

## Actual and Popularly Attributed Placement of Political Attitudes on the Left-Right Scale: Results from a Representative Survey of Turkey

### Siyasal Tutumların Sol-Sağ Cetvelinde Gerçek ve Zannedilen Yerleşimleri: Türkiye'ye Dair Temsili Bulgular

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#### Abstract

Individuals' self-placement on the left-right scale continues to be a staple of voting studies, but the semantic content of this scale is rarely explored. This study aims to examine the discrepancy between the actual and perceived meanings of the political left-right divide among ordinary people, based on original data from a representative sample of Turkey. Are economic issues as pertinent to subjectively held left-right placements as people think? In order to empirically address this question, we develop measures for both parts of the question, i.e. how people endorsing certain economic positions place themselves on the left-right scale, as well as what left-right placement they attribute to a hypothetical person endorsing the same positions. We ask similar questions about non-economic issue positions too, all together comparing six issues. The results show that while the semantic content of the left-right scale in contemporary Turkey is mostly about secularism—a non-economic issue—and is popularly understood as such, it is more about environmentalism, and less about economic issues, than what people think. Endorsement of gender equality and freedom of thought also prove to be substantial correlates of a leftward self-placement and they are popularly recognized as such.

#### Keywords

Left-Right Ideology, Political Attitudes, Turkey, Voting Behavior, Ideology

#### Öz

Bireylerin sol-sağ cetveline kendilerini nasıl yerleştirdikleri (sol-sağ özdeğerlendirmeleri) özellikle seçmen davranışına ilişkin çalışmalarda sıklıkla gündeme gelmekte, fakat bu cetvelin anlam içeriği mevcut literatürde sorgulanmadan kalmaktadır. Bu çalışma, Türkiye'yi temsil niteliği taşıyan bir orijinal anketin verilerine dayanarak, sıradan insanlar için sol-sağ ayrımının gerçek ve atfedilen anlamları arasındaki farkı incelemektedir. Örneğin, ekonomik meseleler sübjektif sol-sağ özdeğerlendirmeleri için insanların zannettiği kadar önemli mi? Bu soruyu ampirik olarak yanıtlamak için, sorunun her iki bileşeniyle ilgili ölçüler geliştirilerek, hem belirli ekonomik pozisyonları destekleyen insanların kendilerini sol-sağ cetvelinde nereye yerleştirdikleri, hem de bu pozisyonları desteklediği bildirilen hipotetik bireyi aynı cetvelde nereye yerleştirdiklerine dair veriler elde edildi. Ekonomi dışı alanları da kapsayacak şekilde altı politika meselesine dair sorular soruldu. Özdeğerlendirmelere ilişkin bulguların gösterdiği üzere Türkiye'de sol-sağ cetveli daha çok ekonomi dışı bir mesele olan sekülerizm ile ilgili olup halk arasında da böyle anlaşılmaktadır; bununla birlikte sol-sağ cetveli çevrecilikle zannedilenden daha çok ve ekonomik meselelerle zannedilenden daha az ilgilidir. Ayrıca cinsiyet eşitliği ve düşünce özgürlüğü de cetvelin solunda yerleşim ile yakından ilintili olup bu konuda farkındalık da mevcuttur.

#### Anahtar Kelimeler

Sol-Sağ İdeolojiler, Siyasal Tutumlar, Türkiye, Oy Davranışı, İdeoloji

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## Introduction

Survey respondents' self-placements on the left-right spectrum, usually measured as a 0-10 or 1-10 scale, is often used in empirical studies of voting behavior and attitudes (Aytaç, 2022; Çarkoğlu & Kalaycıoğlu, 2021; Kalaycıoğlu, 2018). In several studies, the correlates of left-right self-positioning have been examined in relation to class position, ethnic and religious identity, and policy-related attitudes and preferences (Arıkan & Şekercioğlu, 2014; Çarkoğlu, 2007; Çarkoğlu & Kalaycıoğlu, 2009; Esmer, 2002; Özbudun, 2013; Yağcı vd., 2020). Examining the World Values Survey data for the 1990-2018 period, Yağcı (2022) uncovered that in Turkey the distribution of left-right self-placement is structured mostly by attitudes towards secularism and that individuals' economic policy-related attitudes are associated with their left-right self-placements in a much weaker and more ambiguous fashion. Since in elite (media, academia, etc.) political discourse the left-right divide is often evoked to refer to economic ideology, this finding may to some extent be considered as upsetting certain theoretical priors—although a primarily non-economic left-right divide is far from being unique to the case of Turkey. In any case, what we do not know is whether this observation is in any way surprising from the vantage point of ordinary people who are the subjects of the left-right research. In other words, how do survey respondents themselves understand the semantic content of the left-right divide? For example, whom would they place more to the left of the political spectrum—a person advocating secular values, or a person advocating income redistribution? Do such attributed placements mismatch with the self-placement of those respondents who are espousing the said secular or redistributive positions themselves?

This article addresses these questions based on original data from a face-to-face representative survey of Turkey's urban population. We examine the difference between the actually observed and respondent-attributed semantic content of the left-right divide in regard to six issues—secularism, freedom of thought, gender equality, environmentalism, public property advocacy and income redistribution. To this end, the survey respondents were first asked to place on the left-right scale a hypothetical person espousing each one of these issue positions. Afterwards, the respondents' own attitudes on these issues, as well as their left-right self-placements were recorded. The results reveal two findings. Firstly, we confirm that the respondents' own left-right self-placements correlate most strongly with their endorsement of secular values, less strongly with post-material values such as gender equality and environmentalism, and only weakly with their positions on economic issues like redistribution and public property. Secondly, we find that the respondents successfully recognize the primacy of secularism on the left-right divide in Turkey. Among the six hypothetical people each representing an issue position, the respondents attribute the most leftward position to a hypothetical person who advocates secularism. However, respondents still overestimate how economic issues around income redistribution and especially public/private property relate to the left-right scale. In addition, while the respondents' environmentalism is actually strongly associated with a left-wing self-placement, respondents find it relatively hard to attribute a left-right placement to a hypothetical environmentalist person.

To our knowledge, the intersubjective semantic content of the left-right divide in Turkey has not been subject to empirical examination of this sort before. We do have

studies investigating how the voters place political *parties* on the left-right spectrum. To provide a comparison with these, we asked the respondents to place political parties on the left-right scale as well. We confirm earlier findings regarding survey respondents' placement of political parties and show that these align quite well with the self-placement of those respondents who support these parties—better than is the case for the issue positions described above. All in all, our findings suggest that survey respondents find it easier to successfully place concrete political organizations like parties on the left-right spectrum than doing the same for abstract issue positions. This is in line with what Zechmeister (2006: 153) observes for the literature in general: “researchers examining advanced Western democracies have frequently found that citizens of these countries often do not strongly link ideological labels to policy stances, but rather to other factors such as politically relevant parties and groups, *if anything* (e.g., Converse, 1964; Converse & Pierce, 1986; Inglehart & Klingemann, 1976; Kinder, 1983; Klingemann, 1979; but see Huber, 1989 and Knutsen, 1997).” Probably, people care more about how to choose between political parties than about linking these parties to conceptual divides like the left-right division, and they only indirectly attribute particular issue positions to each side of such a divide. Fully investigating these questions is beyond the scope of this article. Herein we are able to show that the degree of correspondence between the actual and respondent-attributed left-right positions seems greater for political parties than for issue positions. Regarding the latter, while survey respondents do have a recognition of secularism as the primary driver of the left-right divide in Turkey, they still overestimate the economic content of that divide. In fact, while economic issues may be important to political competition in Turkey, they do not map onto the left-right divide well.

### Theoretical Issues and the Existing Literature

The discourse of a political left versus right is pervasive, yet ambiguous. In the twentieth century this dichotomy gained widespread usage with reference to an economic debate over the protection of private property and redistribution, and as Stimson et al. (2012: 314) remind us, the “‘left’ and ‘right’ have their origin in disputes between monarchists and republicans. These terms characterized essential differences between political camps in French politics long before the debate over socialism and capitalism, long before the organization of labor, and long before the welfare state.” In other words, the semantic and material correlates of “left” and “right” have been subject to realignments from an early point onwards, and it should not be surprising that they come to mean different things in various temporal and geographical contexts. As Yagci et al. (2020: 3-4) note,

*There is ample evidence that mass publics indeed find meaning in the labels of left and right, however, this meaning is neither universal nor always economic (Caprara & Vecchione, 2018; Franklin et al., 2009; Freire, 2015; Zechmeister, 2006) ... Whether the fundamental political cleavage in a given society will revolve around economic issues and whether it aligns with a policy contestation along the linear left-right axis is an open empirical question, as it may depend on the party landscape (Meyer & Wagner, 2020), history of democratization (Huber & Inglehart, 1995), and religious legacy (Davis & Robinson, 2006).*

Of course, it is not necessarily the case that there should be *one* distinguishably fundamental political cleavage dominating a society's politics (Benoit & Laver, 2012). Furthermore, there is some asymmetry to the coherence and intelligibility of the labels

of left and right. The set of referents are more clearly specified at the left end of the dimension than at the right end (Mair, 2007) and in this sense, one can talk of one left versus multiple rights (Cochrane, 2010, 2012). Still, mass politics arguably has a built-in tendency— conditional on the electoral system in place—to reduce issues to as few dimensions as possible by sorting political actors into camps of viable size (Stimson et al., 2012), and the left-right divide may serve as a sponge-like super-issue that absorbs and represents “whatever major conflicts are present in the political system” (Inglehart 1990: 273). Consequently, a unidimensional differentiation across a symmetrically conceived left-right scale continues to be the subject of much scholarly research. In a wide literature, the left-right self-placement of ordinary people, measured in surveys by asking the respondents to place themselves on an interval scale with higher values typically signifying a more rightward position, are examined in relation to the respondents’ class position and values (as correlates of the self-placement) or vote choice (typically as a dependent variable) (see Dalton, 2009; Mair, 2007 for reviews).

The subjective meaning of such a left-right scale, though, is often assumed, rather than examined. Among the rare exceptions, in a study that compares the meanings attached to these labels in Mexico and Argentina, Zechmeister (2006) finds that the respondents associate left and right with somehow incommensurate political objects. While the respondents find it easier to define the term “left” in ways that reference policies, the term “right” is most often used to refer simply to political parties and actors. Studying Germany, Bauer et al. (2017) focus on the interpersonal comparability of the left-right scale across individuals and find that respondents associate these labels with different meanings depending on their own self-placement on the left-right scale, on their education level and on their cultural background (being from the formerly socialist East Germany or the West). That both of these studies use time-consuming, labor-intensive techniques may explain why they are rare. While Bauer et al. use open-ended questions to probe what people associate with the labels of left and right, Zechmeister uses a “Q-method” where respondents are presented with cards containing items from a set of 62 possible meanings of the labels. Consequently the latter study is limited to a small sample of university students (109 students in Mexico City and 117 students in Buenos Aires).

There is more research on how voters infer the left-right placement of political parties, often in comparison with party placements in expert surveys or according to widely accepted databases such as the Comparative Manifesto Project. Studies highlight a striking degree of similarity between survey respondents’ party placements and experts’ placements (Adams et al, 2015; Bakker et al, 2012; Dalton et al, 2011), although these do not necessarily match well with party positions coded on the basis of party manifestoes (see Laver, 2014). One interesting finding is about a “U-shaped function” whereby people who are closer to the extreme ends of the left-right scale perceive more distance between parties on the same scale than moderates do. This may be because people would like to minimize the imagined distance between themselves and their preferred party due to motivations for cognitive balance, or because moderates are likely to be less knowledgeable about politics than extremists (Granberg and Brown, 1992).

The literature reviewed so far relates mostly to Western countries, where the applicability of an economic left-right divide has been taken as a default starting point

for theoretical discussions. However, literature on the Middle East may perhaps provide another relevant context for the case of Turkey. Commenting on four countries of the region, Lust and Waldner (2017) argue that, like in many other late democratizers, the main political cleavage lines do not rest on a traditional (presumably economic) left-right divide. In this regard, Benoit and Laver's (2006) study of the relationship between experts' judgments of parties' placements on a left-right scale and their policy positions, is striking. In a sample of 44 mostly OECD countries, Turkey is one of two Middle Eastern cases (the other being Israel), and one of only two countries (the other being Japan) where parties' economy-related policy positions have, according to country experts, virtually no relationship to the left-right cleavage, which appears to be highly correlated with policy positions on cultural issues relating to homosexuality, abortion, and euthanasia (religion per se is not an option in the study). In a similar vein, Aydoğan (2021) examines expert judgments of party positions across the Middle East. While political reforms (relating to democratization) appear to be the most important dimension of party competition for most countries, they find that for Turkey religion/secularism provides the most important dimension. The religion/secular dimension also proves to be highly correlated with parties' left-right placements across the region, but so does the economic policy dimension. Whether these expert-coded features of party competition are echoed in voters' attitudes is a different question. Comparing support for Islamist and secular left parties, Wegner and Cavatorta (2019) find that there are virtually no differences in economic attitudes between respondents voting for these parties, and the ideological congruence between voters and parties is limited to the Islamist-Secular core divide. Çarkoğlu et al (2019) shed more light on this question by differentiating between less and more settled cleavage structures, presumably owing to the institutional history of each country. In Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, with less settled cleavage structures, there is little congruence between respondents' propensity to vote for parties and their levels of agreement with the parties' policy positions, whereas in the more institutionalized democracies of Israel and Turkey voters exhibit a higher likelihood to vote for a party as the distance between the voter and the party in the policy space gets smaller.

Note that neither Wegner and Cavatorta (2019) nor Çarkoğlu et al (2019) examine voters' left-right placements, but there is considerable research on this question as it relates to Turkey. These show that left-right self-placement has no clear class basis but is strongly connected with the individual's religious and ethnic identity (Çarkoğlu, 2007), that it is a strong predictor of voting behavior even when confounders like religiosity are controlled (Aytaç, 2022; Çarkoğlu & Kalaycıoğlu, 2021; Kalaycıoğlu, 2018; Yagci and Oyvat, 2020), and that it has an ambiguous relationship with economic policy preferences that defy a simple linear story (Yagci vd., 2020). There is strong evidence that secularism versus religious conservatism cleavage is a powerful driver of the left-right self-placements (Çarkoğlu & Kalaycıoğlu, 2009). In fact, Yağcı's (2022) findings from the World Values Survey 1990-2018 suggest that the left-right self-placement correlates most strongly with the respondents' endorsement of secularism, less strongly with post-material values such as freedom of expression, and only weakly with their economic attitudes.

All in all, it appears that the left-right divide is important in Turkey, but it is not primarily an economic divide. This is somewhat in contradiction with an economic understanding

of these terms found in some scholarly literature (see for example Esmer, 2002, p. 99-103 and its critique, Ergüder, 2013, p. 53-54). How the ordinary people understand the meaning of these labels, though, has not been the subject of much empirical research—none of the works cited above in relation to Turkey examined this question. In other words, would survey participants themselves recognize left-right as being mostly about secularism? This, i.e. the intersubjective semantic content of the left-right divide, is what we aim to examine in this study.

The question widely put has multiple pertinent aspects such as symmetry, dimensionality, and salience, and one could imagine several research methods through which it could be attacked. Many such methods, starting with open-ended questions directed to survey participants, would be rather non-standard and labor-intensive, and probably most applicable to small samples, as explained above. In this study we adopt a simple approach. We ask the respondents in a representative survey of Turkey how they would rate on a left-right scale, for example, someone who advocates secularism rather than the application of religious rules. Similar questions are asked about someone who advocates income redistribution, and the like, allowing for inter-issue comparability in regard to attributed left-right positions. Furthermore, we also ask the respondents how much they endorse secularism, for example, and how they place *themselves* on the left-right scale. We can therefore compare the respondent-attributed placement of a hypothetical secular person with the average left-right self-placement of actual secularly-oriented survey participants themselves, to explore relative mismatches across issues. Three hypotheses guide the examination:

H1: Left-right self-placements will correlate less with economic attitudes and more with cultural attitudes like secularism.

H2: Supporters of secularism will be self-placing themselves to the left of those who support redistribution or public property ownership, who will on average stay closer to the center of the left-right spectrum.

H3: Respondent-attributed placements will accurately reproduce the relative self-placements of actual issue supporters (e.g. putting a hypothetical secular person to the left of a hypothetical person who supports redistribution or public property ownership).

H1 and H2 find their justification in previous findings on the salience of secularism and other cultural issues to the left-right divide in Turkey, in terms of either expert opinion (Benoit and Laver, 2006) or self-placement (Çarkoğlu, 2007; Yağcı, 2022). H3, due to the lack of related literature, stands as an exploratory working hypothesis, and there are reasons to be skeptical about whether it may hold true. On the one hand, people must have some understanding of the commonly used political labels of the left and right. On the other hand, as Zechmeister (2006) argues, people may find it difficult to connect these labels with abstract concepts (compared to, for example, connecting them with concrete parties and leaders). In this sense, respondents' placement of various issue positions on the left-right scale may involve a random component, which would generate mismatches with actual self-placements.



## Methods and Data

We present the results of an original survey. A face-to-face survey was administered to a sample representative of the adult population in Turkey's urban areas, during 19 August-20 September 2021, in collaboration with Frekans Research. For sample design, the Turkish Statistical Institute's (TÜİK) Address-Based Population Registration (Adrese Dayalı Nüfus Kayıt) system 2020 data was used to determine the urban population for Turkey's 26 NUTS-2 regions, and the number of surveys to be administered in each region was determined proportionately to population. A province from each region was selected with probability of selection proportionate to population share in region. For each of these provinces, residential addresses for blocks of 20 residences were obtained from TÜİK and were visited by survey administrators employed by Frekans. In each address, an individual to be surveyed was selected based on a Kish table of alphabetically ordered first names of people living at the residence. Repeated visits were made to each address until the individual was present and willing, or until 3 visits were done. Most surveys were done by 13 September and the operation was complete by 20 September 2021. Ultimately, out of 4,349 addresses contacted, 1,982 surveys (951 males and 1,031 females) were completed with a 47% response rate. The median respondent was a 38 year-old high-school graduate, who reported to have a household income of 4,000-5,000 Turkish liras.

Table 1 below displays the descriptive characteristics of the survey sample. The first column displays how many people actually answered the relevant question, and the second column displays the share of the listed demographic group among those who answered. The third column displays the average left-right self-placement of each demographic group on the left-right scale where 0 is the left-most and 10 is the right-most position. F-test results show that, in regard to their left-right self-placement, most of these groups differ from the rest of the sample in a statistically significant manner. For example, Kurds place significantly to the left, and Sunni Muslims place significantly to the right, compared to other people. Younger people are closer to the left and older people are closer to the right. Higher education is associated with more left self-placement. These findings are in line with what we know about Turkish political attitudes from existing literature (Çarkoğlu, 2007; Yağcı, 2022).

Supporters of each party too form statistically distinct groups, apart from IYI Party supporters, who have an average self-placement similar to the sample mean. We should note here that party support is measured by a question that asks which party the respondent "feels closest to" at the time of the survey. The survey also featured questions probing past or future vote preferences. All these different measures of party choice give similar results regarding the issues of concern here, and the "feeling" question is the one that garners the highest response rate, allowing us greater statistical power for our analyses, so we rely on it as a measure of the party support.

Table 1  
*Sample Characteristics*

	Sample share		Left-right (0-10) self-placement	
	N (answers)	Ratio	Mean	F-Test
Total sample	1982	N/A	5.37	N/A
Male	1982	0.48	5.39	0.812
Kurd (including Zaza)	1942	0.19	4.13	0.000
Sunni	1820	0.94	5.73	0.000
Age, 18-32	1972	0.35	5.06	0.002
Age, 33-48	1972	0.38	5.47	0.338
Age, 49+	1972	0.27	5.66	0.024
Less than high school	1971	0.45	6.18	0.000
High school graduate	1971	0.35	5.05	0.001
University graduate	1971	0.2	4.27	0.000
AKP supporter	1777	0.35	7.75	0.000
CHP supporter	1777	0.27	2.82	0.000
HDP supporter	1777	0.08	2.06	0.000
IYI supporter	1777	0.07	5.37	0.925
MHP supporter	1777	0.04	7.56	0.000

In relation to our subject topic, the survey respondents were first asked to place themselves on the left-right (0-10) scale and then to similarly place on the same scale six anonymous, hypothetical individuals, each defined by one issue position. These include a person who advocates the preservation of the natural environment, a person who advocates freedom of thought, a person who advocates gender equality, a person who advocates secularism rather than religious rules, a person who is against privatizations in the economy, i.e. advocating public property ownership, and a person who advocates reducing income inequality. Table 2 below lists the mean left-right placement attributed to each hypothetical person by the survey respondents. This is what we call *respondent-attributed placements* or, in short, *attributed placements*.

Table 2  
*Left-Right Position of Hypothetical Individuals as Attributed by the Respondents*

Issue endorsed by hypothetical person	Observations	Mean left-right (out of 0-10)	Std. Dev.
Environmentalism	1,734	3.97	2.89
Freedom of thought	1,728	3.5	2.82
Gender equality	1,696	3.52	2.7
Secularism	1,734	3.15	2.6
Public property	1,693	3.38	2.63
Redistribution	1,699	3.54	2.74

Lastly, the respondents were asked to report how much they themselves agree with the advocated position for each of these six issues, on a Likert scale ranging from 1 “absolutely disagree” to 5 “absolutely agree.” Table 3 below lists the mean scores. It seems that the said issue positions, when stated in abstract, prove to be popular and the average respondent



supports all of them moderately. This is despite the fact that each of these issue positions was worded in the survey questionnaire in a way that contrasts it with a contrary position or associates it with some cost to avoid confirmation bias from fully dictating the responses. (The exact wording of the questions can be found in the Appendix).

Table 3  
*Respondent Endorsement of Issue Positions*

Issue	Observations	Mean endorsement (out of 1-5)	Std. Dev.	Correlation with left-right
Environmentalism	1899	3.93	1.14	-0.334***
Freedom of thought	1903	4.16	0.97	-0.292***
Gender equality	1893	4.06	1.03	-0.334***
Secularism	1850	3.89	1.12	-0.427***
Public property	1842	3.94	1.08	-0.246***
Redistribution	1870	4.02	1.08	-0.130***

The table also reports the correlation between the respondent's position on these issues and her left-right self-placement. The correlations suggest that the left-right self-placements are most strongly associated with the respondent's position on secularism and post-material issues like gender equality and environmentalism, and *least* with economic issues around property relations and redistribution. This already supports H1.

In short, the survey questions measure the left-right self-placements of the respondents, the left-right placements attributed by the respondents to different issue positions, and the respondents' own positions on the same issues. Between each set of questions, the survey featured questions unrelated to the topic, so as to prevent the respondents from self-consciously calibrating their answers for greater consistency—a tendency that could be a product of the social desirability bias. Together these measures enable us to compare the attributed and actual left-right placement of people holding certain issue positions. We will undertake a similar analysis of attributed and actual placement of supporters of different political parties too, since the respondents were also asked to place each of the major parties in the Turkish Parliament on the left-right scale, as well as disclose their own party preference. The aim is to shed some new light on the actual and attributed contents of the left-right scale in contemporary Turkey, and on any mismatches in between.

### Analysis

We will start by comparing the attributed and actual left-right placements of people supporting each major party to provide a validity check for our attributed left-right placement exercise. Previous studies have established that Turkish voters have a good understanding of where each party lies on a left-right scale. Ecevit and Celep (2018: 208) find, for example, that compared to people who are members of party organizations, “the voters’ estimations are more reasonable ... and more accurate, based on experts’ evaluations, in positioning other parties.” In line with this conclusion, the findings from our sample demonstrate that the left-right positions attributed to each party by the respondents are quite close to the actual average left-right self-placement of the party’s

supporters. Figure 1 below compares these attributed party positions and actual self-placements by party supporters. It can be seen that the average self-placement of İyi Parti supporters is quite close to the center of the left-right scale, and a similar position is also attributed to this party’s supporters by the respondents in our sample. AKP and MHP supporters place themselves close to the rightmost end of the scale, and this aligns with positions attributed to those parties. CHP and HDP mirror the same pattern on the left end of the scale. The only discrepancy in terms of relative positioning is that while actual self-placement of HDP supporters is to the left of CHP supporters, most respondents attribute a more left-leaning position to CHP, but the discrepancy is small.

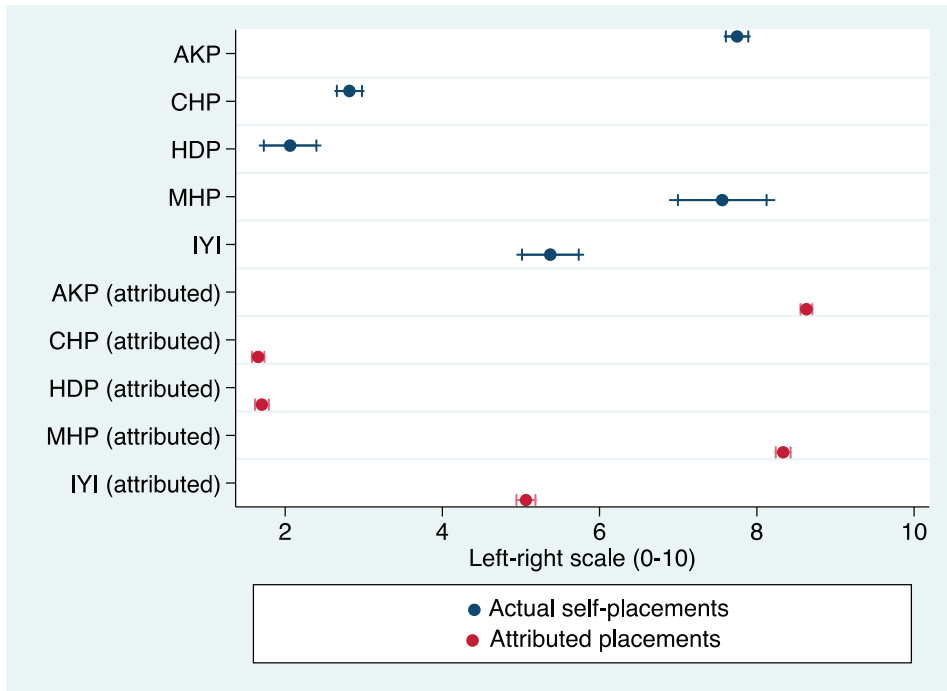


Figure 1. Mean left-right self-placement of supporters of each party, compared with mean respondent-attributed placements of hypothetical party supporters

In contrast, as we will see, there is a much lower degree of correspondence between actual and attributed positions with regard to the six ideological attitudes, suggesting that people have a better sense of how the left-right division relates to concrete political organizations than how it relates to concepts and issues. In order to examine this question, we already have the attributed left-right placement of someone who supports, for example, income redistribution, and, for the purpose of comparison, we now need to ascertain the mean left-right placement of respondents who actually support income redistribution. One naïve approach for doing this could be to simply take the mean left-right self-placement value of those who score the top support level for the income redistribution issue, but then we would be losing information about variation in self-placement between people scoring different support levels other than the top. So a regression estimation is

needed instead. To this end, we first run a regression to estimate the respondent’s left-right self-placement, with all of the six issue positions as independent variables. Based on this we then estimate the left-right self-placement value for a respondent whose support for income redistribution is set to be at the highest possible value (5 out of a scale of 1-5, indicating “complete agreement”), while all the other issue positions are held at the mean. The output from the regression analysis is available in the Appendix at the end of this article. The table below displays estimated (using the `prgen` command on Stata) left-right self-placement of people scoring 5 out of 5 on each of the listed issue positions. These are what we call the *(estimated) actual self-placements*.

Table 4  
*Mean Left-Right Position for Each Issue, Estimated on the Basis of Actual Issue Endorsement and Left-Right Self-Placement Responses*

Position strongly endorsed	Estimated mean left-right (out of 0-10)
Environmentalism	4.80
Freedom of thought	5.13
Gender equality	4.90
Secularism	4.40
Public property	5.33
Redistribution	5.32

Figure 2 below visually compares these actual self-placements and the respondent-attributed placements reported earlier. While the values refer to the same 0-10 left-right scale as usual, we are visually zooming in on the spectrum to magnify relative differences.

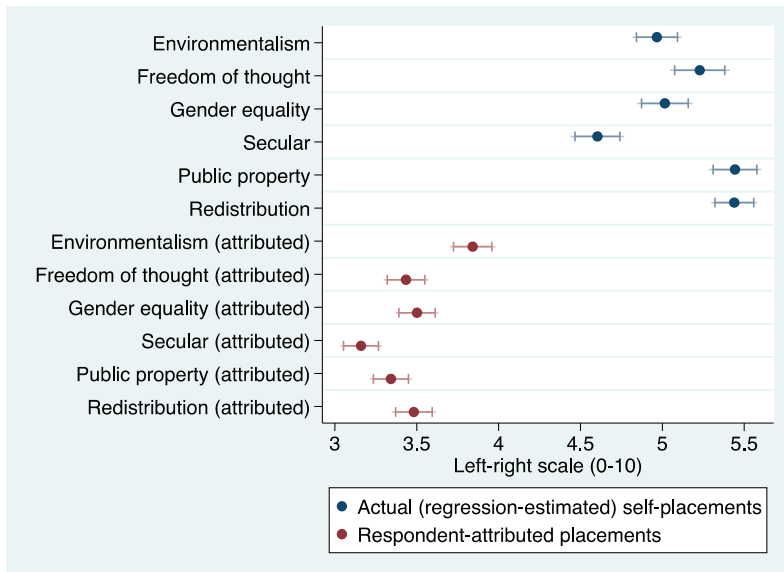


Figure 2. Left-right self-placement of respondents endorsing certain issue positions, compared with mean respondent-attributed placements of hypothetical advocates of same issues

To interpret; first of all, the respondent-attributed placements for all issue positions appear more to the left than the self-placements we estimated on the basis of the actual position endorsement responses. Since the latter was estimated for someone who endorses the issue in question at the highest possible degree, this comparison is revealing. Respondents may be underestimating how popular these issue positions would be in a survey, and consequently they misjudge these issue positions as being more confined to a left-wing political space than what is really the case.

Secondly, in both attributed and estimated placements, secularism turns out to be the most leftward issue position, confirming H2. This finding regarding the *estimated* left-right self-placement of secular people in the sample, together with the correlations reported earlier, confirm Yagci's (2022) finding that secularism is the most important issue axis—clearly ahead of economic issues—defining the left-right self-placement of individuals in Turkey. In addition, an original finding generated herein by the *attributed* placement analysis is that common people in Turkey too are aware of this configuration and recognize it as such. In other words, the intersubjective semantic content of left-right division in contemporary Turkey is understood to refer primarily to a secularism-religion conflict rather than an economic conflict. This is in line with the expert understanding of Turkey's left-right divide as being mostly relating to cultural rather than economic issues according to Benoit and Laver's (2006) expert survey. In any case, it seems that the ordinary people have on aggregate a somewhat accurate understanding of what other people mean when they talk about a left-right division—it is basically about the relative standing of secularism versus religious values. This provides partial support for H3.

Nevertheless, the aggregate judgment of the ordinary crowd is not completely divorced from the said overestimation of the economic content of the left-right division, and we find this another striking finding. This is visible in the discrepancy between the actual (*estimated*) and *respondent-attributed* left-right placements associated with income redistribution and public property. While the left-right placement that we estimated—based on actual endorsements by the respondents—for someone who completely agrees with income redistribution is close to 5.3 on the 0-10 left-right scale, i.e. very close to the center of the spectrum, the respondents attribute a much more left-wing position when they are asked about a hypothetical person who is in favor of such income redistribution. For public property advocacy there is likewise a big discrepancy between actual and attributed placements.: In fact, while the respondents attribute to the hypothetical public property advocate the second most left-wing position after a secular person; judging from actual endorsements, public property advocacy associates with the least left-wing position among all six issues. This is not necessarily because public property advocacy is universally endorsed; actually both environmentalism and freedom of thought are more popularly endorsed positions than redistribution or public property advocacy (see Table 3). In other words, while the respondents correctly recognize that a self-ascribed left-wing placement is defined mostly by secularism, they still have an exaggerated sense of how much economic issues around income redistribution, and especially public/private property, define that placement. H3 is therefore partially refuted.

The placement of environmentalism deserves a special discussion. On the one hand, among the six issue dimensions, the discrepancy between actual and respondent-attributed

left-right placements appears smallest for environmentalism, and this may be interpreted at first glance as improved accuracy for attributions related to this item. On the other hand, this is an artifact of the previously explained leftward bias in respondent-attributed placements for all issue positions, together with the fact that environmentalism is really close to the left. Hence, if we state the outcome in relative terms, while the respondents attribute the *relatively least* left-wing (compared to the other five dimensions) placement to a hypothetical environmentalist person, the estimated left-right self-placement of someone in complete agreement with environmentalism is actually the *second-most* left-wing, lagging only behind a secular person. In addition, the respondent-attributed position for the hypothetical environmentalist position features the highest standard deviation among the six attribution responses, indicating that the respondents find it relatively hard to converge on their attribution when it comes to this item. In short, we can state that environmentalism is a much stronger component of left-wing self-placement in Turkey than people think.

In summary, we find that the semantic content of the left-right scale is mostly about secularism and it is popularly understood as such. While it is *more* about environmentalism than what people think, it is *less* about economic issues than what people think. Before finishing, a second-order question of interest could be what kind of people can more accurately attribute the left-right placement of issues positions. In particular, we may want to know whether the issue positions themselves are associated systematically with a certain bias in attributing a left-right placement to the issues. The regression analysis below was undertaken to examine this question. The dependent variable is the respondent's attributed left-right placement of a hypothetical person advocating the issue position listed in the column title. Apart from demographic variables like education, income, gender and age, the independent variables include the respondent's own position on the same six issues, as well as the respondent's own left-right placement.<sup>1</sup>

Table 5

*Respondent-Attributed Left-Right Placement of Hypothetical Issue Advocates Regressed (OLS) on Respondent's Own Issue Positions and Characteristics*

	Issue endorsed by hypothetical person					
	Environ.	Free. thought	Gender equality	Secular	Public property	Redistribut.
Respondent characteristics						
left-right self-placement	0.546*** (0.023)	0.532*** (0.024)	0.446*** (0.025)	0.355*** (0.026)	0.391*** (0.025)	0.477*** (0.025)
environmentalism	-0.189*** (0.065)	-0.176*** (0.068)	-0.240*** (0.070)	-0.035 (0.073)	-0.053 (0.072)	-0.075 (0.071)
free. of thought	-0.160** (0.078)	-0.170** (0.081)	-0.105 (0.084)	-0.252*** (0.087)	-0.279*** (0.086)	-0.088 (0.084)
gender equality	-0.037 (0.073)	0.003 (0.077)	0.257*** (0.081)	0.008 (0.084)	-0.177** (0.082)	-0.068 (0.079)

1 We also ran alternative model specifications with only the respondent endorsement values and left-right self-placement (with no demographic control variables), which we do not show here for the sake of brevity. The results are essentially the same.

secularism	-0.114	-0.055	-0.115	0.170**	0.247***	-0.031
	(0.073)	(0.075)	(0.079)	(0.082)	(0.081)	(0.080)
public property	-0.134*	-0.024	-0.042	0.003	0.007	-0.119
	(0.069)	(0.071)	(0.074)	(0.077)	(0.077)	(0.075)
redistribution	0.130**	0.046	0.082	0.007	0.120*	0.090
	(0.060)	(0.062)	(0.065)	(0.068)	(0.067)	(0.065)
male	-0.108	-0.240*	-0.082	-0.042	-0.020	-0.178
	(0.123)	(0.128)	(0.133)	(0.139)	(0.136)	(0.133)
age	-0.011**	-0.004	0.004	-0.006	-0.018***	-0.003
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
education	-0.175***	-0.043	-0.017	0.088	-0.097	-0.054
	(0.064)	(0.066)	(0.069)	(0.072)	(0.070)	(0.069)
income	-0.047	-0.033	-0.052	-0.106***	-0.015	-0.036
	(0.030)	(0.031)	(0.032)	(0.034)	(0.033)	(0.032)
Constant	4.568***	2.917***	2.023***	2.177***	3.098***	2.881***
	(0.526)	(0.549)	(0.570)	(0.592)	(0.579)	(0.569)
$R^2$	0.47	0.41	0.31	0.18	0.24	0.33
$N$	1,246	1,238	1,225	1,242	1,229	1,236

\* $p < 0,1$ , \*\* $p < 0,05$ , \*\*\* $p < 0,01$ , standard errors in parentheses

To interpret these results, first of all, the coefficient for left-right self-placement is always significantly positive: The more a respondent leans to the right himself, the more he thinks that the issue position in question is to be placed on the right. In other words, people would like to think that these issue positions are close to where *they* stand on the left-right scale. This makes sense when we take into account that all six issue positions were popular across the sample and when we remember the “cognitive balance” motivation mentioned above (see Granberg and Brown, 1992). The second thing to check is the coefficient for the respondent’s own actual position on the issue that is being investigated in a given model, which may take positive, negative or insignificant values across models. For example, in the first model (which is about how the respondent attributes a left-right position to environmentalism), the coefficient for the respondent’s own environmentalism is significantly negative; and the same pattern is observed in the second model (about freedom of thought) with a significantly negative coefficient for freedom of thought. This means, for example, that the more a respondent espouses environmentalism, the more she thinks that environmentalism is a left-wing position, since increasing values on the left-right scale indicate more rightward placement. The same thing goes for freedom of thought, *but not* for gender equality, secularism, public property or redistribution. The coefficient for the respondent’s secularism in the fourth model (about secularism) is significantly positive, indicating that it is the less secular people who tend to perceive secularism to be more associated with the left. The same holds for gender equality. Lastly, the coefficients for the respondent’s support for public property and income redistribution are insignificant in the relevant models, regardless of whether we include the demographic control variables or not. Whether one supports redistribution oneself does not have an association with whether one thinks this to be a left-wing position.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the discrepancy between the actual and perceived meanings of the political left-right divide among ordinary people, based on original data from a representative sample of Turkey. In other words, are economic issues as pertinent to subjective left-right self-placements as people think? In order to empirically address this question, we developed measures for *both* parts of the question, i.e. how people endorsing certain economic positions place themselves on the left-right scale, as well as what placement they attribute to a hypothetical person endorsing the same positions. The study examined this across six issue endorsement positions, covering economic and non-economic domains: environmentalism, freedom of thought, gender equality, secularism, public property ownership (rather than privatization), income redistribution. The study also inquired about party placements, to provide a comparison and validity check for our exercise of respondent-attribution of placements, since previous literature had already established that Turkish voters' understanding of parties' positions were similar to those of experts (Ecevit and Celep, 2018).

The findings confirm that respondents' placement of political parties on the left-right scale align well with the self-placement of those respondents that actually support those parties. In other words, the respondents are remarkably accurate in their understanding of where parties (or rather, their supporters) stand. The same cannot be said to the same degree for an understanding of what these labels mean in terms of issue positions. On the one hand, the respondents successfully recognize that secularism is the issue that most strongly defines a left-wing self-placement in Turkey—something that was found in more comprehensive data before (Yağcı, 2022) and which we confirm here on the basis of the left-right self-placements of our respondents who take highly supportive positions for secularism. Nonetheless, the respondents still overestimate how much the said left-right placement rests on positioning on economic issues. Among the six issue positions we examined, the endorsement of two economy-themed positions—public property ownership and income redistribution—were the ones that were associated the least with left-wing self-placements in our sample; yet the respondents attribute very left-wing placements to hypothetical individuals who are portrayed as endorsing these values. The opposite is true for environmentalism. While it is associated with the second left-most self-placement after secularism, the respondents attribute the relatively least left-wing placement to a hypothetical environmentalist person among the six hypothetical issue advocates in consideration. The standard deviation for attributions relating to this item is also the largest, indicating that respondents find it relatively hard to converge on an attribution when it comes to environmentalism. All in all, it could be concluded that in contemporary Turkey, the semantic content of the left-right scale is mostly about secularism and it is popularly understood as such, while it is *more* about environmentalism than what people think, and *less* about economic issues than what people think. Economic issues may be important to political competition in Turkey, but they poorly map onto the left-right divide—more poorly than what most people seem to believe.

A discussion of the study's limitations is in order. First, the six issue positions we examined, although rooted in existing literature, are not inductively defined, and one could design alternative studies that make use of a different battery of questions. Secondly,



we are not exploring issues of dimensionality, in the sense of how a left-right divide could relate to differentiation on other, orthogonal divides and how many of them are needed to efficiently represent the issue space in Turkish politics (see Çarkoğlu & Hinich, 2006 for a discussion). Thirdly, this study does not give information about salience. For example, while environmentalism is associated among our respondents with more left-wing self-placements than redistribution, it is possible for the same left-leaning people to see their position on redistribution as more salient to where they stand ideologically. In other words, in a rank-ordering of policy preferences, they could still have chosen redistribution over environmentalism and felt that they stayed true to their left-wing credentials. Maybe the respondent-attributed placements incorporate such an assumption of differential salience to alternative issues in a way that is not echoed in the respondents' own issue endorsement responses. While this seems like a rather arcane issue, it is worth noting here. To our knowledge, this is the first study that systematically examines the subjective understandings of the left-right divide using survey data in the Turkish context. If other studies follow on from this one, they are advised to improve upon these limitations.

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## APPENDIX

### A) Relevant Survey Questions

1) Left-right self-placement: We sometimes hear about the concepts of left and right in politics. When you think about this left-right divide in politics, where would you place yourself on a scale where 0 is the most left and 10 is the most right?

Left

Right

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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### 2) Attributed left-right placements

Now I will describe to you some imaginary individuals. How would you place each of these individuals on the left-right scale?

- Someone who advocates the preservation of the natural environment
- Someone who advocates freedom of thought
- Someone who advocates gender equality
- Someone who advocates secularism [*laiklik*] rather than religious rules
- Someone who opposes privatizations in the economy
- Someone who advocates the reduction of income inequality

And now I will read out the names of political parties. I will ask you to place each one on the left-right scale in regard to the ideas they represent.

- AKP
- CHP
- HDP
- MHP
- İyi Parti

### 3) Respondent issue endorsements

Now I will ask you which policies you prefer in regard to the governance of our country. Answer each from 1 to 5 where 1 equals completely disagree and 5 equals completely agree.

- How much would you support putting a halt to construction projects for roads, dams and the like because they are harming the natural environment?
- How much would you support everyone expressing their thoughts as they wish even if they are against the dominant values in society?
- How much would you support gender equality over traditional gender roles?

- How much would you support the application of secularism [*laiklik*] rather than the requirements of religion in state affairs?
- How much would you support the important firms in the economy to be owned by the state rather than the private sector?
- How much would you support the disproportionate taxation of high-income citizens in order to reduce income inequality?

**B) Regression (OLS) Analysis Grounding the Estimated Left-Right Positions in Table 4**

	<b>Respondent left-right self-placement</b>
Respondent endorsements	
environmentalism	-0.405*** (0.076)
free. of thought	-0.144 (0.093)
gender equality	-0.357*** (0.087)
secular	-0.768*** (0.083)
public property	0.072 (0.081)
redistribution	0.068 (0.072)
Constant	11.288*** (0.384)
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.22
<i>N</i>	1,455

\*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$

