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## Leaving the Space—Opening the Gap? Electoral Effects of Parties' and Voters' Repositioning

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# 3

## Leaving the Space—Opening the Gap?

### Electoral Effects of Parties' and Voters' Repositioning

*Bernhard Weßels*

#### Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 1, the German party system has become increasingly fragmented and polarized in the past decades. West Germany's previously super-stable party system already started to change in the early 1980s with the success of the Greens. German unification in 1990 led to further differentiation of the party system on the left. Following the 2017 federal election, yet another new party entered the Bundestag, this time on the right side of the political spectrum: the AfD. This most recent expansion of the party system is an exceptional development and came quite unexpectedly, given that, at the national level, German voters had never given parties to the right of the CDU/CSU a chance to pass the five-percent threshold required to obtain parliamentary representation. For a long time, Germany had appeared to be immune to right-wing parties, making significant inroads at the polls, although such parties were quite successful in other Western European countries, in which right-wing and populist parties had been on the rise since the early 1990s. Against this background, some observers interpreted the emergence of the AfD simply as a normalization of the German party system in the sense that already existing "sleeping" political orientations were eventually activated at elections (Anders et al. 2018: 371; Müller 2016).

Implied in this argument is a demand-side perspective on vote change: voters have preferences that are not represented, and as soon as there is a matching offer, they vote for it. This assumption finds some support in the fact that about a quarter of the AfD's vote share in 2017 came from individuals who had abstained in the 2013 election. However, this is only part of the story. To complement this demand-driven explanation, the development of political supply must be considered. At issue is whether there has been a programmatic shift of the mainstream center-left and center-right parties to the left, thus opening the space on the right side of the political spectrum and creating a gap for new right-wing populist offers.

Accordingly, the questions to be answered in this chapter are threefold. The first question puts Germany in the wider European context. Does the entry of a right-wing populist party into parliament at the 2017 German federal election signal a “normalization” in that Germany has just caught up with a broader European development? Second, the chapter queries whether it was a change in supply structures that opened the space for this party. If a repositioning of mainstream parties has happened in this way, the more general—third—question arises whether voters reacted to it and with which consequences.

The chapter adopts a dual-track perspective by examining the specific case of Germany in parallel with a broader perspective of Western Europe overall. It shows that the centrist mainstream parties—the parties of the Social Democratic family and specifically the German SPD on the center-left as well as the Liberal, Christian Democratic, and Conservative party families, respectively the CDU/CSU and FDP, on the center-right—indeed have opened a gap on the right side of the political spectrum. This analysis is followed by a discussion of research on voters’ reactions to parties’ political repositioning, which shows that evidence is mixed and there are serious doubts that voters perceive parties’ movements at all. Against this background, the chapter then explores if and with what consequences voters react to position shifts of the parties they voted for at the previous elections. It demonstrates for Germany as well as for Western Europe overall, that voters indeed respond to position shifts of the parties they voted for at the previous elections. Having established this relationship, the question is addressed to which degree parties’ repositioning has contributed to vote switching to right-wing populist parties in Western Europe in general and the AfD in Germany in particular.

As the research question deals with relationships between parties’ political supply and voters’ individual-level reactions to changes in this supply, the chapter draws on data from two levels. To indicate parties’ programmatic supply, the Manifesto Project provides data on the content of election platforms, coded into fifty-six categories, which allow for constructing ideological scales. These data are used to measure the repositioning of political parties from one election to the next (Volkens et al. 2019a). For the individual-level analysis of voters, the post-election surveys compiled by the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES 2019a, 2019b), which also incorporates the CSES module of the post-election surveys of the German Longitudinal Election Study (CrossSec09\_Post, CrossSec13\_Post, CrossSec17\_Post), is used. The Manifesto Project Dataset 2019 has been matched to this individual-level dataset. The resulting matched data cover the period from 1996 to 2017 and include fifteen Western European countries (Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden). Based on these data, findings that refer either to all countries together or to the special case of Germany are presented in the following.

## A Changing Political Space

The idea that the general structure of party competition can be conceived in spatial terms originates from Downs (1957). While the notion of space as such is derived from an economic argument, the content of the space is conceived in terms of the left–right dimension that has its origin in the historical seat allocation to political parties in parliaments (Best 1991). The left–right semantics has become a powerful heuristic in political life, both for political actors and for citizens (Fuchs and Klingemann 1989). The traditional economic cleavage could be easily mapped on this dimension. However, political competition has also always been organized by a second, cultural dimension of cleavage. This second dimension was generally much less salient than the traditional economic left–right divide, but in recent decades, it has received increased attention in the public debate (cf. Chapter 4). Accordingly, numerous scholars have pointed out that the growing importance of the cultural dimension has created a new cleavage constellation, within which a space has been opened up for new political entrepreneurs from the right to enter the scene (Kriesi et al. 2012; Hutter et al. 2016). In their interpretation, long-term trends show an “increasing conflict between universalistic/integrationist cosmopolitans and particularistic/isolationist nationalists” (Kriesi 2013: 2).

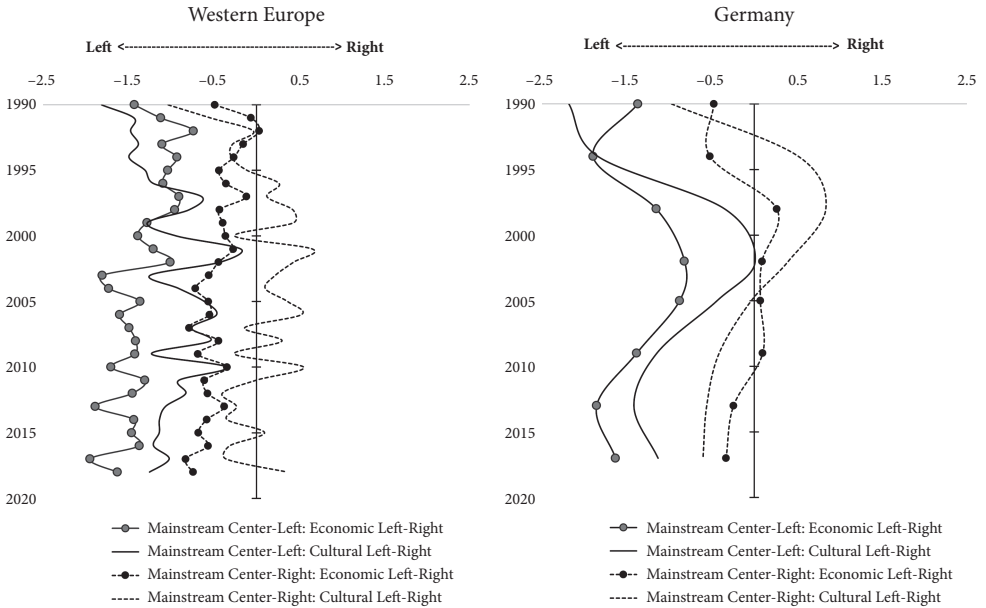
Drawing on this two-dimensional perspective allows for describing political space by four quadrants that result from the cross-classification of the economic and the cultural left–right lines of conflict. From this point of view, it is the specific combination of economically and culturally right-oriented positions in which the mainstream parties provide no viable programmatic supply. The general hypothesis, then, is that it is the opening of this particular segment in the two-dimensional political space that allowed neoliberal nationalists and right-wing populists to become important political players in almost all Western European party systems. The same may have happened in Germany in the 2017 federal election when the AfD was able to overcome the 5 percent hurdle and score larger vote shares than the FDP, the Greens, and the Left Party, thus rendering it the largest opposition party. It thus seems that the European trend of increasingly successful right-wing populists and right-wing extremists has finally also reached Germany.

Inspecting the positional movements of center-left and center-right mainstream parties for both Western Europe overall and the special case of Germany shows that these parties indeed left a gap. These movements can be made visible by examining the respective parties’ election platforms based on the data from the Manifesto Project. This project provides data on election manifestos using about fifty categories of coding topics and positions from which different kinds of position scales can be constructed (Lowe et al. 2011). The economic left–right dimension, e.g., refers to positive mentions of the free market economy, economic growth, and welfare state limitations as indications of right positions, and market regulation,

corporatism/mixed economy, and welfare state expansion of left positions. The cultural left–right dimension includes positive mentions of traditional morality as well as law and order motives and negative mentions of multiculturalism to indicate positions on the right, and the exact opposite to indicate positions on the left (see Appendix for a full list of categories). For both the economic and the cultural left–right dimension, subtracting the sum of the shares of right positions from the sum of the shares of left positions results in a scale that in principle ranges from –100 for an overall far-left position to +100 for a far-right position. However, in the following analyses, logarithmic transformations of these scales are used that have been calculated according to a formula proposed by Lowe et al. (2011), resulting in a range of roughly –5 to +5 (see Appendix A). Based on these scales, it becomes apparent that, in the Western European countries studied here, the Social Democrats have on average moved to the left both economically and culturally since the 1990s (Figure 3.1, left panel). Since 2004/2005, the center-right parties have also moved to the left on both dimensions. As a result, today the space in the quadrant defined by economically and culturally rightist positions is free from offers of centrist mainstream parties. For Germany, the programmatic shifts of the center-left SPD and the center-right CDU/CSU and FDP show a particularly pronounced picture, with both party camps having moved to the left on each of the two dimensions (Figure 3.1, right panel). Analyzing the political space in Germany, Bornschier classified the movements of Social Democrats and Christian Democrats between 1994 and 2002 as shifts to the left on the economic social welfare vs. economic liberalism dimension (Bornschier 2010). Our data show that the move to the left of CDU/CSU and FDP started earlier than that of the SPD. In recent years, however, the picture has become the same as for the Western European overall average: all parties are now positioned left of center.

There are three interesting aspects. First, the movement of the center-right parties to the left does not mean that they converged with the center-left. On the contrary: The distance between Liberals, Conservatives, and Christian Democrats on the one hand and the Social Democrats, on the other hand, has remained pretty much the same because the latter have also moved further to the left. Second, the center-right moved so far to the left that a huge gap opened on the right. Third, the development of these parties' vote shares pretty much mirrors their positional shifts. The joint vote share of the mainstream center-left and center-right parties has declined continuously. From 2005 to 2009 it amounted to about 48 percent but dropped to 34 percent between 2010 and 2014 and to 30 percent from 2014 to 2017 across the fifteen Western European countries under investigation. In Germany, the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats, and Liberals together scored 84.4 percent at the federal election in 2002, 79.2 percent in 2005, 71.4 percent in 2009, 72.0 percent in 2013, and, finally, only 64.3 percent in 2017.

These developments complement the electoral successes of right-wing populist and extremist parties in Western Europe. Right-wing populist parties have already



**Fig. 3.1** Position shifts of mainstream center-left and mainstream center-right parties on the economic and cultural left–right dimensions, 1990–2017

*Notes:* Party-specific moving averages over two elections. Mainstream center-left: Social Democratic Parties (Germany: SPD); mainstream center-right: Liberal, Christian, and Conservative Parties (Germany: FDP and CDU/CSU). Range of scales about  $-5$  to  $+5$  (log-scales calculated according to procedure proposed by Lowe et al. (2011)).

*Source:* Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2019a); for definition of economic and cultural left–right dimensions see Appendix A.

had some success since the early 1990s, with an average of about 6 percent of the votes in national elections. However, only from 2004 onward, there has been a steady and continuous increase in their average vote share to almost 12 percent (Guardian 2019). In Germany, the AfD came close to the 5 percent hurdle already in 2013 (4.7 percent) and easily surpassed it with 12.6 percent of the (second) votes in 2017. These numbers leave the impression that (a) there is a negative relationship between the left turn of the mainstream parties and their overall vote shares and (b) the decline in the combined vote shares of the mainstream center-left and center-right parties matches the rise of the vote share of right-wing populist parties in Western Europe overall but also specifically in Germany.

According to Roberts, “political space for populism is opened by the failure of established parties to effectively represent salient interests or sentiments in the body politic” (Roberts 2017: 390). Looking at the political space created by the economic and cultural dimensions of political conflict, we indeed see room for competitors. Placing the Western European party families and German parties in this two-dimensional space clearly shows considerable skewness in terms of the

symmetry in space. The zero point must not be regarded as the empirical political center; nevertheless, the gap left open by the mainstream parties is so huge that a potential challenger may regard this as an invitation and may ultimately be successful at the polls. Yet, this presupposes that voters actually react to shifts in parties' positions. The next section explores whether this has been the case.

### **Parties' Repositioning and Voters' Reactions—A Research Review**

Mainstream parties in Germany and elsewhere in Western Europe are embedded in social cleavages. Under normal conditions, voters of these parties are hardly available to other parties (Bartolini and Mair 1990; cf. Chapter 6). Repositioning can then be costly for parties and may lead to voter reactions that are not profitable for them. Therefore, parties tend to change their positions only under special conditions. Research shows that these conditions are manifold, complex, and do not necessarily lead different parties to react in the same ways. Adams et al. (2004) have found parties not changing positions in response to past election results but in response to strong shifts in public opinion away from them. Schumacher et al. (2013) refined this finding by demonstrating the conditionality of the effects of voters' shifts on party organizations. While leadership-dominated parties respond to changes in the mean positions of all voters, activist-dominated parties care more specifically about position shifts of their own voters. Motivation to change positions also comes from the success of competing parties. Abou-Chadi and Krause (2020) have shown that the strength of radical right parties motivates mainstream parties to change positions independently of public opinion. Yet, under normal conditions parties must stick to their "corridor of political identity" to sustain the programmatic linkages with their voters and keeping linkages requires competing parties to offer meaningful alternatives. There are two situations that may outweigh the potential costs of position shifts: one is the reaction to serious position shifts of the party voters or the electorate at large, and the other is successful mobilization. For both alternatives, the implication is that voters react to position shifts of parties.

Extant research on voters' reactions to position shifts of parties has come to different conclusions. In a recent review, Adams (2012) concludes that parties do shift positions in line with the expectations of the spatial model, whereas the assumption that voters perceive parties' policy shifts and that these perceptions lead to behavioral consequences does not find consistent support. There is strong evidence that citizens "hold reasonably accurate perceptions of parties' long-term policies, in the sense that voters' party perceptions match experts' party placements along with the left–right codings of party policy manifestos" (Adams 2012: 409). Still, this does not imply that voters react to position shifts in line with the assumption "that all voters have identical perceptions of each party's policy

positions, and that voters instantly update these perceptions—along with their party evaluations—in response to changes in the policy statements issued by the party’s elites” (Adams 2012: 403). Empirical evidence that voters react to policy shifts is weak or at best mixed. The variation of results is huge.

Adams and Somer-Topcu (2009) found that voters take some time to update their perceptions of parties’ policy positions. Voters do not react to current policy programs but policy profiles at the last election. Another study shows for Germany, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the Netherlands that voters only perceive and react to policy shifts if they concern issues they care about (Plescia and Staniek 2017). But it is not saliency alone that renders reactions on the part of voters more likely, but also the polarity of parties’ positions on issues. Maurer et al. (2015) show that this results in party-specific issue voting. For Denmark, Seeborg et al. (2017) show in a panel study that voters update their perceptions of party positions quite accurately. Even differences in voters’ political awareness do not matter for these perception adjustments. Most recently, Spoon and Klüver (2019) have demonstrated that voters tend to switch their electoral support from mainstream parties to a non-mainstream party if the former converge on the left–right dimension.

Thus, the phenomenon of parties repositioning themselves appears to create reactions in electoral behavior. In other words, changes in parties’ supply lead to effects on the demand side. To illustrate, let us assume that the party a voter has voted for in a previous election changes its position and thus distances itself from the voter (whose position is assumed as constant). In this case, the possible recourse of the voter would be either to abstain from voting or to switch to another party. However, switching would only work if there were electoral alternatives available in close vicinity of the position held by the party supported by the voter before its programmatic shift (Bendor et al. 2011). Accordingly, it should be possible to model voters’ reaction to the repositioning of parties in spatial terms (Downs 1957; Dassonneville and Dejaeghere 2014).

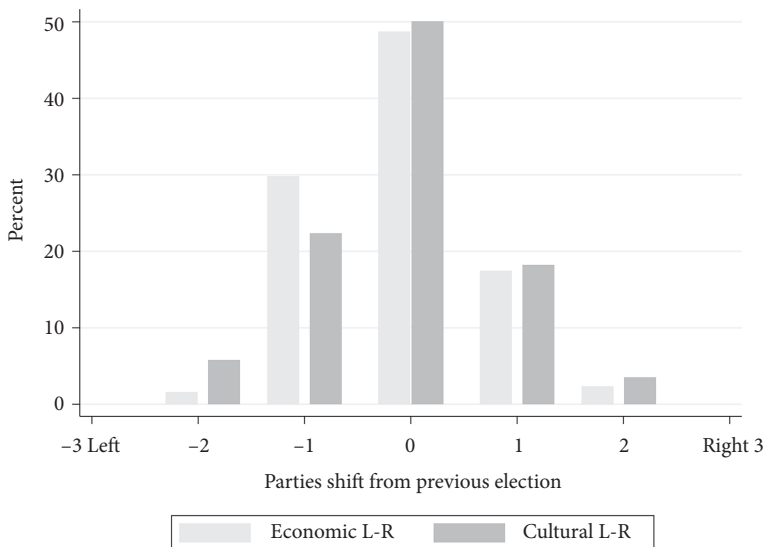
### **Measuring Parties’ and Voters’ Repositioning**

In the following, the implications of parties’ positional shifts on the two lines of conflict in party competition—the economic and the cultural—are examined. Specifically, the analyses focus on shifts that occurred between the election immediately preceding the analyzed (post-election) survey, henceforth addressed as the “most recent” or “last” election, and the one before that, henceforth addressed as the “previous” election. The parties chosen at these elections are determined by means of recall questions, one pertaining to the election on which the respective survey followed as post-election study, the other pertaining to the previous election. Parties’ position shifts are measured by means of data from the Manifesto



Project. For reasons of comparability with the CSES and GLES survey data, we use the log version of the scales as proposed by Lowe et al. (2011). The range of the log scales of about  $-5$  to about  $+5$  matches the range of the survey measure of left–right self-placement of  $-5$  to  $+5$  quite nicely. The measurement for a party’s policy shift is the difference between its position in the most recent election and its position in the previous election. If there is no difference, no shift occurred. A negative score indicates a shift to the left and a positive score a shift to the right. According to the CSES data, about half of the voters in the fifteen Western European countries included in our study voted in the last election for a party that had not changed its position on either the economic or the cultural left–right dimension. On average, about 30 percent of the voters were confronted with a party that had moved, after they had supported it at the polls, to the left, and about 20 percent with a party that shifted its position to the right (Figure 3.2).

However, position shifts are not restricted to parties. Voters can also change their positions between elections. This can happen for various reasons. Preferences may change due to changing individual circumstances or re-evaluations of the general situation. It is also possible that parties take the lead and persuade voters to follow them, thereby altering their views. In any case, voters’ positional shifts must also be considered when examining the effects of parties’ movements in political space on voters’ choices.



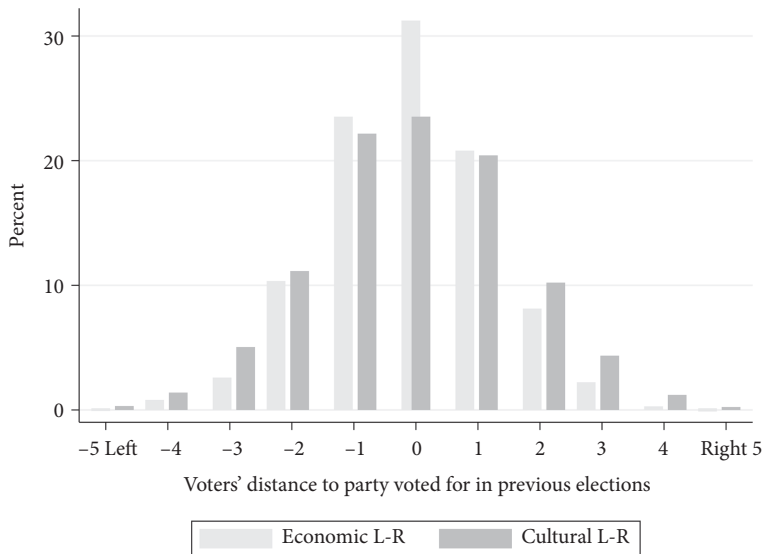
**Fig. 3.2** Parties’ repositioning in Western Europe, 1996–2017

*Notes:* Only parties chosen by respondents in previous election. Scale recoded to integer values for descriptive reasons.

*Sources:* CSES (2019a, 2019b), Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2019a).

We have direct measurements of parties' position changes from the previous to the recent election. Unfortunately, we lack similarly direct information on position changes of voters. Shifting one's vote from one party to another may have different reasons. In the context of spatial voting, there are three possible reasons for vote shifting: (1) The party has changed its position away from the voter, (2) the voter has changed his or her position away from the party voted for in the previous election, and (3) another party has moved closer to the voter's position and he or she has switched to this now more proximate party. If the party has maintained its position, only (2) or (3) could be reasons for switching.

The distribution of voters' distances to the economic and the cultural left–right positions of the party they voted for in the previous election, measured by the distance between this party's positions on each of these dimensions and voters' left–right self-placement, suggests that a fairly large proportion of the voters may have been motivated to watch out for a more suitable party in the subsequent elections (Figure 3.3). Empirical results on the distances between the parties and their voters show overall closer positions in the subsequent, most recent elections. In this case, distances on both dimensions amount to only a tenth of those to the parties voted for in the previous elections. If the party has not moved, this may



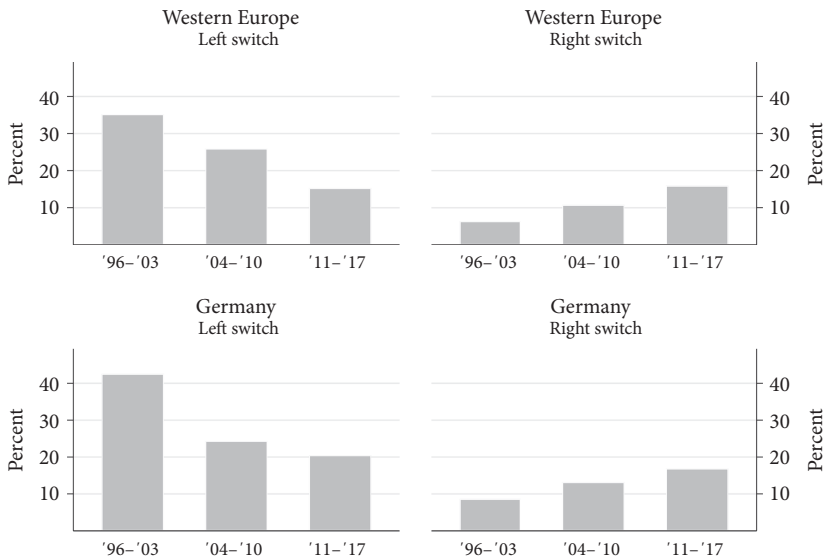
**Fig. 3.3** Distance to the party voted for in previous elections, Western Europe 1996–2017

*Notes:* Distances between economic and cultural left–right positions of parties as determined by party manifestos and voters' self-placements on left–right scale. Left–right scale for voters standardized to range of party manifesto scales from original scaling 0 to 10.

*Sources:* CSES (2019a, 2019b), Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2019a).

indicate that the voter may have changed position. But this is only suggestive and not measured precisely, because the logical alternatives are that another party has moved closer or that the voter just made a bad choice in the previous election in terms of proximity.

Voters' options for reacting to increasing distances between the parties they voted for in the past and their own views are either abstention due to alienation (Aarts and Weßels 2005) or switching to a more proximate party. Non-voting due to alienation from the parties that moved to the left or the right on the economic or the cultural left–right dimension has occurred rather rarely. Only about 2 percent of all voters on either side have joined the non-voter camp in Germany. Vote switching between parties has been much more frequent. Figure 3.4 shows its long-term development among Western European voters and German voters. To get an idea of how changes in voters' choices developed over time, the 21 years for which CSES studies are available (1996–2017) are divided into three seven-year periods: 1996–2003, 2004–2010, 2011–2017. This way, a reasonable number of studies and countries are available for each period. Furthermore, the steady rise of right-wing populist and right-wing extremist parties in Europe began in 2004 with an increase in the average vote share across Western Europe of almost half a percentage point



**Fig. 3.4** Vote switching in Western Europe and Germany, 1996–2017

*Note:* Left and right-switching defined by change between reported party choices in previous and recent elections with regard to party families (ordered from left to right: Communist, Green, Social Democratic, Liberal, Christian, Conservative, and Nationalist party family; corresponding to the party families' average positions on the left–right measure of the Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2019a)).

*Source:* CSES waves 1 to 5 (CSES (2019a, 2019b)).

per year, a trend that wore out in 2011 and the following years with an annual increase of a tenth of a percentage point (Guardian 2019). Left- and right-switching is defined in this analysis in terms of changing from a party from a certain family to a party from another family, positioned either on the left or on the right of the initial one.

The interesting aspect of the results displayed in Figure 3.4 is that the patterns of switching have changed considerably: The proportion of those switching to the left, which had been very high in the first period (1996–2003), has continuously decreased over time. In contrast, switching to the right has become more frequent. While in the first period, the proportion of those switching to the left was about four times higher than of those switching to the right, in the last period (2011–2017) the two directions are almost on par, their shares amounting to about 14 to 18 percent. In other words, right-switching has been about twice as high in the third period as it was in the first. These alterations in voters' switching patterns could be an explanation for the centrist mainstream parties' decreasing electoral fortunes.

### **Vote Switching: A Reaction to Parties' Repositioning or Position Changes of Voters?**

The research literature on voters' reactions to parties' positional and policy shifts does not provide clear evidence to suggest whether voters are aware of parties' movements. Yet, the hypothesis pursued here, namely that it is the gap in political supply that opened the space for new challengers from the political right, is tested under the assumption that voters react to the observable repositioning of the mainstream parties on the left and the right. Therefore, the relationship between parties' shifts and voters' reactions must be demonstrated. The empirical task is to answer the following questions: How are parties' positional changes, voters' distances to the parties they chose in the previous election, and their party switching at the most recent election related? Does it make a difference whether one looks at the economic or the cultural left–right dimension of political conflict?

The evidence at the aggregate level suggests that mainstream parties' repositioning on the left leads to votes switching to the right and vice versa. Regarding the relevance of the economic and cultural left–right dimension, the general expectation—given the general salience of the two dimensions for the conflict structure (cf. Chapter 4)—is that the economic dimension has a stronger impact on vote switching. However, this may depend on political camps. Perhaps the cultural conflict dimension is more important for center-right mainstream parties.

To test these expectations, two rather parsimonious models have been calculated. Specifically, two multi-level fixed-effects logistic regression models have

been estimated, one for left-switching and one for right-switching as dependent variables. As predictors, the models include position shifts of the parties the respondents had voted for at the previous election compared to the most recent election. As described above, this information is generated from the Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2019a), using the two ideological scales in the log version. The second set of independent variables includes the left–right distances on both dimensions between the positions of the parties at the previous election, determined using the data from the Manifesto Project, and the positions of the respondents as measured by the CSES and GLES surveys by means of respondents’ general left–right self-placement, standardized to the range of the manifesto left–right logarithmic scales. Dummy variables for party families are included as controls, with Communist respectively Nationalist party families as baselines. Since further control variables, such as party identification, age, and education, did not show statistically significant effects, we opted for the more parsimonious model described above. It includes four explanatory variables and five party family dummies for both dependent variables (see Table 3.A1 in Appendix).

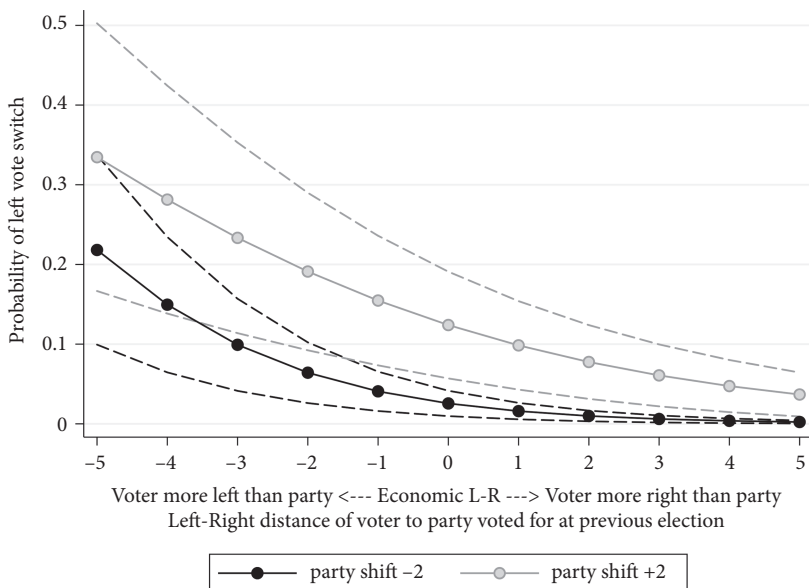
At the core of interest are the variables indicating parties’ positional shifts in interaction with voters’ positional shifts. The emphasis on these factors’ interaction results from the fact that they can compensate each other. Let us assume a party has moved to the left. If a voter who supported it at the previous election has also moved to the left, there is no need for switching. If only the party has moved but not the voter, the likelihood that he or she looks for other political offers increases. If the voter has moved, again he or she should be motivated to look for a different party. If the party has moved in one direction and the voter in the other, the probability of vote switching should be highest. Therefore, not taking the interaction into account cannot provide an answer regarding the character and strength of the effect of positional shifts on vote switching.

However, the constitutive terms of the regression equation can also provide useful information, namely their effects when the interaction variable is zero (Brambor et al. 2006). Under the condition that voters do not move, a previously supported party’s positional shift to the right on the economic dimension leads to a statistically significant increase in Western European voters’ left-switching (see Table 3.A1 in Appendix). Under the same condition, a party’s move to the left on the cultural dimension increases right-switching on the part of voters. If parties do not move, a voter’s movement to the left on the economic dimension leads to more left-switching, whereas a move to the right on the cultural dimension increases right-switching. These findings show that there are different effects for switching, depending on which of the two conflict dimensions—the economic or the cultural left–right contrast—is concerned. The asymmetry in the effects of both the repositioning of parties’ and voters’ distance to the party previously voted for concerning the two dimensions of conflict is remarkably clear: left-switching is determined by the economic left–right dimension but not by the

cultural left–right dimension. Right-switching, by contrast, is mainly induced by the cultural left–right dimension.

However, parties and voters are communicating vessels, and the assumption of one remaining constant and the other moving is probably not the most realistic one. The pattern of positional stability with regard to parties or voters on at least one of the two dimensions of conflict pertains to 40 percent of the electoral choices examined in our analysis. Hence, in about 60 percent of our cases, shifts occurred with regard to both parties and voters. It is therefore necessary to consider the interaction between the shifts of parties and the movement of voters.

Regarding effects on vote switching, there is a strong interplay between parties' repositioning and voters' distances to the respective parties of choice in the previous election. Regarding the economic left–right dimension, the probability of a voter switching to the left is highest if he or she has moved to the left and the party voted for in the previous election has moved to the right. The distance to the party voted for in the last election is large and negative, implying that the voter has moved to the left (Figure 3.5). The probability of left-switching is still high in



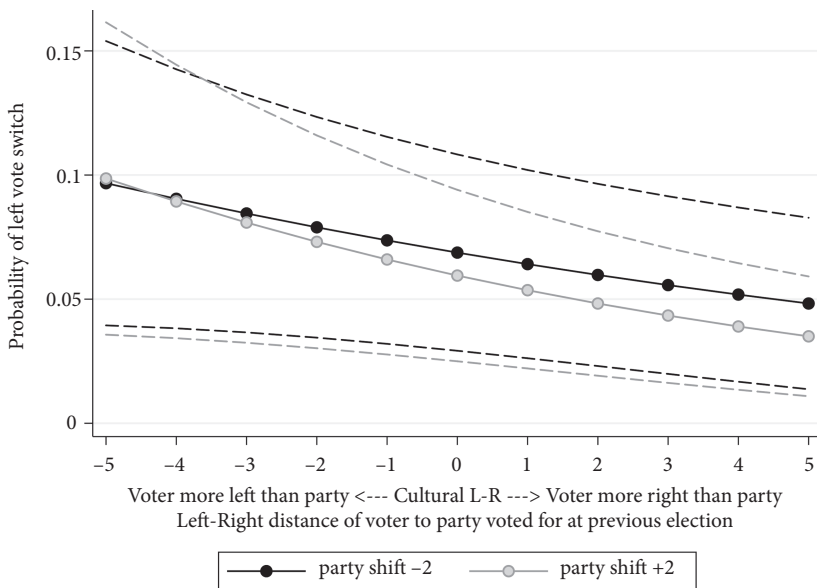
**Fig. 3.5** Marginal probabilities for left vote switching depending on parties' repositioning and voters' distance on the economic left–right dimension to the party voted for in the previous election, Western Europe 1996–2017

*Notes:* Marginal effects derived from Table 3.A1, Model 1. Covariates fixed at their means. Dashed lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. Party shift refers to the difference between the position of the party a respondent voted for in the previous election compared to that same party's position in the most recent election.

*Source:* Micro-level data from CSES (2019a, 2019b) combined with Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2019a).

cases in which a voter moved to the left of the position of the party voted for in the previous election and the party has also moved to the left. However, the likelihood of such a switch amounts to only about half the size. The difference in effects by a party's movement is significant, indicating that both the repositioning of the parties and the voters are of relevance. Turning to the cultural left–right dimension, a voter's distance to the party voted for at the previous election and movement of the party voted for at the previous election has a much lower impact on vote switching to the left. Neither a voter's distance to the party voted for previously nor the party's movement shows a statistically significant effect. Thus, left-switching depends on what happens on the economic left–right dimension. The cultural dimension has no significant effect (Figure 3.6).

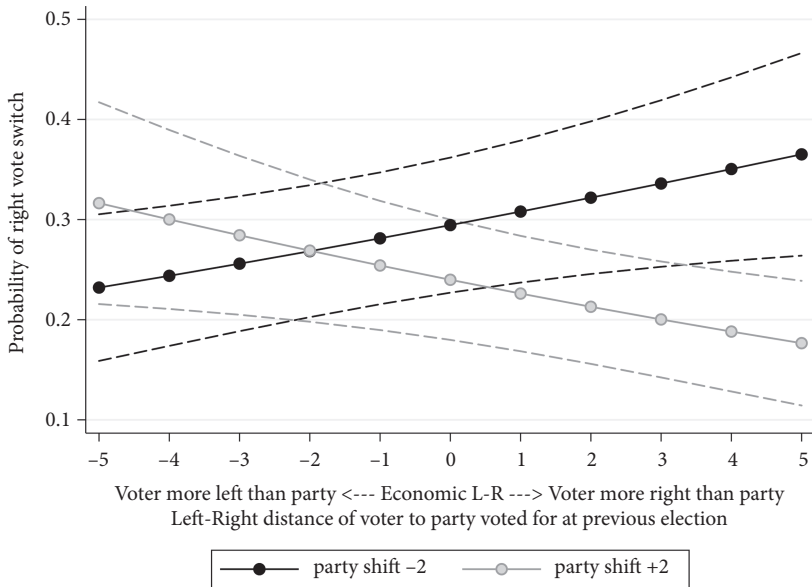
Turning to right-switching, shifts in the economic left–right dimension produce effects that again clearly show the common impact of supply, i.e., the movement of the party voted for in the previous election, and demand, i.e., the change in left–right distance to that party. If voters have moved to the right and the party



**Fig. 3.6** Marginal probabilities for left vote switching depending on parties' repositioning and voters' distance on the cultural left–right dimension to the party voted for in the previous election, Western Europe 1996–2017

*Notes:* Marginal effects derived from Table 3.A1, Model 2. Covariates fixed at their means. Dashed lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. Party shift refers to the difference between the position of the party a respondent voted for in the previous election compared to that same party's position in the most recent election.

*Source:* Micro-level data from CSES (2019a, 2019b) combined with Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2019a).



**Fig. 3.7** Marginal probabilities for right vote switching depending on parties' repositioning and voters' distance on the economic left-right dimension to the party voted for in the previous election, Western Europe 1996–2017

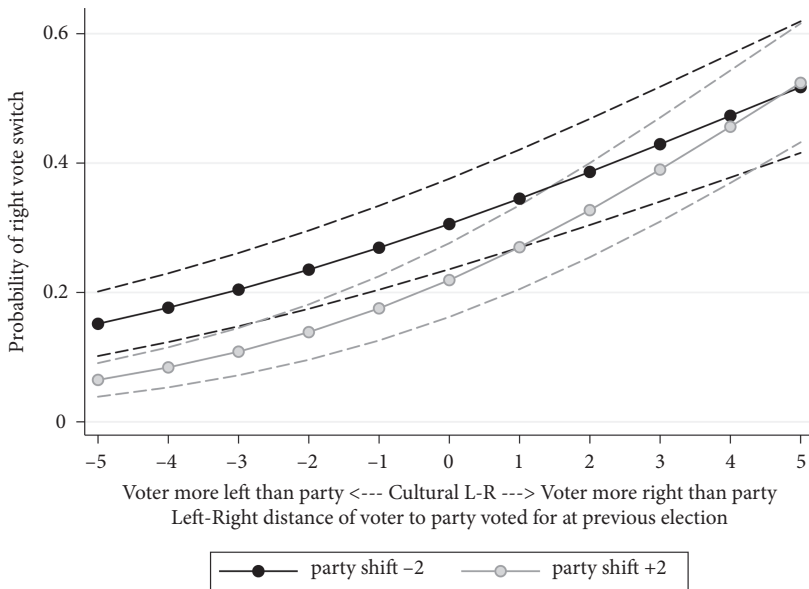
*Notes:* Marginal effects derived from Table 3.A1, Model 2. Covariates fixed at their means. Dashed lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. Party shift refers to the difference between the position of the party a respondent voted for in the previous election compared to that same party's position in the most recent election.

*Source:* Micro-level data from CSES (2019a, 2019b) combined with Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2019a).

has moved to the left, the probability of a shift to the right in one's vote choice is highest. If the party has also moved to the right, this compensates for the shift in the position of the voter to some extent and accordingly decreases the probability of right-switching considerably and in a statistically significant way (Figure 3.7). The movement of voters on the cultural left-right dimension relative to the party they have voted for in the previous election has a strong and statistically significant effect. Voters' positional moves to the right lead to a much higher likelihood of switching to the right also in their electoral choices than positional stability or even shifts to the left. This is true regardless of change in the position of the party voted for. There is no difference regardless of whether the party voted for in the last election has moved to the left or the right (Figure 3.8).

Turning to the special case of Germany, country-specific logistic regressions show similar but not identical patterns. Regarding the economic left-right dimension and left-switching, the pattern is very similar to the Western European one. Regarding the cultural dimension, German voters show a pattern with no impact attributable to the parties' repositioning, but effects regarding the voters'





**Fig. 3.8** Marginal probabilities for right vote switching depending on parties' repositioning and voters' distance on the cultural left–right dimension to the party voted for in the previous election, Western Europe 1996–2017

*Notes:* Marginal effects derived from Table 3.A1, Model 2. Covariates fixed at their means. Dashed lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. Party shift refers to the difference between the position of the party a respondent voted for in the previous election compared to that same party's position in the most recent election.

*Source:* Micro-level data from CSES (2019a, 2019b) combined with Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2019a).

own positional moves. Here, the clear result is that the more voters turn culturally to the right the more they switch to the left. Regarding right-switching and the economic dimension for German voters, there also exists a significant effect of the party's move to the right or the left. If the party has moved to the right, the probability of right-switching is lower. It is in general higher if a voter him- or herself has moved to the right. For the cultural dimension, findings are equivalent to the Western European ones: a voter's movement counts, but not movement of the party (tables and figures are documented in the Online Appendix).

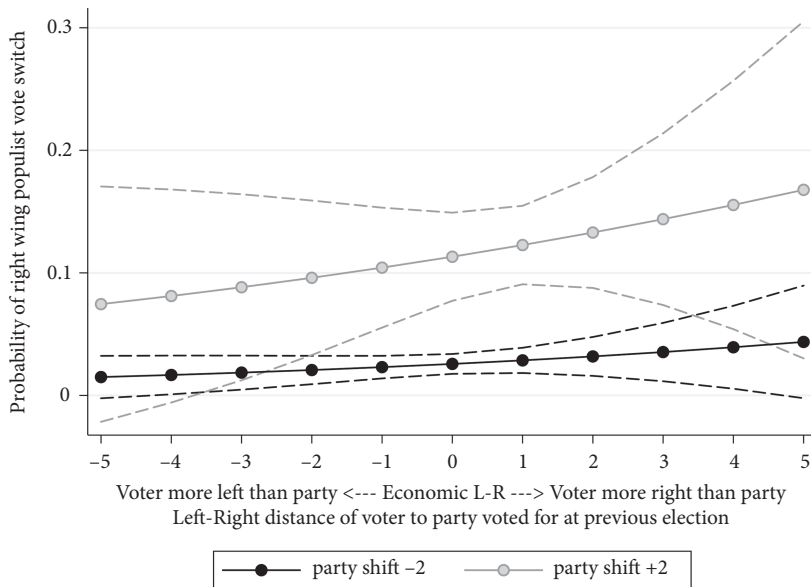
These analyses show that voters react to parties' repositioning. The chance that voters switch their electoral choices is higher when a party changes its position. However, this is not the only reason for switching. Position changes of the voters themselves also matter. If a voter's position moves away from the party he or she has voted for at the previous election, the probability of switching increases too. The results show that the necessary condition for the hypothesis is met, namely that the recent successes of right-wing populist parties in general and the AfD in Germany, in particular, are a result of a gap mainstream parties opened up in the

political space. More globally, they suggest that the success of right-wing populist or extremist parties in general and the AfD in Germany, in particular, is a reaction to changing political supply creating a gap for their specific programmatic offers.

### **Shifting Parties, Shifting Voters, and Turns to Right-Wing Populist Parties**

We have seen above that parties' and voters' positional shifts are consequential for electoral behavior. Depending on the shifts' direction, voters switch to parties further to the left or further to the right. These findings indicate reasonable political behavior: if parties change their positions and voters do not follow, party-switching becomes likely. However, electoral switches to the left and the right are not triggered by the same dimension of conflict. Voters' moves to the left are associated with position shifts on the economic dimension of conflict, whereas moves to the right concern the cultural dimension of conflict. A large distance of a voter to the party he or she supported at the previous election is a strong stimulus to move to another party at the subsequent election. This mechanism works in both directions, left and right, although regarding different lines of conflict. It is not yet clear, however, if it also specifically explains the success of right-wing populist parties. Our findings suggest that switching to right-wing populist parties may be stronger related to the cultural than to the economic left-right dimension. Furthermore, while parties' repositioning matters, changes in the distance between voters' positions to the party voted for in the previous election probably matter more.

In the following, these assumptions are tested using the same model setup as in the analysis of switching above. However, the dependent variable is now specified as switching to a right-wing populist party. In eight of the fifteen Western European countries under investigation here, right-wing populist parties have become quite successful since the mid-1990s. Altogether this concerns nine parties: Freedom Party of Austria, Danish People's Party, True Finns, National Front, Alternative for Germany, United Kingdom Independence Party, Party for Freedom, List Pim Fortuyn, and Sweden Democrats (Mudde 2007: 305–308; Akkerman et al. 2016: 2). The dependent variable is coded as 1 if a respondent had not voted for a right-wing populist party in the election before the recent election but subsequently switched to such a party. Code 0 is assigned if a voter chose either a right-wing populist party at both elections or any other party. Thus, the variable contrasts switching to a right-wing populist party with all other patterns of party choice, including stable support for such a party. Non-voters are not included because for them neither a party's movement nor their own position relative to a party voted for in previous elections is available. Using the same independent and control variables as above leads to a model that explains 13 percent of the variance in switching to a right-wing populist party (McKelvey & Zavoina's R-squared; cf. Table 3.A2 in Appendix).



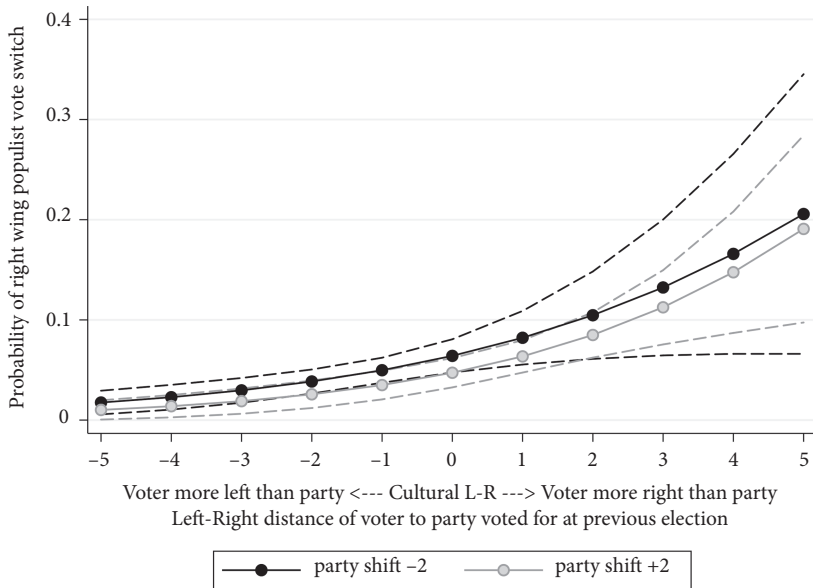
**Fig. 3.9** Marginal probabilities for switching to a right-wing populist party depending on parties' repositioning and voters' left-right distance to the party voted for in the previous election on the economic left-right dimension, Western Europe 1996–2017

*Notes:* Marginal effects derived from Table 3.A2, Model 3. Covariates fixed at their means. Dashed lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. Party shift refers to the difference between the position of the party a respondent voted for in the previous election compared to that same party's position in the most recent election.

*Source:* Micro-level data from CSES (2019a, 2019b) combined with Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2019a).

Figure 3.9 shows the marginal probabilities of the interaction between parties' repositioning and the distance to the party on the economic left-right dimension. There is no significant probability change depending on the distance of voters' left-right positions at the most recent election to the party voted for at the previous election. There is a small area in which the difference between the party's movement to the left and a party moving to the right from the previous to the recent election is significant. Surprisingly, vote switching to a right-wing populist party was more likely when the previously supported party had shifted to the right on the economic dimension.

Regarding the cultural left-right dimension, only the distance to the party voted for at the previous election matters, whereas changes on the political supply side do not. The more a voter is positioned on the right with regard to the party he or she voted for at the last election the more likely is switching to a right-wing populist party (Figure 3.10). Thus, for the cultural dimension of conflict, the specific pattern of switching votes to a right-wing populist party closely resembles the



**Fig. 3.10** Marginal probabilities for switching to a right-wing populist party depending on parties' repositioning and voters' left-right distance to the party voted for in the previous election on the cultural left-right dimension, Western Europe 1996–2017

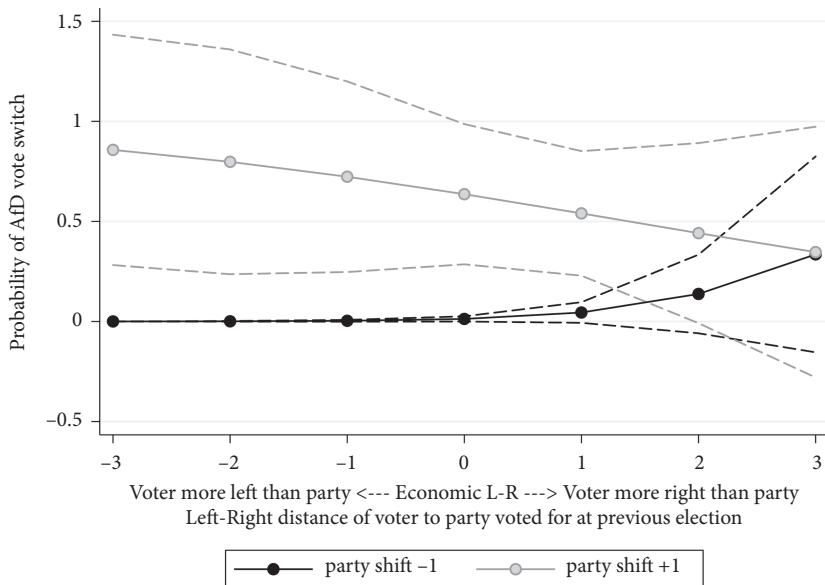
*Notes:* Marginal effects derived from Table 3.A2, Model 3. Covariates fixed at their means. Dashed lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. Party shift refers to the difference between the position of the party a respondent voted for in the previous election compared to that same party's position in the most recent election.

*Source:* Micro-level data from CSES (2019a, 2019b) combined with Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2019a).

general pattern of switching to the right observed above. Regarding the economic left-right dimension, however, the pattern of right-wing populist switching differs from that of general switching to a party further to the right.

The general diagnosis for right-switching and switching to a right-wing populist party, in particular, is the same, however: The cultural left-right dimension matters not only more but also shows more significant differences in probabilities. A second similarity is that the repositioning of parties matters only if it occurs on the economic left-right dimension. On the cultural dimension, changes in probabilities are driven by voters' distance to the party voted for at previous elections. Thus, it is the cultural dimension that motivates voters to switch to parties further to the right and right-wing populist parties in particular. A policy profile including opposition to multiculturalism and a preference for a traditional way of life and law and order seems to drive the move to the right.

Do the same patterns also describe German voters' shifts to the AfD? Since the AfD was only founded in 2013 and entered the national parliament in 2017, the



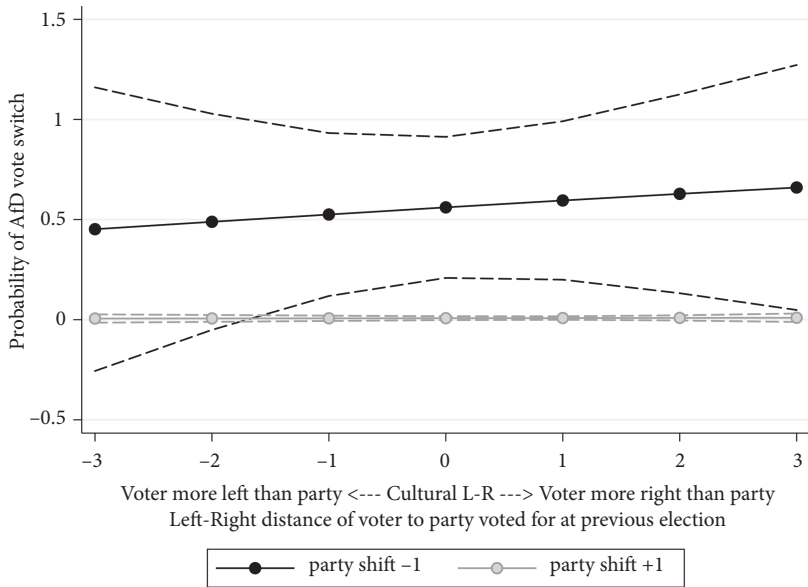
**Fig. 3.11** Marginal probabilities for switching to the AfD depending on parties' repositioning and voters' left-right distance to the party voted for in the previous election on the economic left-right dimension, Germany 2013–2017

*Notes:* Marginal effects derived from Table 3.A2, Model 4. Covariates fixed at their means. Dashed lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. Party shift refers to the difference between the position of the party a respondent voted for in the previous election compared to that same party's position in the most recent election.

*Source:* Micro-level data from CSES (2019a, 2019b) combined with Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2019a).

analysis is constrained to switching between the 2013 and 2017 federal elections. Despite the fundamental transformation that the success of the AfD implies for the German party system, there has been less change between 2013 and 2017 in the positions of both parties and voters than during the whole period from 1998 to 2017. For this reason, the measurement of voters' distance to the party voted for at the previous election scores only within a range of  $-3$  to  $+3$ , and parties' position changes do not reach  $-2$  and  $+2$ .

In a simple logistic regression model, parties' repositioning and voters' movements bind about 15 percent of the variance in switching to the AfD (defined as changing from another party to the AfD; switches from non-voting to the AfD are excluded from the model). Contrary to the finding for general right-switching and switching to right-wing populist parties, in particular, switching to the AfD is not induced by change on the demand side, i.e., voters' distance to the party chosen at the previous election, but only by changes on the political supply side. However, on the economic left-right dimension, our finding for the AfD resembles somewhat the pattern observed for switching to right-wing populist parties in



**Fig. 3.12** Marginal probabilities for switching to the AfD depending on parties' repositioning and voters' left-right distance to the party voted for in the previous election on the cultural left-right dimension, Germany 2013–2017

*Notes:* Marginal effects derived from Table 3.A2, Model 4. Covariates fixed at their means. Dashed lines indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. Party shift refers to the difference between the position of the party a respondent voted for in the previous election compared to that same party's position in the most recent election.

*Source:* Micro-level data from CSES (2019a, 2019b) combined with Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2019a).

Western Europe overall. If the party supported at the previous election has moved to the right on the economic dimension, the likelihood of switching to the AfD is higher than if the party voted for at the previous election has moved to the left (Figure 3.11). For the cultural left-right dimension, the pattern is reversed: if the cultural position of the party voted for at the previous election has shifted to the left, the probability of switching to the AfD is higher than if the party has moved to the right (Figure 3.12).

### Conclusions and Speculations: A Right-wing Populist Preference Shift?

This chapter put forward the expectation that the rising electoral support for right-wing populist parties is a result of a programmatic move of mainstream center-left and center-right parties to the left. During the past ten to fifteen years, this development has opened the political space for new political entrepreneurs from the right.

Our inspection of long-term trends in the political positioning of mainstream center-left parties (Social Democrats) and center-right parties (Liberals, Christian Democrats, and Conservatives) in the two-dimensional political space defined by the economic and the cultural lines of conflict in Western Europe and specifically in Germany found indeed indications of a gap. The vote shares of these parties have decreased considerably, corresponding to the expectation that their repositioning contributed to the success of new challengers. The goal of this chapter was to clarify whether evidence for the presumed mechanisms could be found at the level of individual voters.

Examining the behavior of Western European voters in general and German voters in particular by means of parallel analyses, the study proceeded in three steps. First, a general model was estimated to test the effects of parties' repositioning as well as position shifts on the part of voters themselves on these individuals' propensity to switch to a party further to the left or the right. Left- and right-switching was defined in terms of changing from a party from a certain family to a party from another family, positioned either on the left or on the right of the initial one. Our indicator of voters' position shifts pertained to distances on the economic and the cultural left-right dimensions with regard to the party voted for in the previous election. The chapter's results suggest that voters consider spatial changes of parties for their choices. However, parties' repositioning has a smaller effect than changes of individuals' own positions. Remarkably, the economic left-right dimension showed stronger effects on switching to the left, whereas the cultural left-right dimension appeared more important for switching to the right. Parties' repositioning on the left produced right-switching on the part of voters, whereas movements to the right made left-switching more likely.

In a second step, the same model was tested specifically for switching to right-wing populist parties. Even stronger than switching to the left or the right in general, switching directed toward right-wing populists is asymmetric regarding the two ideological dimensions. On the economic left-right dimension, parties' position shifts produce a weak effect on vote switching. The more the party voted for at the previous election moved to the right, the more likely switching to a right-wing populist party became. This is an effect opposite to that of the findings for general left- or right-switching. Voters' own position shifts on the economic dimension do not produce any significant effects. In contrast, position changes of voters on the cultural left-right dimension are clearly relevant. However, parties' repositioning does not show a significant effect.

The third step of this investigation concentrated on voters' shift to the AfD in Germany between the 2013 and 2017 federal elections. Again, the model included position changes of both parties and voters. For the economic dimension, the pattern is similar to that of shifting to right-wing populist parties across Western Europe: Parties' repositioning on the right is associated with a higher probability to switch to the AfD. Regarding the cultural left-right dimension, the German

pattern differs considerably from that of Western Europe. In contrast to the latter, position shifts of voters do not have any impact on voters' likelihood to move to the AfD. Also contrasting the Western European pattern, parties' repositioning does matter, although not strongly. If the party voted for in the previous election has moved toward the cultural left, the probability of shifting to the AfD increases.

These findings show various patterns that may be relevant for the strategic behavior of political parties. In the general model, switching to the left or the right is either a counter-reaction to parties' repositioning or consonant with position changes on the part of voters themselves. However, with regard to switching to right-wing populist parties including the German AfD, it does not help the mainstream parties to move to the right on the economic dimension in order to prevent voters from turning their back on them. A possible conclusion mainstream parties might draw from these findings is to better not move to the right on the economic dimension. Regarding the cultural left–right dimension, effects are different for the Western European right-wing populist parties and the AfD in Germany. While it seems that in Western Europe overall voters' own position shifts to the right on the cultural dimension lead them to switch choices to right-wing populist parties, in the German case, no effect of voters' position shifts is discernible. Rather, a weak effect of repositioning of the party voters chose in the previous election emerges. If the party moves to the cultural left, the probability of switching to the AfD increases somewhat. However, parties' repositioning on the right does not entail any effects. Thus, moving to the right does not help prevent voters from deserting parties to support the AfD instead. The best for the mainstream parties would be to stay put in this dimension.

Contrary to the inconclusive evidence offered by previous research, the chapter provides clear indications that voters do perceive position changes of parties and react to them by altering their electoral preferences. Perhaps this effect only became visible because the analyses considered the interaction between parties' repositioning and voters' positioning. Second, the role of the economic and the cultural left–right dimensions in vote shifting seems to be asymmetric, depending on whether voters move toward parties further to the right or toward parties further to the left. Position changes on the economic left–right dimension affect both left- and right-switching as well as switching to right-wing populists in general and the AfD in particular. The cultural left–right dimension, in contrast, seems to be only relevant for switching to a party further right and specifically toward a right-wing populist party.

All in all, we found that about 50 percent of the Western European voters were in a situation in which the party they voted for in the previous elections has changed its position. More than half of these voters chose another party at the recent election than they had supported at the election before. The overall trend of these party changes seems to be more and more directed to the right than to the left. Only half



of the Western European electorates face a situation of stability and accordingly are not incentivized to consider moving to another party.

With the data available we cannot fully disentangle whether switching is a result of parties' or voters' repositioning. Obviously, there are effects of parties' repositioning. It seems plausible that there is also an additional effect of voters' preference shift. Of those voters for which the party they had voted for in the previous election did not change its position on the economic left–right dimension, about 10 percent switched to the left and about 24 percent to the right. Roughly, the same applies to the cultural left–right dimension. This seems to suggest that voters have changed their position. These results lead to the conclusion that the success of right-wing populist parties in Western Europe is not only induced by changes in political supply but also by preference changes on the part of voters. This becomes apparent only when supply factors are analytically differentiated into two dimensions of conflict, one pertaining to traditional economic left–right issues and the other to cultural left–right issues. The unidimensional standard indicator of left–right positions routinely used in election studies hides this differentiation so that the actual character of electorally relevant position changes on the part of parties and voters stays hidden. Shifting to the right happens twice as often as switching to the left, and it seems to be the cultural left–right dimension on which not only supply change has happened but also a considerable preference shift of voters to the right. Thus, not only the opening of the political space by mainstream parties has contributed to the success of competitors from the political right. Results suggest that preference shifts on the part of voters may also have contributed considerably to this development. Results also suggest that it does not help mainstream parties to behave electorally opportunistically by running after the voters. For political competition, the implication could be that it is not running after the voter but mobilization that counts for electoral success.

## Appendix A. Documentation of Left–Right Scales

Construction of left–right scales from Manifesto Project Dataset 2019 (Volkens et al. 2019b):

### Economic Left–Right

#### Economic Right

per401 Free market economy  
per402 Incentives: positive  
per407 Protectionism: negative  
per410 Economic growth: positive  
per414 Economic orthodoxy  
per505 Welfare state limitation  
per507 Education limitation  
per702 Labor groups: negative

#### Economic Left

per403 Market regulation  
per404 Economic planning  
per405 Corporatism/mixed economy  
per406 Protectionism: positive  
per409 Keynesian demand management  
per412 Controlled economy  
per413 Nationalization  
per415 Marxist analysis  
per504 Welfare state expansion  
per506 Education expansion  
per701 Labor groups: positive

## Cultural Left–Right

### Cultural Right

- per601 National way of life: positive
- per603 Traditional morality: positive
- per605 Law and order: positive
- per608 Multiculturalism: negative
- per704 Middle class and professional groups

### Cultural Left

- per201 Freedom and human rights
- per202 Democracy
- per503 Equality: positive
- per602 National way of life: negative
- per604 Traditional morality: negative
- per607 Multiculturalism: positive

## Calculation of Index

Economic Left–Right Scale =  $\log(\text{sum Economic Right} + 0.5) - \log(\text{Economic Left} + 0.5)$ ; mean – 0.92, minimum – 4.93, maximum 3.93.

Cultural Left–Right Scale =  $\log(\text{sum Cultural Right} + 0.5) - \log(\text{sum Cultural Left} + 0.5)$ ; mean – 0.51, minimum – 5.21, maximum 5.05.

## Appendix B. Regression Models

**Table 3.A1** The effect of parties' repositioning and voters' distance to the party voted for at the previous election on left- and right-switching in Western Europe

	Model 1 (left switch)		Model 2 (right switch)	
	Odds Ratio	P> z	Odds Ratio	P> z
<b>Distance to party (vote choice recall)</b>				
Economic L-R dimension	0.69	0.000	0.99	0.761
Cultural L-R dimension	0.91	0.000	1.27	0.000
<b>Party's repositioning</b>				
Economic L-R dimension	1.54	0.000	0.93	0.000
Cultural L-R dimension	0.96	0.139	0.89	0.000
<b>Party's repositioning X distance</b>				
Economic L-R dimension	1.06	0.001	0.96	0.001
Cultural L-R dimension	0.99	0.457	1.03	0.001
<b>Vote choice recall</b>				
Green Party	1.75	0.000	1.10	0.090
Social Democratic Party	2.59	0.000	0.65	0.000
Liberal Party	2.27	0.000	0.71	0.000
Christian Democratic Party	3.71	0.000	0.35	0.000
Conservative Party	8.03	0.000	0.28	0.000
Constant	0.02	0.000	0.62	0.006
N (observations)	41,221		41,221	
N (countries)	15		15	
McKelvey & Zavoina's R <sup>2</sup>	0.13		0.07	

*Note:* Results from fixed-effects multi-level logistic regression estimations with respondents clustered in countries.

*Sources:* Micro-level data from CSES (2019a, 2019b), combined with the Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2019a).

**Table 3.A2** The effect of parties' repositioning and voters' distance to the party voted for at the previous election on switching to right-wing populist parties

	<b>Model 3</b> Switch to right-wing populist party		<b>Model 4</b> Switch to AfD	
	Odds Ratio	P> z	Odds Ratio	P> z
<b>Distance to party (vote choice recall)</b>				
Economic L-R dimension	1.11	0.171	1.53	0.210
Cultural L-R dimension	1.34	0.000	1.14	0.587
<b>Party's repositioning</b>				
Economic L-R dimension	1.49	0.000	15.13	0.001
Cultural L-R dimension	0.92	0.144	0.06	0.000
<b>Party's repositioning X distance</b>				
Economic L-R dimension	1.00	0.926	0.41	0.035
Cultural L-R dimension	1.01	0.560	0.95	0.909
<b>Vote choice recall</b>				
Green Party	0.39	0.000		
Social Democratic Party	1.21	0.152		
Liberal Party	1.53	0.015		
Christian Democratic Party	1.31	0.060		
Conservative Party	1.31	0.090		
Constant	0.05	0.000	0.23	0.000
N (observations)	17,528		1,368	
N (countries)	8		1	
McKelvey & Zavoina's R <sup>2</sup>	0.13	McFadden R <sup>2</sup>	0.15	

*Note:* Results from fixed-effects multi-level logistic regression estimations with respondents clustered in eight Western European countries (Model 3) and from a logistic regression of German voters (Model 4).

*Sources:* Micro-level data from CSES (2019a, 2019b) combined with the Manifesto Project Dataset (Volkens et al. 2019a).

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