Voter support for the German PDS over time: Dissatisfaction, ideology, losers and east identity

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the changing bases of support for the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the former ruling Communist party of East Germany that has emerged as a consistent force in united Germany’s party system. We draw on theories positing a dynamic relationship between individuals and their social environment to hypothesize about the changing effects of factors for PDS support over time and test our assertions using survey data from the 1991, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2002 and 2004 German Social Survey (ALLBUS). The dynamic influence of four factors identified as instrumental to the PDS' electoral success among eastern Germans—being a “loser of unification”, economic and political evaluations, eastern German identity, and ideology—are examined. Our findings indicate that ideology is consistently the strongest indicator of PDS support in all years while the effects of sociotropic economic and political evaluations start strong but diminish over time. Contrary to many expectations, PDS supporters are neither the losers of unification nor do they exhibit a stronger eastern identity than other eastern Germans. We discuss the implications of these findings for the future of the PDS, especially given its recent merger in 2005, and for understanding the electoral support of other post-communist parties in Eastern Europe.

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Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, political analysts predicted the demise of Eastern Europe’s ruling Communist parties (e.g. Ishiyama, 1995). To the surprise of many, a number of these parties have refashioned themselves as successful players in competitive multi-party systems. Among these parties, scholars have paid rather close attention to the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), the successor to the East German Socialist Unity Party. With a legacy as one of Eastern Europe’s more hard-line and repressive parties, the PDS did not seem likely to garner the support needed to gain representation in the German Bundestag. However, contrary to early forecasts (e.g. Krisch, 1993), the PDS became a significant political force in the former East Germany, increasingly gaining support in national elections there (11.1% in 1990, 19.2% in 1994, 21.6% in 1998, 16.9% in 2002)1 while also doing well in state and local elections.2 In 2005, after falling below

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1 Until 2005, the PDS failed to draw over 3% of the vote in western Germany.
2 The PDS consistently earns over 15% in state elections in the eastern Länder. It was a coalition partner in Berlin (2001) and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (1998), and claims 200 mayors in eastern Germany, more than any other party (Barker, 2004: 62).
the 5% threshold for fraction status in the Bundestag, the PDS merged with Oskar Lafontaine’s Labor and Social Justice Party (WASG). This new party, known as Die Linke/PDS, scored an impressive victory in the 2005 election (25.3% in the East and 8.7% overall). As evidenced by the prominent position held by former PDS members within the new Left Party and the party’s continued focus on issues affecting eastern Germans, the PDS is likely to continue to impact German politics.

In this paper we examine the changing bases of support for the PDS in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) over time. We theorize that unification has created two countervailing trends—one of increasing assimilation based on positive experiences with the German political system and one of increasing alienation based on disappointments and hardships since unification. In the first section, we draw on case studies and more generalizable theories of democratic transition to derive hypotheses about the potential factors influencing voter support for the PDS and how their influence has changed. In the second section, we test these hypotheses with survey data, discussing the implications for understanding support for the PDS and other post-communist parties.

1. The changing bases of support for the PDS

Dynamic changes in the support for a party can occur in two different ways. First, even if the causes of party support remain constant, the distribution of these characteristics within the population may change, leading to increases or decreases in party support. For example, if a party is supported largely by the elderly, demographic shifts toward younger citizens could reduce support for the party even if being elderly continues to increase support. Thus, changes in support for the PDS may be brought on by varying characteristics of the eastern German population since unification.

Even when population characteristics remain constant, party support can fluctuate with their changing import. In the above example, even if the number of elderly remains the same, party support changes if the elderly increasingly vote for a different party. This paper focuses on two types of long-term shifts in the effects of variables that occur when individuals exist within highly different contexts. A first hypothesis states that individuals feel social pressure to conform to their environment regardless of their individual characteristics (see Noelle-Neumann, 1993). Under this assimilation hypothesis, we would expect that over time eastern Germans’ unique qualities disappear as they conform more to explanations of support for far-left parties in Western democracies. Alternatively, a backlash effect may occur if individuals who view their social context as hostile react against their political environment (see Banaszak and Plutzer, 1993; Gusfield, 1963; Jelen et al., 1993). Such a theory suggests that eastern Germans might react against their new political context if they find it inimical to their own situation. Below we discuss the four primary determinants of PDS support according to existing literature, focusing on how each fits into the dynamic trends of assimilation and backlash.

1.1. Backlash: the ‘‘losers’’ of unification

One explanation of PDS support argues that the party is home to “losers of unification”, eastern Germans disadvantaged by unification (e.g. Moreau and Neu, 1994; Neu, 2004; Falter and Klein, 1994; Klein and Caballero, 1996; Neugebauer and Stöss, 1996: 148–152).4 We identify two types of losers in the literature: material and non-material. The former suffered material loss in the course of unification such as unemployment or income loss while non-material losers experienced a loss of status or prestige.

Foremost among the material losers are the unemployed, women and younger and older eastern Germans. Unemployment in the former East Germany has been consistently high post-unification, ranging from 14.8% in 1992 to 19.5% in 2004. We hypothesize that the unemployed will increasingly choose the PDS as an alternative to mainstream parties, which have largely failed to alleviate the poor job climate. With a significant loss of government social support and higher unemployment rates than men (Klein and Caballero, 1996: 231; Rudolph et al., 1990), women should be consistently or increasingly supportive of the PDS, which has consistently fought unemployment, gender discrimination and championed a liberal abortion policy. Both younger (18−29) and older cohorts (50+) are also identified as core constituent groups of the PDS (e.g., Krisch, 1996: 122; Falter and Klein, 1994: 26; Zelle, 1998: 238). While the percentage of young people in the population has remained constant, we expect younger voters’ support for the PDS to be stronger in later years because of rising youth unemployment and fewer educational opportunities (Zelle, 1998: 238).

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3 Thirty-one out of 54 of the Left Party’s members in the Bundestag were previously members of the PDS, and the Left Party’s objectives for the first 100 days in the Bundestag included equalizing living conditions between East and West (Die Linke, 2005).

4 For an opposing view see Patton (1998: 513).
with previous findings (Moreau and Neu, 1994: 73), we also expect older voters to disproportionately support the PDS, particularly in the first years after unification when early retirees faced uncertain futures (Neu, 2004: 108; Collier, 1993: 105) and pension levels did not match western benefits. Over time, as pensioners in the East begin receiving the same benefits as westerners, support for the PDS should decline.

The group identified most consistently with the PDS is the former Dienstklasse, well-educated, white-collar workers employed in the GDR’s public sector (e.g., Krisch, 1996: 114; Falter and Klein, 1994: 26; Koch-Baumgarten, 1997: 871–873; Neugebauer and Stoess, 1999: 123; Olsen, 1999: 46). Although this group enjoyed considerable privilege and a lofty status in the GDR, the changes ushered in by unification have effectively robbed them of their elite status and social prestige (Klein and Caballero, 1996: 232; Koch-Baumgarten, 1997: 868), leading them to disproportionately support the PDS, the only party which has defended their interests and past biographies. Past work suggests that the relative import of the Dienstklasse for the PDS has waxed and waned as its constituent base has expanded (late 1990s) and contracted (2002) (e.g. Kleinfeld, 2005: 149; Neu, 2004: 63–64; Neller and Thaidigsmann, 2004: 187).

1.2. Eastern identity

More recently PDS support has been related to a growing regional eastern German identity. The origins of this growing eastern identity can be traced to individuals’ socialization in the former GDR, which endowed easterners with common experiences and a shared past and culture, all of which were cemented by the common experience of unification (Hough, 2001: 78). One manifestation of eastern identity—Ostalgia—centers on the belief that the GDR’s economic and social systems, although flawed, provided easterners with stability, security and social harmony (Staab, 1998: 159; Neu, 2004: 149). Feelings of Ostalgia have led easterners to support the PDS, as the only political representative of GDR culture and society (e.g. Neller and Thaidigsmann, 2002: 426; Thompson, 1996: 441; Zelle, 1998). A second aspect of eastern identity known as Trotzidentität (Hogwood, 2000: 58; Hough, 2000) is a negative reaction against the terms and outcomes of unification rejecting western hegemony and assimilation into the FRG’s economic and political culture. To appeal to this group of voters, the PDS has marketed itself as the champion of eastern interests. If backlash theories are correct, the effects and levels of Ostalgia and Trotzidentität will increase as the initial euphoria of unification dissolved in the face of the harsher realities of life in unified Germany.

1.3. Political dissatisfaction

At unification, eastern Germans had high expectations for the FRG’s federal democracy. However, since then many eastern Germans have become disenchanted with the government’s inaction on economic inequalities, the imposition of West German rules and bureaucracy on the East, and their own lack of influence on the political system (Moreau and Neu, 1994: 76; Patton, 1998; Jacobs, 2004: 234). As a result, eastern Germans are less supportive of Germany’s political system than its economic system (Wiesenthal, 1998: 5–6) and are dissatisfied with its political institutions and practices (Falter and Klein, 1994: 30; Eith, 2000) if not with democracy altogether (Neu, 2004: 138; Moreau, 1994). The PDS has capitalized on these attitudes, attracting many of those with a low acceptance of Germany’s democracy and institutions (Neu, 2004: 138; Falter and Klein, 1994; Thompson, 1996: 443; Zelle, 1998: 237). We expect that dissatisfaction and its influence on PDS support has grown as eastern Germans interact with the political system, increasing the sorts of experiences that lead to dissatisfaction.

1.4. Assimilation: economic voting

Although few scholars of the PDS have explored the role of sociotropic evaluations of the economy (the exceptions are Krisch, 1996: 110; Moreau and Neu, 1994: 75), we expect both sociotropic and egocentric economic considerations will play increasingly important roles in determining support for the PDS. Initially many eastern Germans had high expectations for the economic benefits of unification only to experience a slumping economy and limited access to high paying jobs. Following Gerth (2003: 31) and Neu (2004: 132–133) we expect that eastern Germans observing economic problems in their own lives are more likely to support the PDS, just as poor economic prospects in other advanced economies are associated with support for the opposition. Thus, subjective economic evaluations should increasingly affect support for the PDS. Following other scholars (Neu, 2004: 136–137; Krisch, 1996: 110; Moreau and Neu, 1994: 75), we hypothesize sociotropic economic attitudes will follow the same pattern as egocentric economic voting; eastern Germans will be increasingly pessimistic of the national economic situation regardless of their own situation and these
evaluations should in turn play an increasingly larger role in explaining respondents’ support for the PDS.

1.5. Ideology

Although the effects of ideology on vote choice are generally regarded as limited, we believe that this variable is particularly relevant to PDS vote among eastern Germans given that many easterners share certain ideological beliefs with the party. Unlike the majority of parties, which have dropped most ideological tags from their platform, throughout the 1990s the PDS openly espoused a democratic socialism best characterized as “an eclectic mix of classic social-democratic positions with contemporary Green and feminist ideas” (Minnerup, 1994: 194; and see Kleinfeld, 2000: 105). Studies since unification have generally found strong support for Socialist values among eastern Germans, in particular an active role for the state (e.g. Finkel et al., 2001; Fuchs, 1999; Rohrschneider, 1999). Such values appear strongest among PDS supporters who often view the party as the only true representative of the Socialist tradition, especially as other leftist parties have shifted toward the middle of the ideological spectrum (e.g. Jacobs, 2004: 233; Zelle, 1998: 237; Olsen, 1999: 237). As generational replacement brings in new voters with no direct experience with the East German socialist tradition, we expect the importance of ideology as a determinant for PDS support to decline.

2. Data and methods

Evaluation of the changing nature of voter support for the PDS requires opinion surveys over a number of years with consistent survey items measuring the factors described above. Unfortunately, no survey has consistently repeated measures of all factors on a regular basis. The survey that comes the closest is the German Social Survey (ALLBUS), a survey consisting of face-to-face interviews conducted with a sample of Germans drawn using clustered, random sampling from the population of non-institutionalized adults (age 18 years or older). Here we use data from the 1991, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2002 and 2004 German Social Surveys to analyze how the determinants of support for the PDS have changed over time.5 Because measures for all of the relevant variables are not available in all of these years, we conduct two analyses: an analysis of some of the relevant factors in all 6 years and an analysis of all of the relevant factors in four years (1991, 1994, 1998, 2000). In both cases, we limit our analysis to German citizens who reside in eastern Germany at the time of the survey.

2.1. Dependent variable

Our dependent variable is a hypothetical question about who the respondent would support if national elections were held next Sunday. Respondents are coded 1 if they indicated that they would choose the PDS if the national elections were held tomorrow, 0 if they would vote for another party or abstain from the election.

While self-reported vote is normally a better indicator of support for a political party, the ALLBUS did not coincide with elections. In the 1994 and 1998 election years, the survey was fielded before the elections, meaning self-reported vote referred to the previous national election 4 years before. Of all the potential measures of support for the PDS in the 1994 ALLBUS, intended vote comes closest to the actual percentage of the vote received by the PDS. For example, although the PDS received 20% of the eastern German vote in 1994, by 1998 only 13% of eastern Germans reported that they voted for the PDS. Since using self-reported vote on an earlier election with contemporaneous social characteristics and attitudinal measures makes causal implications impossible, we utilize the question about the hypothetical election instead.6

2.2. Independent variables

We employ seven variables to capture the different types of losers of unification. Two dichotomous variables represent the unemployed and women. Unfortunately, no question asked consistently over the time period was specific enough to capture former officials in the DDR. However, we were able to single out respondents who last worked as a public servant, allowing us to create a dichotomous variable indicating former public servants. High educational levels, another characteristic indicative of the Dienstklasse, is measured using a five-category ordinal variable with the highest category indicating respondents who have an Abitur—the degree

5 The Zentralarchiv für Sozialforschung (Cologne) and the Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden und Analysen (Mannheim) conducted these surveys and these data were made available by the Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung, Universität Köln (ZA). These analyses use the ZA-Datasets 1990 [1991], 2400 [1994], 3000 [1998], 3451 [2000], 3700 [2002] and 3762 [2004]).

6 Asking respondents who they would vote for is not without problems. The question overestimates the number of people who go to the polls since more individuals state a party preference than actually vote. Second, the effect of events in the election campaign is lost when we ask vote intention before the election.
required for attending university. We use two dummy variables to capture young (18—29) and old (50+) age groups with those 30—49 serving as the omitted category. A respondent’s monthly income is represented by a 22 category measure ranging from less than 400 DM to 15,000 or more per month.8 To capture subjective feelings of loss, we utilize two measures of pocketbook voting—one asking respondents’ current economic status and another asking about their expectations in a year’s time. Both variables used a five-category scale running from very bad (low) to very good (high).

Similar measures capture respondents’ sociotropic economic evaluations. We employ two separate variables, both five-category scales running from very bad (low) to very good (high), asking respondents to evaluate Germany’s current and future economic situation in a year.

Unfortunately no single measure of respondents’ political evaluations runs consistently throughout the ALLBUS. Instead, we utilize two related questions measuring various dimensions of political satisfaction.8 The first question, fielded in 1991, 1994 and 2004 asked respondents to evaluate on a four-point scale how well they thought the political system functioned. A second question, fielded in 1991, 1998, 2000 and 2002, asked respondents to state overall how satisfied (on a four-point scale) they were with democracy in Germany. Both questions ask the respondent to reflect on the performance of the political system as a whole rather than a particular institution (e.g. Parliament), and to make “an evaluative assessment” (Kuechler, 1991: 278—279). In that sense, the questions are neither completely cognitive nor completely affective.9

We utilize three measures of ideology to capture individuals’ attitudes toward socialism. First, respondents’ left—right placement was measured by self-placement on a ten point left—right ideology scale with 10 indicating those farthest to the left. In the full analyses, we also capture specific evaluations of socialism using two other questions. First, respondents were asked to agree completely, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat or disagree completely with the statement: “I find social differences in our country by and large just.” Since agreement with this statement indicates support for class differences, this variable should be negatively associated with support for the PDS. Second, we include a four-point Likert scale item asking the respondent to react to the statement that: “Socialism is fundamentally a good idea that was only poorly implemented.” This evaluation of socialism has ambiguous status: it captures respondents’ support for a socialist system but also measures nostalgia for aspects of the political and economic system of the former GDR (see below). The correlations between the three measures were fairly low, suggesting that the three items capture different dimensions of attitudes toward socialism.10

We focus on three aspects of eastern identity in full model analyses. First, to capture how different eastern Germans feel from westerners, we include a question asking respondents to state their agreement or disagreement (on a four-point scale) with the statement “Citizens in the other part of Germany are much stranger to me than citizens of other countries.” To measure the degree to which eastern Germans see westerners as disproportionately benefiting from unification, we utilize an eight-point index composed of two four-point agree/disagree items: (1) citizens in the old German states should be willing to sacrifice more in order to improve the situation of citizens in the new German states and (2) unification created more advantages than disadvantages for the citizens in the old German states. High scores on the index indicate complete agreement with both statements.11 Finally, to capture nostalgia for the GDR regime we rely on the evaluation of socialism measure described above. While other authors have used this question to measure nostalgia (Pickel, 1998: 103—107; Zelle, 1998: 196—200), correlations reveal

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8 To avoid losing individuals who failed to answer the income question, we coded all non-responses to the mean. The largest problem with mean substitution is that standard errors of estimate for income is artificially low, overstating the significance of a variable (Little and Rubin, 1989). However, income is insignificant in all equations, mitigating this concern.

9 Unfortunately neither question appears in the 1996 ALLBUS.

10 The average of the absolute value of the correlations between the three measures in the 4 years all three measures were available is 0.23 in 1991, 0.17 in 1994, 0.19 in 1998 and 0.17 in 2000.

11 This two-item measure was reliable across an all-German sample with Cronbach’s alpha equal to 0.57 in 2000, 0.64 in 1998, 0.59 in 1994, and 0.52 in 1991. Attempts to combine all of the identity measures into a single index failed as confirmatory factor analyses and reliability tests indicated that the measures were capturing significantly different dimensions.
that it better captures a respondent’s ideology (Neller and Thaidigsmann, 2002: 428–431).  

2.3. Methods

Given that our dependent variable is dichotomous, we test our hypotheses using separate multivariate logit analyses for each year of the survey. Because the 2002 and 2004 surveys do not include the evaluation of socialism question or any questions on East German identity, we report partial models which exclude these variables in all 6 years, and full models for the years 1991, 1994, 1998 and 2000.  

3. Findings

Tables 1 and 2 present the results of logistic regression analyses on support for the PDS. In Table 1, we show partial models that include only those variables related to a respondent’s objective and subjective loser status, economic and political satisfaction and placement on the left—right ideological scale across all years (1991, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004). In Table 2, we present findings from full models across 4 years (1991, 1994, 1998, 2000) adding to the partial models in Table 1 two additional measures of ideology and two measures of eastern identity.

Results from partial models in Table 1 reveal only limited support for the losers’ hypothesis. More specifically, results showing that the better educated in 1994 and 1998 and former elites in 1994 and 2004 are more likely to support the PDS offer some evidence that the party’s center of support lies with well-educated former civil servants. In addition, older eastern Germans in 1998 and 2002 were also more likely to vote for the PDS, indicating that the PDS was able to capitalize on issues facing pensioners and others disaffected by their changing environment. However, the variables capturing other losers of unification such as unemployment, income and women were not significant, leaving us with rather ambiguous findings regarding the PDS’s stature as the party of the losers of unification.

The lack of explanatory power of the losers’ hypothesis becomes clearer in the full models in Table 2.  

Among the “loser” variables, the most important finding continues to be the greater likelihood of better educated eastern Germans supporting the PDS from 1994 to 2000. This finding, together with the insignificant results for the former elite, again leads us to question the PDS’s identity as a milieuparty or as largely supported by losers or the former Dienstklasse.

Results from Table 2 also reveal little support for the hypothesis that the PDS has benefited from the rise of an eastern identity. Among the two measures of eastern identity, only the belief that other Germans are strange is a significant factor of support, and then only in 1991. Unfortunately, the question “socialism is a good idea poorly implemented” has ambiguous status in that it represents both ideological attitudes as well as how one views the past. While we believe it better captures ideological beliefs than eastern identity, its growing significance from 1994 to 2000 may nevertheless be an indication of a form of eastern nostalgia focused specifically on certain ideological values from the past regime.

These findings do not contradict others who claim that the PDS is an eastern regional party (Ostpartei) since its base of support, even after the merger in 2005, is located primarily in the East. However, our analysis shows that other aspects of eastern identity, defined here in terms of negative feelings about western Germans and feelings of Trotzidentität, are not particular to PDS supporters. Instead, this analysis suggests that eastern identity, with the possible exception of eastern German nostalgia represented by the Socialism question, are ubiquitous in the eastern population, including among supporters of rival parties such as the SPD and CDU.

Sociotropic economic and political evaluations played a significant role in fostering PDS support early on before diminishing in later years. Looking at the full models in Table 2, easterners with current or future

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12 In addition to the above mentioned variables, we also include controls for state of residence (a set of five dummy variables with respondents in Thuringen the omitted category), union membership (coded 1 as a member of a trade union), and the non-religious (coded 1 when the respondent is not affiliated with any religious group). While these variables are included in all models, we do not discuss them in the results.

13 In the 2000 and 2004 ALLBUS measures in the analysis were asked of only one half of the sample (in 2000 the eastern German identity questions, including the evaluation of socialism question, and in 2004, the measure for democratic satisfaction). An analysis of partial models excluding these questions indicated that discarding cases where incomplete data were present altered the results. For this reason, in both years EM techniques in SPSS for imputing data were used for non-dichotomous independent variables (see Little and Rubin, 1989; Rubin, 1987).

14 With so many variables, multicollinearity affecting the significance of variables might be a concern. An examination of the bivariate correlations in every year indicate that only one correlation exceeded 0.5; in 1998 the correlation between one's own economic evaluation and that of the country as a whole equaled 0.52. Dropping one’s subjective economic evaluation in this year did change the significance of the national economic situation (p changes from 0.08, one-tailed, in the model in Table 2 to 0.04, one-tailed), but not the size and sign of the coefficient. All other variables were unaffected.
negative evaluations of the national economy in 1991–1998 and with low levels of satisfaction with democracy in 1991–1998 were much more likely to vote for the PDS. This initial result suggests that the former Communists captured significant support from individuals upset with the terms of unification and the uncertain course of economic and political developments in unified Germany. However, in 2000 sociotropic evaluations were insignificant, indicating that the PDS had effectively lost its appeal to those dissatisfied with the economic or political situation in united Germany. The lessening effect of sociotropic evaluations and satisfaction with democracy over time is best illustrated by looking at the effect of these variables on the predicted probability of supporting the PDS. While an individual set to the mean for all independent variables had a 5% probability of supporting the PDS in 1991, if they were the most dissatisfied with German democracy their probability of supporting the PDS quadrupled to 20%. In 2000, a person who was the most dissatisfied with democracy was only slightly more likely to vote for the PDS than the average person (20.1% compared to 20%). Similarly, in 1991 individuals who were two standard deviations (or 1.5 points on the four-point scale) more pessimistic about the national economy were almost three times more likely to support the PDS than the average person (20.1% compared to 20%). Similarly, in 1991 individuals who were two standard deviations (or 1.5 points on the four-point scale) more pessimistic about the national economy were almost three times more likely to support the PDS (22% vs. the 20% mean). Overall, this suggests that as the PDS broadened its appeal, the influence of both sociotropic economic evaluations and political evaluations has decreased over time.

The most consistent and powerful explanation for PDS support across time is ideology. This is evidenced foremost by the positive and significant coefficients of the left–right spectrum, which indicates that as easterners identify themselves more to the left, the greater probability of supporting the PDS.

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**Table 1**

Partial models of PDS support: losers of unification, sociotropic evaluations or ideology

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<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>-5.40**</td>
<td>1.13</td>
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<td>Currently unemployed</td>
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<td>18–29</td>
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<td>50 and over</td>
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<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.77**</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<td>Former elites</td>
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<td>0.60*</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.12</td>
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<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.50**</td>
<td>0.16</td>
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<td>Subjective. economic situation</td>
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<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.17</td>
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<td>Prospective subjective economic situation</td>
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<td>-0.13</td>
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<td>-0.36*</td>
<td>0.19</td>
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<td>Satisfied with democracy</td>
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<td>-0.89</td>
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<td>-1.65**</td>
<td>0.62</td>
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<td>Ideology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left–right ideology</td>
<td>1.10**</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.53**</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.61**</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>–2 × LL</td>
<td>234.24</td>
<td>457.41</td>
<td>407.36</td>
<td>652.17</td>
<td>534.69</td>
<td>530.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chi-squared</td>
<td>154.31**</td>
<td>146.99*</td>
<td>153.61**</td>
<td>182.16**</td>
<td>118.25**</td>
<td>99.9**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>1035</td>
<td>752</td>
<td>629</td>
<td>832</td>
<td>690</td>
<td>714</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < 0.05, one-tailed test.

**p** *p < 0.025, one-tailed test.

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15 We also examined changes over time by combining all years in a single analysis and including interaction terms between time and sociotropic economic and political evaluations (analyses available by request from author). The interaction between satisfaction with democracy and time was significant and positive when entered individually into the full and partial analysis (reducing its effect over time). While the coefficient for the interaction between sociotropic economic evaluation and time had the same effect in the partial model, it just misses achieving significance in the full model (*p = 0.055, one-tailed*).
likelihood they have of supporting the PDS over other parties and non-voters. Furthermore, as indicated above, “Socialism is a good idea poorly implemented” has positive and significant coefficients from 1994 to 2000, indicating that advocates of this idea are more likely to support the PDS. Our third measure of ideology, “Class differences are just”, did not play a role in the full models of Table 2 until 2000, when its negative and significant coefficient indicated that those believing social differences are indeed unjust are more likely to support the PDS. Unlike other explanations of PDS support, whose relative import is either negligible or waxes and wanes over time, ideological beliefs appear consistently significant through the first 14 years after unification. Thus, an otherwise average individual who was two points to the left of the mean on the ten-point scale had a 35% chance of supporting the PDS in 1991 and a 45% chance in 2000.

In sum, our analyses over time show both stability and change in the bases for PDS support between 1991 and 2004. Aside from some discrepancies in individual years, there is relative stability in the effect of three of the four factors commonly used to explain PDS support: losers, eastern identity and ideology. More specifically, the analyses show that except for the well-educated starting in 1994, the losers of unification as defined by objective standards—women, the unemployed, those with low income—or by individual economic assessments are no more likely to vote for the PDS than other eastern Germans. Similarly, except for individuals who view westerners as stranger than citizens in other countries in 1991 and the ambiguous findings of those holding more positive views of socialism in 1994–2000, the general trend is that voters with a strong eastern identity are no more likely to vote for the PDS than for other parties. Finally,
ideology is the most consistent factor in determining PDS support; those on the left or with positive evaluations of socialism are more likely to support the PDS in all years.

One important trend borne out by our analysis is the tapering effect of sociotropic evaluations over time. Interestingly, the tapering effect occurred while shifts in the feelings of easterners toward the country’s economic and political situation stagnated. While easterners viewed their country’s future economic prospects much more bleakly after 1998, indicating that more protest votes were available to the PDS, the effect of this variable became weaker. On the other hand, the mean level of individuals’ evaluations of democracy shows almost no change after 1994, signifying that easterners were not becoming more satisfied with democracy. This suggests that while voters were just as dissatisfied with their country’s economic and political situation in later years, dissatisfied voters were increasingly unlikely to prefer the PDS. One explanation for the tapering effect of sociotropic evaluations is linked to the shift in government in 1998 when a leftist coalition of SPD/Greens replaced Chancellor Kohl and the long-standing CDU/CSU government. It is possible that the insignificant effect of sociotropic evaluations after 1998 reflects neither wholesale changes in easterners’ value orientations nor a withdrawal of support from the PDS among those dissatisfied. Rather, the new coalition may have brought renewed optimism to easterners who, hoping that the coalition’s economic programs would bring a turnaround in the East, lost some of their impetus for protest and turned away from the PDS.

Taken together, these findings reveal both dynamic and stable bases of support for the PDS over time. While the PDS resembled a protest party in 1991 with its support among those dissatisfied with the economic and political developments in post-unification Germany, by 2004 the party’s base of support centered more directly on easterners with leftist ideological views.

These results indicate that in many respects PDS voters have assimilated as successfully into united Germany’s economic and political culture as supporters of other parties. The insignificance of the losers of unification and eastern identity measures, for example, indicate that PDS supporters are generally as accepting of their new environment as other easterners; both have equally strong ties to their past identity. Moreover, the diminishing support for sociotropic explanations over the same time period suggests that PDS supporters have learned to adapt to their new environment after initial concerns and hesitations. However, once ideology is considered, the assimilation hypothesis loses some ground to the backlash hypothesis. Unlike other factors, which either remain largely insignificant or fluctuate over time, ideology remains a consistent source of PDS support. Just as PDS supporters have been able to assimilate across a range of concrete issues positions, they remain uncompromisingly steadfast in their leftist ideological beliefs. Resigned in part to the inevitable changes brought by unification, PDS supporters nevertheless remain strongly defiant against the West’s free market capitalism and are perhaps still hopeful for the emergence of a viable socialist alternative.

4. Conclusion

While secondary data analysis cannot completely account for all the reasons why eastern Germans voted for the PDS, several standard explanations—losers of unification and eastern identity—are not the main determinants of PDS support. Instead, PDS voters constitute a core of ideologically oriented individuals who support the party’s reformed socialist platform. We suspect that easterners’ support for socialism originated in large part from their experiences in the former GDR. A comparison between age and views on ideology reveals that older voters were more likely to believe socialism was a good idea. This generational distinction is likely to erode the PDS’s support base as core supporters are not replaced with generational change.

It is still too early to tell whether ideological beliefs will continue to influence support for the new Linke/PDS. Recent results from the 2005 Bundestag elections indicate that the party far eclipsed the PDS’s best results in the West by securing 8.7% of the vote. While many of these supporters certainly view themselves to the left of the SPD, it remains to be seen whether ideology will drive western vote choice over time as it had for many easterners. The presence of Lafontaine and other former SPD members likely attracted some union members and others from the traditional working class who are guided by more pragmatic economic concerns.

Our analysis of the PDS also contributes to a broader understanding of electoral behavior among post-communist parties in Eastern Europe. Our findings, when put in the context of previous studies of voting for other post-communist parties, suggest two trends related to democratic consolidation. Like previous analyses of Poland, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Hungary and
Russia (Harper, 2000; Colton, 2000; Tworzecki, 2003), we find that initially negative evaluations of democracy are associated with a greater likelihood of supporting post-communist parties. Yet, we also find that the effect of political evaluations wanes over time, suggesting that democratic attitudes have decreasing relevance as mass publics in Eastern Europe countries become more accepting of democracy. On the other hand, if the causes of voting for post-communist parties were to converge with those of other political parties, we would expect not only similar shifts away from sociotropic political evaluations, but also a move towards voters evaluating the performance of parties and incumbents in power.

Thus far, the bulk of evidence supports an alternative theory of electoral behavior. First, our analysis of the PDS mirrors work from Lithuania and Poland that economic evaluations play at best a limited role in influencing electoral support for the post-communists. This trend is further supported by our own finding that the importance of sociotropic economic evaluations for the PDS declines over time. Rather, an alternative theory of post-communist party vote relies heavily on the importance of ideology. Previous analyses of post-communist parties in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Russia as well as our analyses of the PDS reveal that ideology, whether defined as abstract placement in a left—right scale, views of socialism, or concrete issue positions about the market and social equality, strongly predicts support for post-communists (Harper, 2000; Colton, 2000; Tworzecki, 2003). This finding differs significantly from standard models of electoral behavior in advanced democracies which generally disregard ideology as a powerful predictor of electoral support. In this regard, post-communist parties appear to have carved their own electoral space as the “authentic representatives of the post-communist value culture, which is still heavily socialist” (Mahr and Nagle, 1995: 398 and see also Evans and Whitefield, 1995: 1179).

The evidence on how the losers in democratic transitions affect support of post-communist parties is more limited when we examine our results in the context of other studies. Harper (2000), Colton (2000), Tworzecki (2003) and Lubecki (2004) also find only isolated support for the claim that losers of transitions, in this case older cohorts in Hungary and Bulgaria and unemployed in the Czech Republic, support post-communist parties. Results on the role of education are particularly ambiguous. While education appeared as a significant predictor for post-communist parties in Hungary in 1992—1994 (Harper, 2000; Grzymala-Busse, 2002: 222), in the Czech Republic in 1993—1996 (Grzymala-Busse, 2002) and marginally in Poland in 1993 (Powers and Cox, 1997: 626), it held no significance for post-communist parties in Russia in 1995 (Colton, 2000), Lithuania and Bulgaria in 1992 and 1994 respectively (Harper, 2000) and Poland or Slovakia in the period 1992—1996 (Grzymala-Busse, 2002). In contrast, we found education to be a significant predictor of support for the PDS from 1994 to 2000 in the full models. Our analyses of the PDS, particularly in the earlier years, thus support Grzymala-Busse (2002) who found that support for post-communist parties in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia is predicated on parties’ ability to appeal to a wider, more diverse portion of the electorate.

We believe that the similarities between our analysis of the PDS and those on other transitioning democracies support the idea that a general theory of electoral behavior among post-communist parties can be developed. Specifically, our analysis of the PDS reinforces earlier findings that socialist ideological positions remain the most consistent determinant of support for post-communist parties. We also believe that more limited support exists for the declining importance of economic and political evaluations. That these factors determine support for the PDS in East Germany—normally considered an outlier among post-communist countries—as well as in countries undergoing very different transition processes (e.g. Russia, Hungary, Lithuania, and Bulgaria) suggests that the similarities among voters’ decision making may outweigh the differing political and social contexts.

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16 In contrast, Tworzecki finds that supporters of former communist parties in Hungary and the Czech Republic are not more likely to be dissatisfied with politics.
17 Unfortunately, Harper (2000) and Tworzecki (2003) are unable to analyze the effect of sociotropic economic evaluations in Hungary, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic. Colton (2000) finds that sociotropic economic evaluations are significant predictors of support for Russia’s communist party.
18 Harper and Colton use ideologically oriented issue positions instead of the traditional left—right scale to measure the relationship between issue positions and support for the successor parties. While Tworzecki finds that self-placement on the left of a conventional left—right scale is correlated with support for the communist successor parties in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, he finds no such correlation with an index of “socialist values” (i.e. income redistribution, full employment).
19 Using aggregate analyses Tucker (2006) also finds support for the hypothesis that former communist parties in Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic benefited from downturns in the economy.
Finally, our analyses explicitly examine changing support for the PDS over time, an analysis not mirrored in studies of other post-communist parties. Previous studies (e.g. Colton, 2000; Harper, 2000; Tworzecki, 2003) cover only the first 5 years of the democratization process and thus cannot contribute to a longer-term analysis of voter attitudes during democratic transition. This omission is particularly sanguine in the case of individual evaluations of democracy, socialism and socio-tropic economic evaluations since our analysis reveals substantively important changes over time in these variables. The question is whether populations in Eastern Europe and Russia have undergone similar value shifts since 1995 within the context of a rapidly changing institutional setting and how these shifts influence voter behavior and the electoral fortunes of parties. Given greater institutional instability in some other Eastern European countries, we would expect dissatisfaction to remain longer in these countries, serving as a stable base of support for post-communist parties. However, if sympathetic new governments reduce negative economic and political evaluations or diminish the attraction of post-communist parties as the means of protest, we may find more volatility in the causes of support for post-communist parties and, similar to the PDS, the emergence of ideology as the core vote determinant. In the event that such changes have occurred, a more general theory of electoral behavior of post-communist parties including the PDS may be plausible.

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References


