent in western Germany but exactly twice that figure in eastern Germany (7.4 percent), once again underscoring the rapid decline of the Left Party's claim as a regional representative of eastern interests.

## **Explanations for the Left Party's Election Result in 2021**

What explains Die Linke's election result in 2021? Uwe Hahn from the public broadcaster ARD has given a number of explanations,<sup>9</sup> some of which have been reflected in the early emerging political science literature on the 2021 election:

- The question of whether the Left Party should be in a new “red-green-red” government
- A new party leadership duo that was installed only six months before the election
- The lack of a dynamic election figure (i.e., someone other than Sahra Wagenknecht)

**Figure 2:** 2021 German Federal Election: Die Linke 1st and 2nd Vote Share Change, 2017–2021



**Note:** The party gained in only one constituency for the 1st vote, where they had not run a candidate before. They lost in every other constituency for the 1st vote. They lost votes in all of the constituencies for the 2nd vote.

- The drift of voters to the SPD over the question of who would be the new chancellor
- The rise of the AfD as the new protest party of eastern Germany

To this list we could also add:

- The Left Party's vote in the Bundestag in August withholding its support from a "rescue mission" in Afghanistan, a vote that further inflamed its reputation as mercurial and unreliable.<sup>10</sup>

These factors could have played a supporting role in the Left Party's poor election result. However, as all-purpose explanations, they no doubt leave a lot to be desired.

Taking the first and last factors together, we can say that Die Linke's vote in late August probably damaged the party's reputation and may have been a small factor in its final vote result. However, beyond the fact that causation here is extremely difficult to know with any certainty, it should be noted that the party was polling poorly before the Afghanistan vote: from January until mid-August, it consistently scored between 6 and 7 percent.<sup>11</sup> Before the vote in the Bundestag, the last poll from Infratest dimap put Die Linke at 7 percent. Subsequently, the next two polls before the election put Die Linke at 6 percent. Statistically, it would be hard to show that the party's vote on Afghanistan—and any considerations voters may have had in supporting the Left Party in a red-green-red coalition—had a significant effect on the election. This explanation thus seems highly inadequate to explain its huge drop in support, especially Left Party voters' move to the SPD and Greens and the question of the Left Party's inclusion in a red-red-green government.

The second and third explanations can also be viewed as similarly rooted explanations—ones that center on party leadership. Certainly, Sahra Wagenknecht was a polarizing politician during the run-up to the election, but inner-party conflict is about as unique to the Left Party as gambling at Rick's in *Casablanca*. Moreover, while the new leadership team of Janine Wissler and Susanne Hennig-Wellsow made its debut a bit later than the party originally planned, it was in place a good six months before the vote—hardly late-comers to the party.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the "charisma factor" has plagued the party for many years, basically since the departure of Gregor Gysi and Oskar Lafontaine from their highly visible posts a decade ago. Yet if this were a causal factor in Left Party electoral success, Die Linke would have been out of the Bundestag long ago.

The wide-open race for chancellor—the first "post-Merkel" election—has also been considered as a factor affecting the Left Party vote. Of course,

Die Linke always plays outside of the main arena of party competition for the chancellorship, that is, the party is never a factor except in an abstract way, as a possible partner for the Social Democrats. In previous elections, the SPD had ruled out a coalition with the Left Party, but the former's failure to score well in elections made that a moot point. In 2021, however, the SPD proclaimed its openness to a coalition that would include Die Linke. In theory, this could have increased support for the party: a red-green-red coalition remained at least a theoretical possibility up to election night. It is impossible to know whether the intense competition for the chancellorship had any small effect on the Left Party's election result. However, it should be pointed out that Die Linke had one of its better elections over the last two decades in 2005, a similar "polarizing" election to see who would be chancellor.

The impact of the AfD has also been suggested as a factor, but this is an explanation for the 2017 election, not the election in 2021. As noted above, in 2017 the Left Party suffered tremendous losses to the AfD. Yet losses to the AfD in the 2021 election were relatively minor; they certainly cannot explain the Left Party's disastrous performance. Indeed, the AfD witnessed a similar decrease in vote share in 2021 when compared to Die Linke. The AfD gained in first vote share in only 33 out of 299 (11 percent) constituencies in Germany, losing vote share in 261 constituencies (87.3 percent).<sup>13</sup> These gains mostly came from fielding candidates in constituencies that were uncontested in the 2017 election. Similarly, the AfD made gains in second vote share in only 21 out of 299 (7 percent) of constituencies, while losing vote share in 275 constituencies (92 percent). In terms of its East-West breakdown, the average constituency vote share for the AfD in western Germany was around 8 percent for the first and second vote—4 percentage points lower than the AfD's nationwide percentage of the vote. In comparison, the average constituency vote share for the AfD in eastern Germany in 2021 was around 21 percent for the first and second vote. The result indicates an average AfD constituency vote share gap of around 13 percent when comparing western and eastern constituencies. While the second vote declined in western Germany, in eastern Germany vote share stayed relatively the same. To summarize, although Die Linke did not gain back any voters lost to the AfD in 2017, in 2021 the Left Party did not come close to losing enough voters to the AfD to explain its electoral failure.

Finally, it is also unlikely that the large loss in vote share for Die Linke was caused by voter turnout overall or by Left Party voters staying home. While there was a 0.8 percentage decrease in registered voters in 2021, voter turnout increased 0.4 percent. Overall, 113 (37.8 percent) constituencies witnessed a decrease in voter turnout, 11 (3.7 percent) had no change, and



175 (58.5 percent) observed an increase in turnout. It is unlikely that voter abstention can explain the decrease in Left Party vote share.

We are therefore led to the conclusion that the most likely explanation for the Left Party's electoral result is Die Linke's losses to the SPD and Greens, and that this vote drift is furthermore a consequence of voters' unhappiness with the Left Party. Both the Social Democrats (5.2 percent increase) and Greens (5.9 percent increase) saw a rise in their overall vote share by over 5 percentage points from 2017. As a result, the SPD gained 62 first vote constituency seats, while the Greens gained 15 seats. The SPD lost 9 party list seats due to the seat allocation formula. However, the Greens gained 36 party list seats. The SPD's and Greens' gains were directly at the expense of the Left Party. Die Linke lost over one million votes to its center-left competitors, representing about half of its 2017 electoral result.

So what accounts for these losses and voters' unhappiness with Die Linke? We argue here that the most likely reason is that the Left Party did not satisfactorily distinguish itself programmatically from its two competitor parties. Before turning to the evidence supporting this argument, we note that the literature on the electoral success (or lack thereof) of radical-left parties shows some suggestive trends but not many guides to answering our main question.<sup>14</sup> For example, March and Rommerskirchen suggest that institutional factors (e.g., higher multi-partyism), economic circumstances (e.g., high unemployment), and the absence of competition from parties of the populist radical right and Green parties can lead to greater electoral success for radical-left parties.<sup>15</sup> None of these factors was unique to 2021 or is pertinent to German politics. Gomez et al. conclude that certain socio-demographic factors (younger and more highly educated voters) are crucial for radical-left parties, while Ramiro agrees that highly educated voters are key for radical-left parties, along with (among other things) union membership and a strong left-wing ideology.<sup>16</sup> These trends still held in 2021. In a study of voters for radical-left, Green, and social democratic parties in three European countries, Hansen and Olsen find that in the aggregate, the radical-left voter in Europe is not distinguished primarily by socio-demographic factors but rather by three attitudinal variables: satisfaction with democracy, attitudes toward immigrants, and the role of government in reducing income disparity.<sup>17</sup> In addition, they find that given these three attitudinal variables—which are also shared in part by voters for social democratic and Green parties—the probability of voting for a radical-left party increases dramatically the farther the voter places himself/herself to the far left on the ideological spectrum. What is key for radical-left parties, it seems, is their ability to win votes from a shared pool of voters for social democratic and Green parties by offering

a distinctive policy, attitudinal, and ideological profile. Given this competition, in other words, it is crucial for radical-left parties to stand out from their rivals along certain policy dimensions in order to attract left-leaning voters, especially those on the far left. Did Die Linke do this in 2021? This is what we investigate empirically here.

## **Methodology**

We explore Die Linke's ideological position on election issues in comparison to the SPD and the Greens (as well as other competitor parties) by utilizing data from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP)<sup>18</sup> and the Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES).<sup>19</sup> The primary focus is on party positioning in the 2021 election. However, we also look at how parties' positions have changed over time. In particular, the comparative analysis allows us to determine whether the Left Party distinguished itself from its two sibling rivals. First, we explore all German political parties' CMP scores on political ideology and a range of issue variables in the 2009, 2013, 2017, and 2021 federal elections. Second, we examine whether these trends hold when compared to a contrasting data set. In particular, we explore all German political parties' CHES scores on political ideology and issue variables, similar to the CMP data.

### *Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) Analysis*

In Figure 3, we plot the CMP political ideology scores (rile variable) for each political party in the 2009, 2013, 2017, and 2021 elections. On the right of the ideological spectrum, the AfD is located in the most extreme position and the CDU/CSU and FDP are center-right. The SPD and Greens are positioned on the left of the spectrum and the Left Party is located in the most extreme left position. While some of the parties on the right frequently exchange positions on the spectrum, the left-wing parties are fairly stable in their comparative locations. Die Linke has witnessed a move toward the more extreme left position when we compare 2009 to 2013, and 2013 to 2017. However, the Left Party is less extreme left when comparing its position in 2021 to 2017. The results in Figure 3 would suggest that Die Linke has firmly planted itself in a position on the ideological spectrum unoccupied by competitor parties. That being said, it is important to note that the political ideology variable is a latent variable based on scores from an equation containing 26 different variables. It makes sense to disaggregate these scores in order to understand Die Linke's policy positions more concretely and to be able to answer our main research question.

**Figure 3:** 2021 German Federal Election: Party Manifesto Project Political Ideology Score

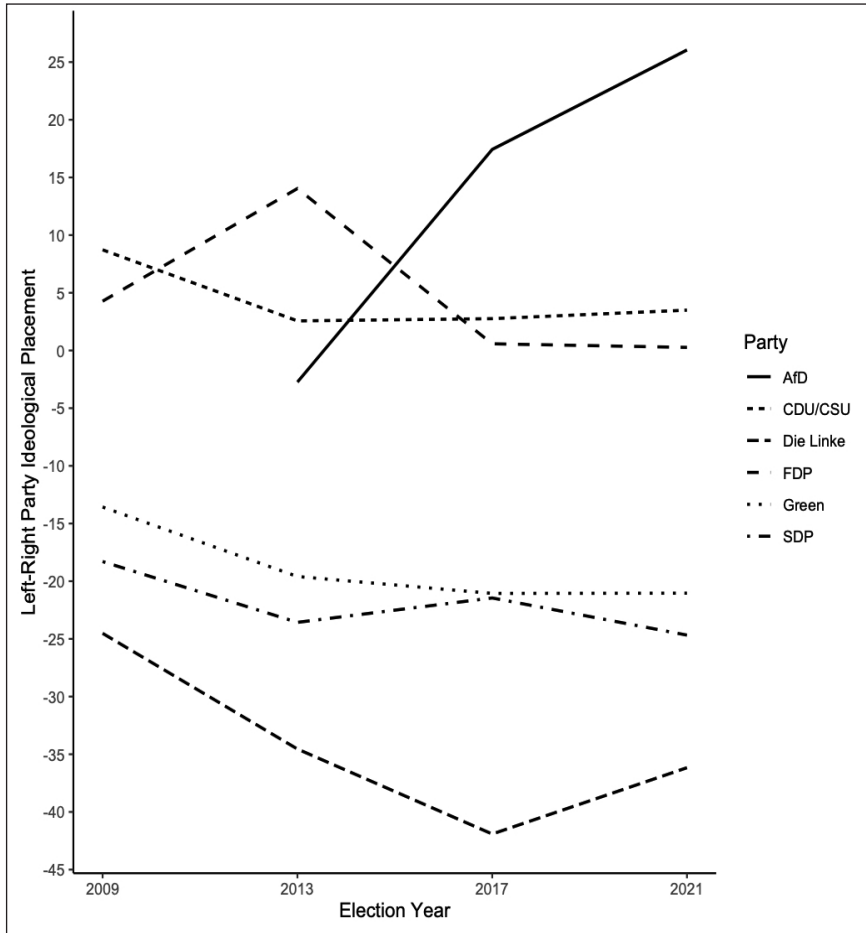


Table 1 provides a breakdown of the creation of the CMP rile variable (i.e., the data set variable label for calculating ideology) representing a political party’s overall left-right political ideology in the 2021 party manifestos. The variable is created by the summation of a political party’s scores on the 13 variables in the top of the table subtracted by the summation of a political party’s scores on the 13 variables in the bottom of the table. Taking the top 13 variables first, very few variables show clear differences among the Left Party, the Greens, or the Social Democrats. Die Linke’s party manifesto appears to have slightly fewer mentions of positive statements on economic incentives, law and order, and civic-mindedness. However, these gaps are not large.

**Table 1:** Breakdown of 2021 Party Manifesto Latent Ideology Variable (rile) by Political Party

Variable	Die Linke	Greens	SDP	FDP	CDU/CSU	AfD
Military: Positive	0.02	0.63	0.95	1.33	3.28	2.48
Freedom and Human Rights	3.64	4.84	3.45	7.58	2.13	7.31
Constitutionalism: Positive	0.02	0.00	0.00	0.04	0.04	0.00
Political Authority	1.73	0.89	1.19	0.80	0.58	0.38
Free Market Economy	0.04	0.18	0.12	5.54	1.73	7.50
Incentives: Positive	0.29	1.85	1.61	3.77	4.47	1.14
Protectionism: Negative	0.00	0.05	0.00	0.71	0.32	0.13
Economic Orthodoxy	0.02	0.13	0.00	0.89	1.33	0.89
Welfare State Limitation	0.02	0.00	0.00	1.42	0.40	0.45
National Way of Life: Positive	0.02	0.23	0.60	0.58	2.09	10.04
Traditional Morality: Negative	0.04	0.15	0.71	0.04	1.87	8.83
Law and Order: Positive	2.04	4.20	4.28	4.61	8.90	4.96
Civic-Mindedness: Positive	1.69	1.82	3.21	0.98	1.69	0.19
<b>Total 1</b>	<b>9.57</b>	<b>14.96</b>	<b>16.11</b>	<b>28.27</b>	<b>28.83</b>	<b>44.28</b>
				<b>7.00</b>	<b>3.00</b>	<b>8.00</b>
Variable	Die Linke	Greens	SDP	FDP	CDU/CSU	AfD
Anti-imperialism	0.41	0.29	0.24	0.31	0.00	0.13
Military: Negative	3.38	0.73	1.01	0.44	0.18	0.45
Peace	1.09	0.79	1.07	0.58	0.29	0.13
Internationalism: Positive	2.92	5.49	4.22	4.43	4.69	2.41
Market Regulation	5.37	6.53	4.22	3.01	4.97	2.16
Economic Planning	0.04	0.03	0.36	0.04	0.11	0.00
Protectionism: Positive	0.19	0.08	0.12	0.13	0.04	0.64
Controlled Economy	2.99	0.79	0.77	0.00	0.00	0.38
Nationalism	1.75	0.20	0.48	0.09	0.00	0.38
Welfare State Expansion	10.66	8.81	12.13	6.87	7.21	4.77
Education Expansion	3.05	2.99	3.21	4.25	1.80	1.84
Labor Groups: Positive	8.48	3.75	9.10	3.06	3.50	1.40
Democracy	5.41	5.54	3.86	4.79	2.56	3.56
<b>Total 2</b>	<b>45.74</b>	<b>36.00</b>	<b>40.78</b>	<b>28.00</b>	<b>25.33</b>	<b>18.23</b>
				<b>0.00</b>	<b>3.00</b>	<b>3.00</b>
<i>rile score (Total 1–Total 2)</i>	–	–	–	0.27	3.49	26.00
	36.17	21.04	24.67			5.00

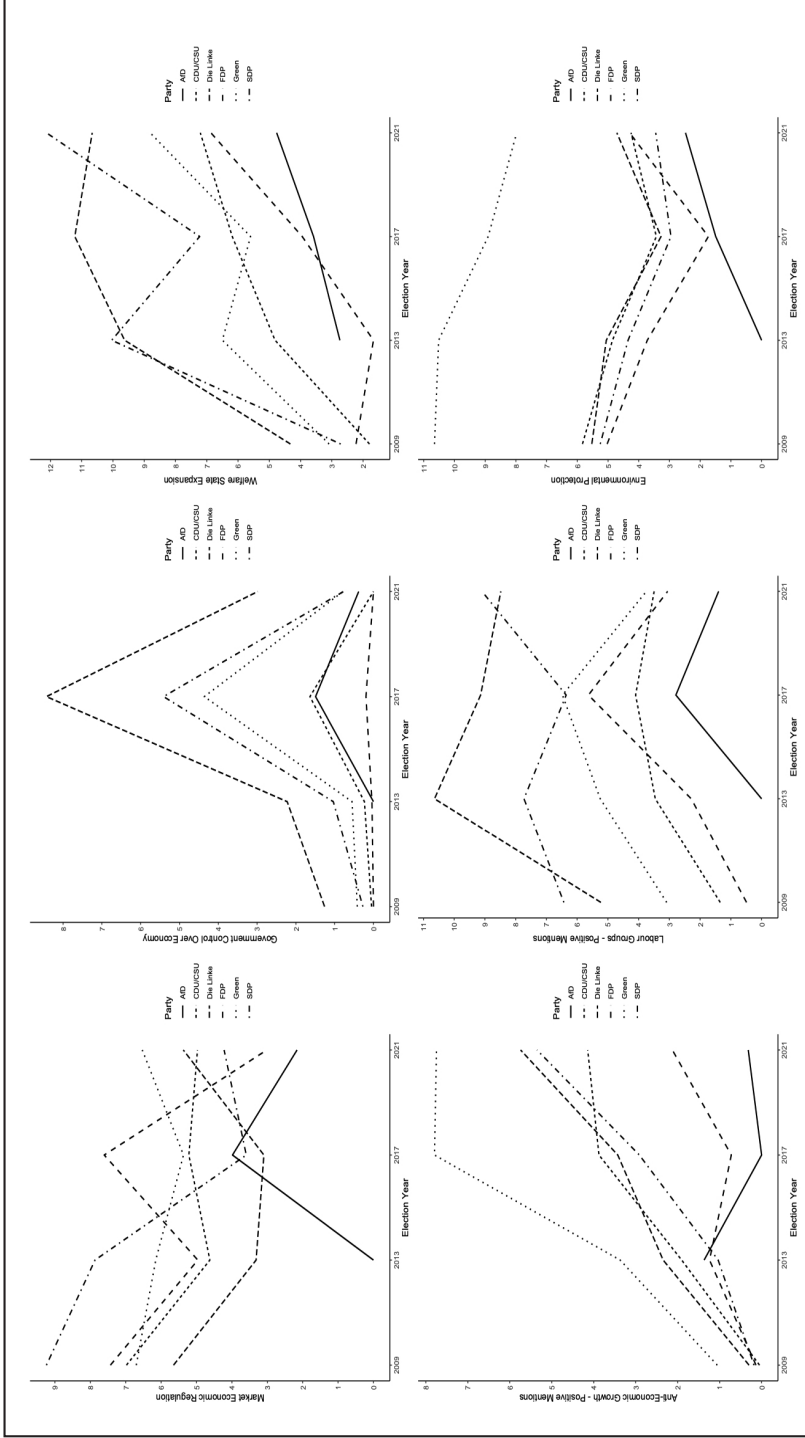
Similarly, scores on the bottom 13 variables do not reveal stark differences between the parties, especially when comparing Die Linke to the SPD. For example, there are only minor differences on mentions of the military, internationalism, controlled economy, welfare state expansion, and democracy. Moreover, these small differences follow a similar pattern for the three parties. This means that it is not the case that one party is mentioning a topic while the other party is not. For example, when looking at welfare state expansion, both the Left Party and the SPD have the highest mentions of this topic, but the SPD mentions the topic slightly more frequently. Crucially, as Table 1 illustrates, the Left Party's far-left positioning on the ideological spectrum is mostly a functioning of very small differences on a large number of variables. These differences, moreover, do not appear to be considerably meaningful.

In Figure 4, we plot six issue areas where there was substantive divergence among the political parties in the 2009, 2013, 2017, and 2021 federal elections, with a focus on the 2021 election. Overall, the results indicate that the Left Party either did a poor job of acquiring ownership over the issues, or followed the trend of their main competitor parties.<sup>20</sup> For example, the Greens, and not Die Linke, had the highest scores on market economic regulation, positive mentions of anti-economic growth, and environmental protection. In comparison, the SPD has the highest scores on welfare state expansion and positive mentions of labor groups. The only issue area where the Left Party had a higher score than both the SPD and Greens was on government control over the economy. However, when exploring changes in the score for the variable, it is clear that Die Linke, the Greens, and the SPD have been following the same trend from 2009 to 2021. There was a slight increase for all three parties if we compare 2009 to 2013, a dramatic increase for all three parties when comparing 2013 to 2017, and a large decrease for all three parties in 2021. Thus, the salience of government control over the economy is similar for the parties when comparing change in salience over time. The results indicate that the Left Party has done a poor job of taking sole ownership of an issue attractive to voters, one that can clearly separate the party from its rivals.

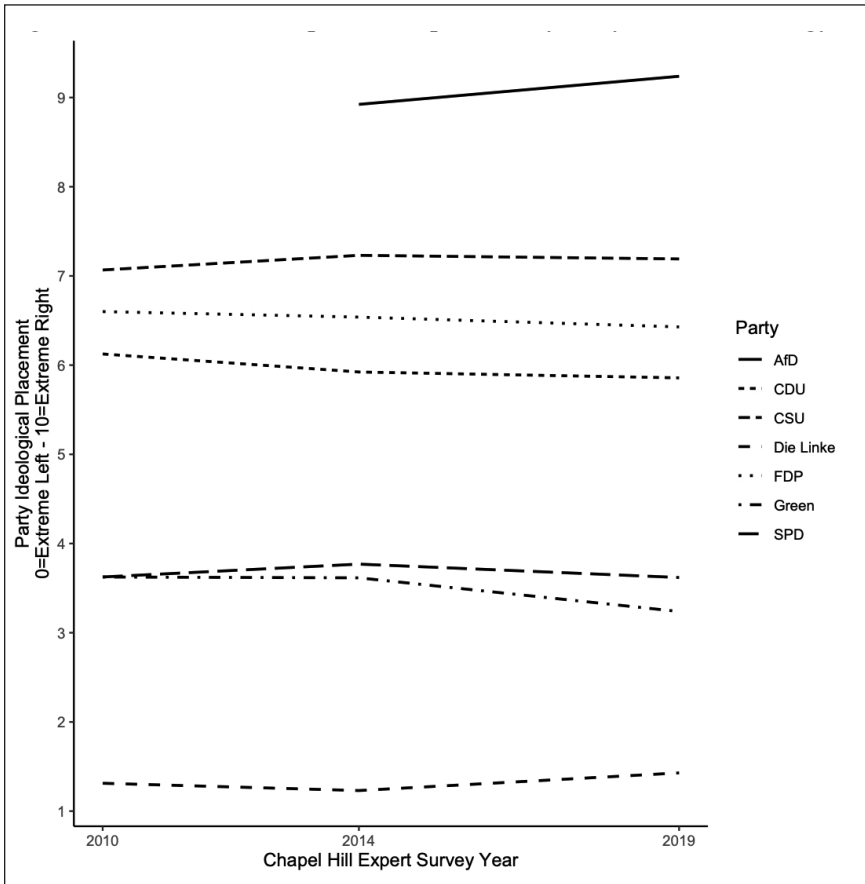
### *Chapel Hill Expert Survey (CHES) Analysis*

While the results from the CMP data set are convincing, they represent only one data set with which to evaluate the parties' political ideology and issue positions. Therefore, we also explore these trends with the CHES data set. The four most recent CHES rounds include 2006, 2010, 2014, and 2019. We cannot directly explore 2021, unfortunately. However, the data set still allows us to compare the parties and view trends over time. In Figure 5, expert evaluation

**Figure 4:** 2021 German Federal Election: Party Manifesto Project Comparative Analysis



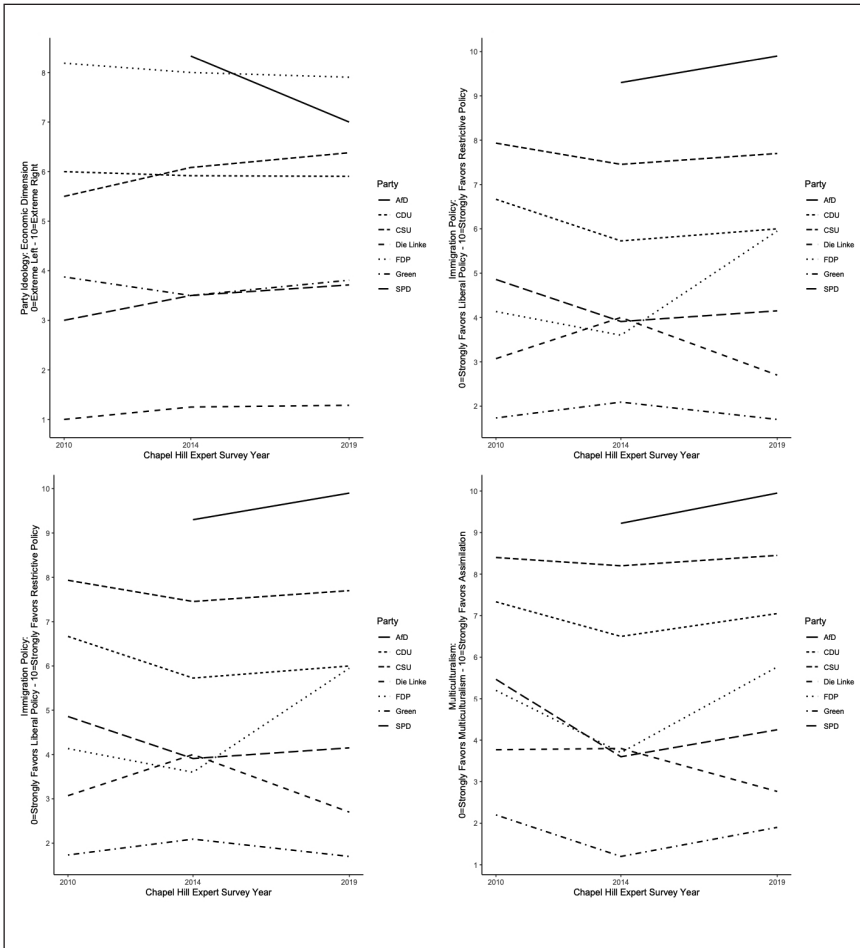
**Figure 5:** 2021 German Federal Election: Chapel Hill Expert Survey Party Political Ideology



of the parties' political ideology is presented. On the right, we see the AfD on the far right of the ideological spectrum and the FDP, CDU, and CSU on the right/center-right. The SPD and Greens are close together on the left/center-left. Finally, Die Linke is located on the far left of the ideological spectrum. Once again, it would appear that the Left Party has located itself on an area of the ideological spectrum that is unoccupied by any competitor parties.

As noted earlier, a conclusion that the Left Party has clearly distinguished itself from competitor political parties based on an overall political ideology score is highly problematic. In Figure 6, results show that experts assess Die Linke as the party furthest to the left on overall economic issues. However, on other important issues the Left Party is either located in between the Greens and the SPD, or is indistinguishable from one of them. For example,

**Figure 6:** 2021 German Federal Election: Chapel Hill Expert Survey Comparative Analysis



on environmental policy, Die Linke and the SPD are very similar, and the Greens are more supportive of the environment. On immigration policy and views on multiculturalism, Die Linke is located halfway between the Greens and the SPD on both issues. The results clearly indicate that while experts place the Left Party on the far left of the ideological spectrum and view the party's economic positioning as extreme left, on the most important and specific election issues the Left Party is not really distinguishable from its competitors. In order to be electorally successful, Die Linke desperately needs to change this dynamic.



## **Conclusion**

In the federal election of 2021, the Left Party suffered its worst electoral defeat in the last two decades. We examined a number of common explanations for Die Linke's election disaster and found them inadequate. For example, although the Left Party suffered at the hands of the AfD (especially in eastern German constituencies) in 2017, the former's losses to the latter in 2021 were insignificant when compared to the Left Party's losses to its left-wing sibling rivals. The damage done to Die Linke by the AfD took place in 2017, not 2021. To be sure, other factors said to be responsible for the Left Party's 2021 electoral fiasco could have played small, additive roles. Yet we have argued here that the far most likely explanation for Die Linke's lack of electoral success in 2021 was that it failed to distinguish itself in policy and direction from its chief rivals on the center-left and left. Using data from the CPM and CHES, we conclusively demonstrated the Left Party's lack of issue ownership and its failure to establish a distinct policy and ideological profile.

Using the CMP data, we found that the Left Party's far-left positioning on the ideological spectrum is a function of very small differences on a large number of variables. True, the analysis shows that Die Linke has moved more toward the extreme left when we compare 2009 to 2013, and 2013 to 2017 (with an opposite movement from 2017 to 2021). However, because this score reflects a latent variable created on aggregating scores from 26 different variables, the score carries less weight. Indeed, on closer examination it seems that the Left Party's placement on the far left of the ideological spectrum is a function of very small differences on a large number of variables that are not necessarily substantively important to voters. With the variables that do have the largest differences, we see that Die Linke either could not/did not acquire undisputed issue ownership or simply followed the lead of its rivals. For example, when we looked at the variable on government control over the economy, there was a slight increase for all three parties when we compared 2009 to 2013, a significant increase for all three parties looking at the data in 2013 and in 2017, and a large decrease for all three parties in the federal election of 2021. On what is arguably one of the most significant markers of radical-left party identity, then, the Left Party is not distinguishing itself in any fundamental way from its competitors.

The CHES data provided similar conclusions. The results showed that experts assess Die Linke as the party furthest to the left on overall economic issues. However, on other important issues the Left Party is either located in between the Greens and the SPD, or is indistinguishable from one of them. The results clearly indicate that while experts place the Left Party on the far

left of the ideological spectrum and view the party as extreme left economically, on the most important—and specific—election issues the party is barely distinguishable from its competitors. In other words, although experts continue to see Die Linke as occupying the far left of the political spectrum, in many specific policy areas the party is hard to differentiate from its rivals. In a crowded political space, the Left Party is failing to offer policies that provide a clear and compelling reason for left-wing voters to cast their ballots for the party, especially those younger voters who have provided the overwhelming support for Die Linke over the last decade and a half. If the Left Party hopes to rebound, to be electorally competitive and politically significant in the future, it will have to craft and communicate a clearer message and profile, while staking its claim over a distinctive set of policy positions. Otherwise, Die Linke will remain a “party without qualities,” that is, one that is vaguely radically left, but gives voters little incentive to choose it over its rivals.

## Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge the support of the International Association for the Study of German Politics (IASGP) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for the opportunity to participate in a Berlin election trip to observe the 2021 federal election.

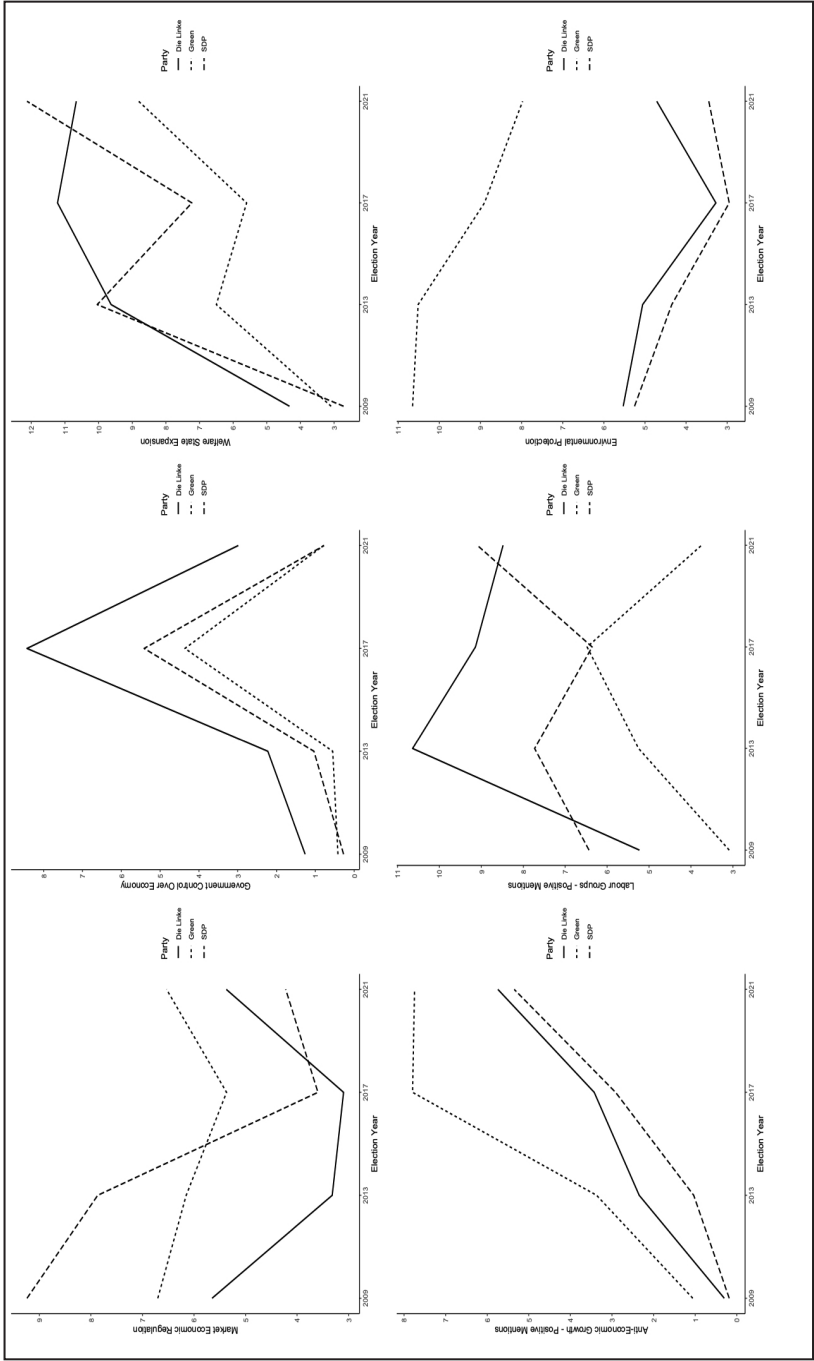
---

**JONATHAN OLSEN** is Professor and Chair of the Department of Social Sciences and Historical Studies at Texas Woman’s University. He is the author or co-author of four books and numerous articles in such journals as *Party Politics*, *German Politics*, *German Politics and Society*, and *Problems of Post Communism*.

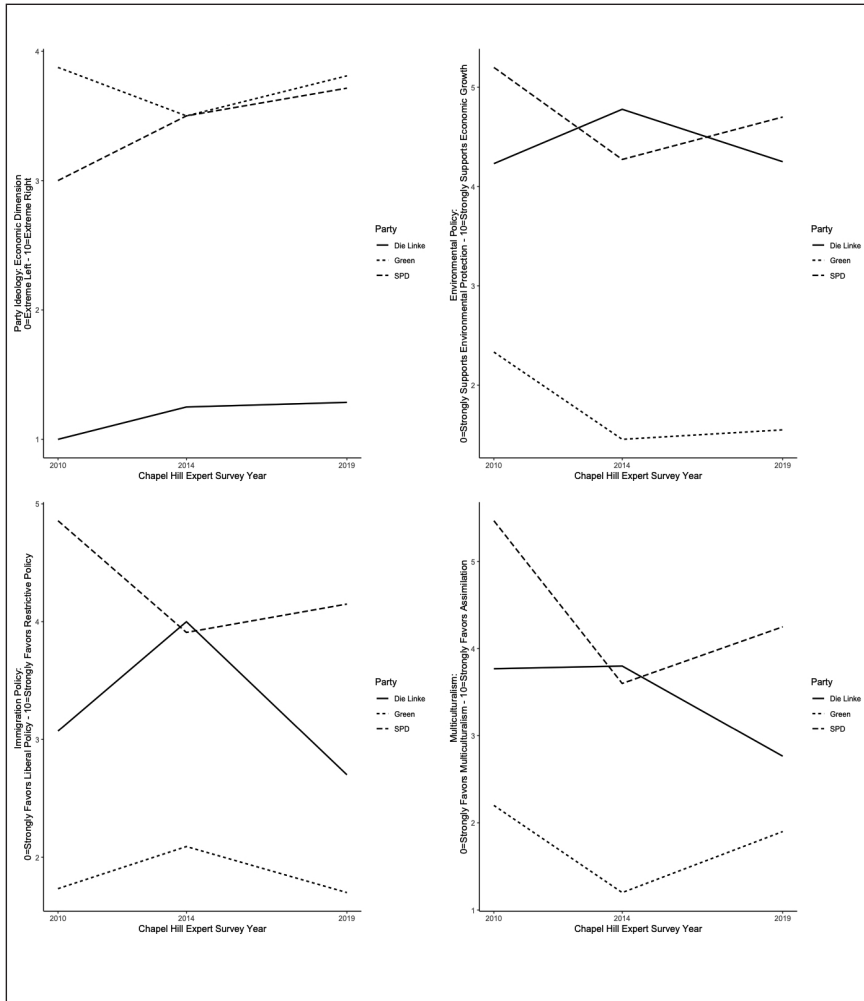
**MICHAEL A. HANSEN** is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Turku. He previously held a postdoctoral position at Lund University and was an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside. His scholarly articles have appeared in numerous peer-reviewed journals, such as *Party Politics*, *Political Behavior*, *Social Science Quarterly*, *Political Research Quarterly*, *Comparative European Politics*, *German Politics*, *Politics & Gender*, *German Politics and Society*, and *American Politics Research*.

# Appendix A: Figures Displaying Left-Wing Competitor Parties

**Figure A1: 2021 German Federal Election: Party Manifesto Project Comparative Analysis— Left-Wing Parties**



**Figure A2: Chapel Hill Expert Survey Comparative Analysis–Left-Wing Parties**



## Notes

1. For a discussion of the competition for left-wing voters among social democratic parties, Green parties, and radical-left parties, see Michael A. Hansen and Jonathan Olsen, “Sibling Rivalry: Voters for Radical Left Parties and Their Competitors in Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands,” *Party Politics* (July 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688211035027>.
2. See the Comparative Manifesto Project at <https://manifesto-project.wzb.eu/>.
3. See the Chapel Hill Expert Survey at <https://www.chesdata.eu/>.
4. On Die Linke’s losses to the AfD in 2017, see Jonathan Olsen, “The Left Party and the AfD: Populist Competitors in Eastern Germany,” *German Politics and Society* 36, no. 1 (2018): 70–83.
5. Ibid.
6. For a discussion of this, see Horst Kahrs, “Die Wahl zum 20. Deutschen Bundestag,” Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (26 September 2021), <https://www.rosalux.de/themen/staat-demokratie/parteien-wahlanalysen>.
7. The German constituency level map was created using R statistical software, an original data set based on the constituency level election results, and the 2021 German constituencies geometric shapefile. The shapefile can be accessed from Der Bundeswahlleiter, <https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/en/bundestagswahlen/2017/wahlkreiseinteilung/downloads.html>. Constituency level results were obtained from Der Bundeswahlleiter, “Bundestagswahl 2021: Ergebnisse” (2021), <https://www.bundeswahlleiter.de/bundes-tagswahlen/2021/ergebnisse.html>.
8. Olsen, “The Left Party and the AfD.”
9. Uwe Jahn, “Warum die Linkspartei abgestürzt ist,” *Tagesschau* (27 September 2021), <https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/btw21/linkspartei-bundestagswahl-101.html>.
10. Horst Kahrs from the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung has argued that the Left Party’s electoral result is a reflection of its vote on Afghanistan, although Kahrs points to other factors as well. See Jan Emmendorfer, “Wahlforscher: Linke hat als Reparaturbetrieb der Sozialdemokratie keine Zukunft,” *Redaktionsnetzwerk Deutschland*, <https://www.rnd.de/politik/bundestagswahl-2021-warum-hat-die-linke-so-schlecht-abgeschnitten-FZTUNBEDYFDJFE77GB3EAJ7VNM.html>.
11. See more at Infratest dimap, <https://www.infratest-dimap.de/umfragen-analysen/bundesweit/sonntagsfrage/>.
12. For more on Die Linke’s new leadership, see Jonathan Olsen, “The Linke’s Search for Leadership—and Direction,” *American Institute for Contemporary German Studies* (10 September 2020), <https://www.aicgs.org/2020/09/the-linkes-search-for-leadership-and-direction/>.
13. For a comprehensive analysis and discussion of the AfD vote in the 2021 federal election, see Michael A. Hansen and Jonathan Olsen, “A Tale of Two Electorates? The 2021 Federal Election and the AfD Voter in East and West,” *German Politics and Society* 40, no. 2 (2022): 110–133.
14. For an overview of literature on radical-left parties’ electoral success, see Hansen and Olsen, “Sibling Rivalry.”
15. Luke March and Charlotte Rommerskirchen, “Out of Left Field? Explaining the Variable Electoral Success of European Radical Left Parties,” *Party Politics* 21, no. 1 (2015): 40–53.

16. Raul Gomez, Laura Morales, and Luis Ramiro, “Varieties of Radicalism: Explaining the Diversity of Radical Left Parties and Voters in Western Europe,” *West European Politics* 39, no. 2 (2016): 351–379; Luis Ramiro, “Support for Radical Left Parties in Western Europe: Social Background, Ideology and Political Orientations,” *European Political Science Review* 8, no. 1 (2016): 1–23.
17. Hansen and Olsen, “Sibling Rivalry.”
18. Andrea Volkens, Tobias Burst, Werner Krause, Pola Lehmann, Theres Matthieß, Sven Regel, Bernhard Weßels, and Lisa Zehnter, “The Manifesto Data Collection,” Manifesto Project Data Set Version 2021a of the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (wzb), <https://doi.org/10.25522/manifesto.mpps.2021a>.
19. Seth Jolly, Ryan Bakker, Liesbet Hooghe, Gary Marks, Jonathan Polk, Jan Rovny, Marco Steenbergen, and Milada Anna Vachudova, “Chapel Hill Expert Survey Trend File, 1999–2019,” *Electoral Studies* 75 (2022), Article 102420, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2021.102420>.
20. In Appendix A, we provide plots that contain only the sibling rival parties: Die Linke, the Greens, and the SPD.