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**Perception and Assessment of Left- and Right-Wing Extremism by Public Opinion. An  
Experimental Study**

Paper for the 59<sup>th</sup> WAPOR Annual Conference, May 16-18, 2006 in Montreal, Canada

## **1. Theoretical Background**

### **1.1 Political Extremism in Germany**

Political extremism, in this paper understood as propaganda and actions against democracy and human rights, is a political and sociological phenomenon in many countries (cf. e.g. Ignazi 1997; Karvonen 1997; Varon 2004). This paper focuses on left- and right-wing political extremism, leaving religious extremism and other types of extreme ideology aside. The concept of “extremism” used in this paper is based on the according criteria of the German *Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz)*, which is an intelligence service fighting extremists of all kind (Verfassungsschutz 2004). These criteria focus on action or propaganda directed against democracy. Right-wing extremists tend to focus on differences between individuals and people, value hierarchies and are prone to fascist ideologies. Left-wing extremists focus on the equality of individuals and people. They strive either for a kind of

communist regime or anarchy (Noelle-Neumann 1996). In both cases, the orientation against democracy discriminates manifestations of left- and right-wing extremists from their moderate, legal, and accepted correspondences.

In Germany, extremism is discussed with high intensity. This is because of the historical background of the country that not only influenced many journalists and their work (Ehmig 2000), but exerted also direct effects on the people and their opinions. The first and most important historical influence on the evaluation of right-wing extremism by public opinion can be attributed to the German history of National Socialism between 1933 and 1945. The aggressive regime of the Nazis, the Holocaust (and other crimes against humanity), and the harm the Second World War did to many countries (including Germany itself), contributed to the bad reputation of right wing politics. In the years after World War II Germany was governed by the allies France, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States of America. The Western Allies combined their sectors and formed the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, while the Soviet sector was transformed into a communist state (German Democratic Republic, GDR) in the same year. That way, another extreme ideology achieved power in at least one part of Germany, this time the extreme left under the aegis of the Soviet Union. Communism in eastern Germany influenced the way western Germany dealt with left wing extremists, especially the terrorists of “The Red Army Faction and the Politics of Murder” (Varon 2004: 196). Contentions between the left and the right in the aftermath of the 1968 campus-unrests (Noelle-Neumann 1984; Noelle-Neumann/Köcher 2002: 704 ff), the Cold War, and a revival of right-wing extremism and racist violence in the 1990s (Brosius/Esser 1996) exerted a strongly influenced the picture of political extremism among Germans.

## **1.2 Perception and Evaluation of Political Extremism by Public Opinion**

Since 1968 there is growing evidence that in Germany public opinion tends to assess right-wing positions as less acceptable than left-wing positions (Noelle-Neumann 1996). One possible reason for this phenomenon may be the perception that the crimes and atrocities of the Nazis between 1933 and 1945 were the worst crimes in the history of mankind. Another reason may be the dominance of moderate leftist journalists in the German media in the 1970s and 1980s (Köcher 1985).<sup>1</sup>

The unequal evaluation of left- and right-wing extremism has not only consequences for survey researchers, which have to keep spirals of silence (Noelle-Neumann 1984) against the political right in mind, e.g. when they are striving to improve election forecasts. The phenomenon also constricts content-analyses of extremists' propaganda, e.g. during a study of extremists' use of the internet, coders complained that it was difficult to measure left and right content equally unbiased (Roessing 2005).

## **2. Hypotheses**

The experimental study discussed in this paper has been designed to yield basic insights into the perception of left- and right-wing extremists' propaganda. Historical considerations as well comparisons with other countries than Germany were intentionally left aside. The first assumption of the study is that in Germany right-wing extremism is generally seen as more threatening and dangerous than left wing extremism. Our actual hypotheses about the evaluation of extremists' propaganda by public opinion are based on two additional assumptions. The first assumption is that arguments and information are not only judged by their manifest content, but also by the alleged communicator (Hovland/Janis/Kelley 1953). The second assumption is that people usually have an eye on the opinions of others when evaluating arguments and information

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<sup>1</sup> There are some indicators that public opinion in formerly communist countries in eastern Europe tends to judge left-wing extremism as worse than right wing extremism (Szayna 1997).

of public interest. The climate of opinion, i.e. the perception of what others think about subjects of public discussion, is a very important element of public opinion. (Noelle-Neumann 1984).

From the two assumptions, we derive two hypotheses on the relationship of public opinion and political extremism:

1. Subjects tend to perceive right-wing propaganda to be more threatening than left-wing propaganda of the same kind.
2. Subjects tend to gauge others to be more worried about right-wing than about equally extreme left-wing extremism.

Extremists of different political orientation usually rely on different types of action and propaganda<sup>2</sup>. Therefore we assume that the threatening effect of left- and right-wing propaganda depends at least partly on the way it is presented to the public. The according hypothesis reads as follows.

3. The evaluation of right- and left-wing propanganda is moderated by the form in which the propaganda is presented to the experimental subjects.

### **3. Method**

A three-group-experimental design was used to test the hypotheses. Members of all three experimental groups were given a booklet with four representations of extremism embedded in a questionnaire. After each item participants were asked to rate on a seven-step Likert scale<sup>3</sup>, how seriously they take the depicted material or how threatened they feel by the described situation.

1. Participants were first confronted with a leaflet containing instructions for the production of incendiary devices (“Molotov-Cocktails”) and an implicit instigation to violence.

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<sup>2</sup> This fact is applicable to classic forms of extremist propaganda. The differences are also existent, but less distinct in extremists' use of the internet, cf. Roessing 2005a; 2005b.

<sup>3</sup> Extremes of the scale were labelled 1 = not serious at all / not at all threatening, 7 = extremely serious / threatening.

2. The second item was a hardcopy (screenshot) of an alleged extremists' internet discussion forum. It showed a message calling demonstrators to prepare for violence and rioting.
3. The third item was a description of a violent demonstration. The Participants were asked to imagine themselves observing the severe rioting and clashes between police and demonstrators.
4. The fourth item was a newspaper article, reporting of willful damage to property including a graffiti reading "Democracy has failed! Overthrow the system and those who support it!"<sup>4</sup>

One experimental group was told that the originators respectively protagonists of the four items were rightists. To support the impression of a right-wing origin suitable type faces and a swastika-symbol were used. The second experimental group was told that the material came from leftists. The design of the booklet and the communist star-symbol were used to emphasize the impression of left wing origin of the stimulus material. The control group was given no information about the originators of the stimulus material, protagonists of the rioting scene (3) and the newspaper article (4) were declared to be "extremists" without any indication of their political orientation.

The experiment was conducted with students at the University of Mainz in July 2005<sup>5</sup>. The total number of subjects was n=90; matching techniques were employed to ensure comparability of the experimental groups and the control group (n=30 each). Matching criteria were sex and subjects of study.

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<sup>4</sup> German original: „Die Demokratie hat versagt! Stürzt das System und seine Machtmarionetten!“

<sup>5</sup> The authors thank the students who were involved in the implementation of the experiment and those who participated as subjects and answered the questionnaire.

#### 4. Results

The experimental data partly support our hypotheses.<sup>6</sup> In a first step we determined the overall perceived threatening for each subject, which was calculated as mean over the perceived threatening for the four different presentation forms. A t-test reveals that subjects took the alleged right-wing material more serious than the alleged left-wing material. ( $p=.017^7$ ).

Next we investigated the different presentation forms separately. The performed t-tests substantiated the aforementioned findings. Subjects took the screenshot of the alleged right-wing discussion forum more seriously than the alleged left-wing forum ( $p=.003$ ). Also the right-wing labeled description of a violent demonstration was evaluated more threatening than its left-wing labeled counterpart ( $p=.031$ ). A similar – yet not statistically significant – result was found for the leaflet. For the newspaper article we found an almost identical perception in the different groups (Table 1).

**Table 1: Perceived seriousness for different presentation forms**

	perceived seriousness / threat*		t	p
	right-wing material	left-wing material		
<b>discussion forum</b>	4.2	2.9	2.93	.003
<b>demonstration</b>	4.8	3.9	1.91	.031
<b>leaflet</b>	3.9	3.3	1.23	n.s.
<b>newspaper article</b>	3.4	3.5	-0.25	n.s.

\*measured on a seven-point Likert scale with the extremes 1 = not serious at all / not at all threatening, 7 = extremely serious / threatening; values are group means  
p values one tailed with df=58

<sup>6</sup> Cross-checks indicate that the matching process of the experimental groups was successful: There were no significant differences between the three groups concerning age and political orientation.

<sup>7</sup>  $t=2.17$ , p value one tailed with df=58

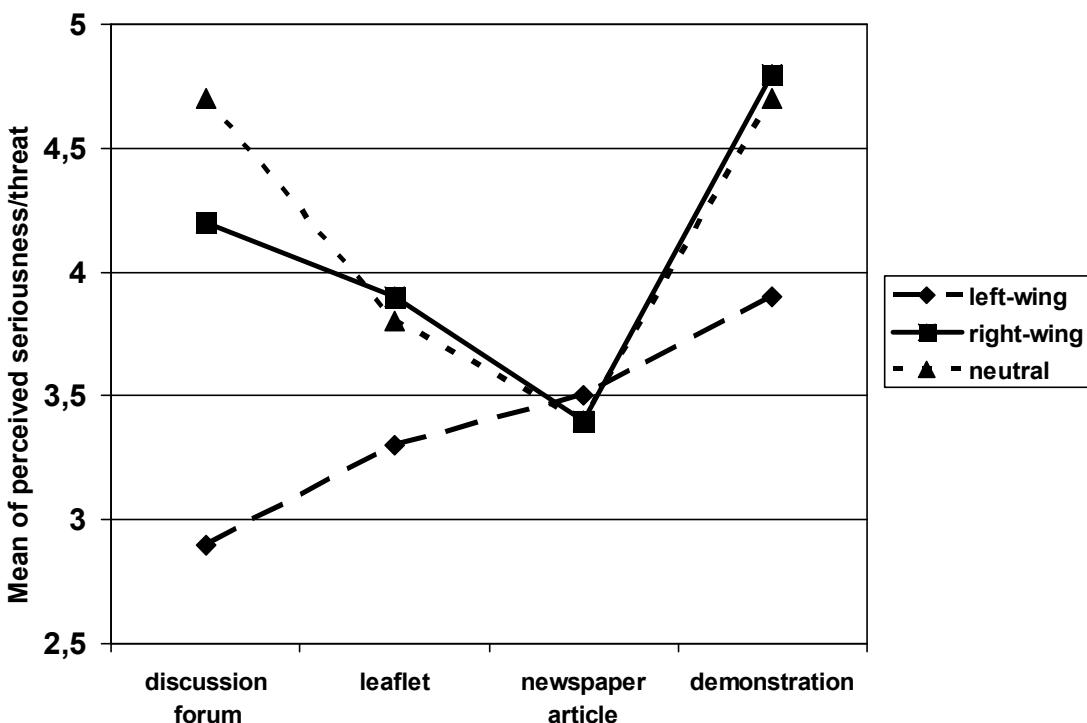
It is noteworthy and puzzling that the means of the control group are unexpectedly high and similar to those of the right-wing experimental condition. For the screenshot of the discussion forum the neutral version yielded the highest means ( $\bar{x} = 4.7$ ), even above the right-wing material. A possible reason for this finding may be the uncertainty about the threat, i.e. the non-attributable origin of the political propaganda. This uncertainty is perceived as a lack of control, which supports the evaluation as serious and threatening (Jungermann/Slovic 1993).

There were neither interpretable, nor significant differences between the groups concerning the questions of how serious other people would take the presented material. We perceive further discussion of the relationship between what people think, others think and their own opinions and convictions (e.g. Salmon/Kline 1985; Scheufele/Eveland 2001) as a promising area for future work.

An analysis of variance was used to test the third hypothesis and to answer the questions following from the first results: Does the communication medium or the type of extreme action influence the extent to which extremism is regarded to be dangerous? The analysis is complicated and must be considered with special caution, because the way the extremist content was presented to the participants has not been tested as independent experimental conditions. Every participant in each of the three experimental groups received all four types of extreme political representation. To analyse the effects of presentation form, the statistical data record was transformed such that the data for the leaflet, the screenshot, the description of rioting, and the newspaper article on vandalism represented independent cases. The description of the demonstration was regarded to be most threatening ( $\bar{x} = 4.4$ ), followed by the discussion forum ( $\bar{x} = 3.9$ ) and the leaflet with the firebomb-instructions ( $\bar{x} = 3.7$ ). The newspaper article was judged to be the most harmless of the four representations of the experiment ( $\bar{x} = 3.4$ ). The analysis revealed significant ( $p=.002$ ) differences between the four groups.

As a next step we investigated the relationship between the presentation form and the political orientation of extremist content. Figure 1 shows the (noteworthy, yet not significant,  $p=.120$ ) interaction between the political orientation of the material and the way of presentation.

**Figure 1: Interaction between experimental variation and way of presentation.**



The strongest effects of the way extremists' actions were presented to the participants of the experiment can be found for the discussion forum and the description of the demonstration. In both cases the left-wing version was explicitly perceived to be less serious or threatening than the right wing version. Smaller effects of the same kind were found for the leaflet explaining how to make incendiary devices. The newspaper article on vandalism is evaluated independently of the political orientation of the offenders. A possible explanation for this finding may be that different forms of action are usually associated with left- and right-wing extremism, respectively. Damage to property and rioting is presumably regarded to be typical for left-wing activists while right-

wing extremists seem to be more prone to arson (e.g. burning down homes of immigrants, c.f. Esser/Brosius 1996) and (illegal) internet propaganda (Verfassungsschutz 2004).

## 5. Discussion

The first hypothesis, assuming that right-wing extremism is regarded to be more serious and threatening than left wing extremism, was partly corroborated by the experiments. The evaluation of right-wing material is very similar to the evaluation of the non-labeled, neutral material. People seem to regard extremists' activities as a serious problem or a threat – unless it is left-wing extremism. The results indicate that the perception of political extremism depends not only on the political orientation of the alleged communicator but also on the kind of extremist action, respectively the way of representation used in the experiment. It may be the obtrusiveness of the imagination to eyewitness rioting and the lesser obtrusiveness of reading a newspaper article that contribute to the different effects of different stimuli. Recent discussions about the dangers of extremists' use of the internet may have contributed for the relatively strong effects that were found for the discussion-forum. There were also interactions between the way of representation of extremists' propaganda or action and the political orientation of the alleged communicator. This may be because different forms of action are usually associated with left- and right-wing extremism, respectively.

It is obvious from the results of this study that further research on this issue is necessary. Future work should include:

- Multi-factorial experiments varying different media of communication as independent factors besides the political orientation of the communicator.
- Additional survey research on the image of left- and right wing extremism, political parties and the climate of opinion.

- International and intercultural studies investigating differences in the reception of political extremism in different countries. Especially a comparison of western and formerly communist governed eastern Europe would be interesting.

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