

The PDS

A left-wing extremist
party?

Roadmap

- What is (left-wing) extremism?
- What is the PDS?
- *Is the PDS a left-wing extremist party?*

What is extremism?

- Stems back from the 19th century
- Not a very precise notion:
 - “A tendency to go to extremes, especially in politics” (Webster’s dictionary); being on the tip of the left-right axis
 - No problem with democracy so far
- Every day language definition is neither especially clear nor very useful

How is extremism defined in Political Sociology?

- Definition by Lipset/Raab (1971:6) is more precise and widely accepted:
 - “Extremism is anti-pluralism”
 - “the repression of difference and dissent”
 - “the closing down of the market place of ideas”
 - “the tendency to treat cleavage and ambivalence as illegitimate”

Extremism vs. Democracy?

- From Lipset's (and my) point of view, extremism is the *opposite* of a liberal, pluralistic democracy
- Certain concepts of democracy (Marxian , maybe Rousseauan) are not liberal/pluralistic and can therefore be termed as extremist
- Extremism can be combined with any position on the (economic) left-right axis

What is the PDS?

- Where do they come from?
- What do they stand for?
- Who are their members & voters?
- What are their prospects for the future?

Where do they come from?

- In 1946, the SPD (social democrats) was forced to merge with the KPD (communist party) in the soviet zone of Germany to form the SED
- SED stood for Socialist Unity Party
- Like the CPSU, the SED regarded itself the “vanguard of the Proletariat”, i.e. it exercised direct or indirect control over any institution of state and society

Who was the SED?

- The party itself was dominated by its leaders (“democratic centralism”)
- While mass participation was more or less binding, the outcomes were very restricted, i.e., elections in the GDR were made up
- The leading role of the SED was even guaranteed in the GDR’s constitution
- In the sense of Lipset’s definition, the SED and the GDR’s political system were clearly extremist

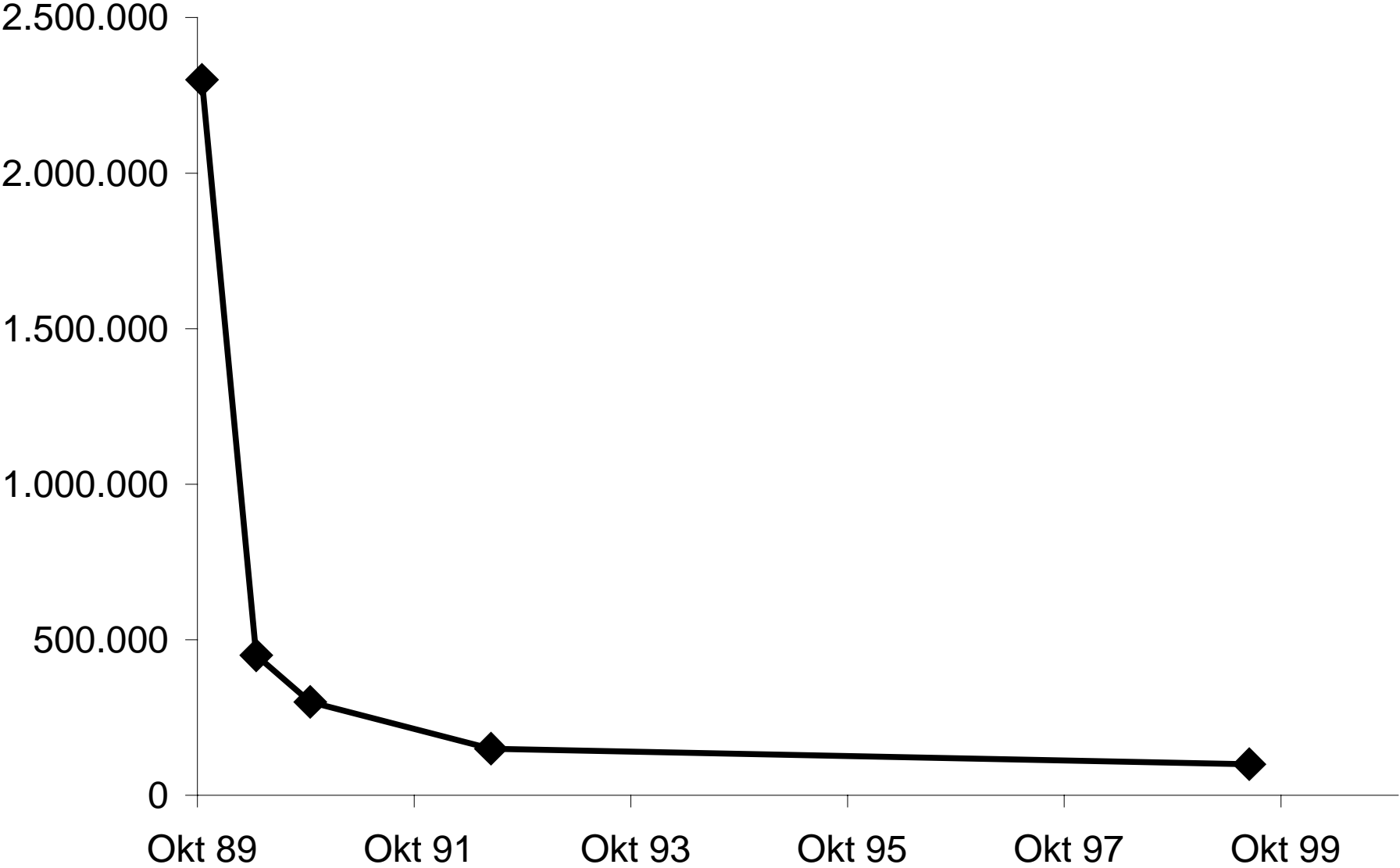
What happened to the SED?

- In autumn 1989, the Soviet Union withdraw its support for the SED
- After an internal struggle, all persons who held high ranks in the SED lost their positions in party and government
- Younger persons who termed themselves “reformist socialists” took their positions
- The party was not dissolved, but renamed to SED-PDS (PDS since the first free election of March 1990)

Who are their members?

- Membership in the SED was a precondition for almost any higher career in the GDR
- In October 1989, the SED had 2.3 million members (that was roughly 20% of the GDR's adult population)
- The opening of the frontier marked the beginning of an exodus from the SED
- Few new members: 1998, about 98% of the members had been members of the SED, too

Membership of the SED / PDS



Who stayed?

- Very few younger persons
 - most of them reformist socialists
 - some of them left-libertarian / ecologist
 - some of them orthodox communists
 - some of them anarchists
- Many elderly rank and file members
 - about 60% of the membership are older than 60 years
 - most of them traditional socialists but politically apathetic
 - most of them pensioners or near age of retirement who had nothing to lose if staying in the PDS
 - many loyal supporters of the GDR and/or the idea of socialism who harbour feelings of nostalgia

What happened to the SED's party organisation?

- About 40,000 persons worked full-time for the SED
- The PDS has now less than 150 employees
- The principle of “democratic centralism” was dropped (would be illegal today!)
- The structure of the PDS' party organisation now closely resembles the structure of other parties in Germany

What does the structure of the PDS' organisation look like?

- Chapters on the federal, state and district level plus cells for certain factories (“Betriebsgruppen”)
- Executive committees elected by assemblies of members or delegates
- Strict “separation of powers” on all levels (prescribed by German law)
- 50% of the offices are reserved for women
- Only 2,500 members in the western states!

Are there extremist groups *within* the PDS?

- There are 28 special-interest groups within the party which reflect the heterogeneity of the party's membership
- Their influence within the party is unique in Germany
 - they are quite autonomous (own papers, statutes, open for non-members)
 - they can nominate up to 20% of the delegates for the party's general assembly
- Three of them (which are especially controversial) are observed by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution. Together, they have probably less than 1,000 members

What does the PDS stand for?

- 5 party platforms on the federal level since 1990
- All of them are (incompatible?) mixtures of
 - Old Left: Social Security, Socialisation etc.
 - New Left: Protection of the environment, women's liberation, reverse discrimination, civil rights, migration issues, 3rd world issues, demilitarisation
 - East German issues: pensions, treatment of former state clerks, development programs for the eastern states etc.
- No orthodox Marxian elements
- Comparable with the platforms of the Greens and especially the (pre-Schröder) SPD

What is their stand on parliamentary democracy?

Pro:

- The PDS is represented in the German Bundestag (5,1%) and all East German state parliaments (17-24%)
- Regularly draft bills, supports many uncontroversial bills
- It is part of the ruling coalition in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and supports the social-democratic minority government in Sachsen-Anhalt
- No sign of “fundamental opposition”, but rather the appearance of a (increasingly) normal party

What is their stand on parliamentarism?

Contra:

- Dubious plans for
 - a third chamber on the federal level to represent East German interests
 - and/or a chamber to represent “social, ecological, feminist and other movements”
- Position on politically motivated violence is unclear
- (Small) groups within the party who define themselves as “revolutionary” and declare “war” on the constitution are tolerated by the executive committee for tactical reasons

Who are the voters of the PDS?

- Virtually no electoral support in the west (about 1% of the vote), but increasingly important in the eastern states (20+x%)
- Regionalisation of the German party system: the PDS as an indicator of a new cleavage between centre and periphery?
- Little is known about the PDS's voters in the western states but a) about two thirds of them are male and b) most of them are quite young, which is typical for the constituency of non-established parties

Who are the voters of the PDS? (eastern states)

- About 52% females
- Most of them are of middle age
- 26% (!) of their voters received an university degree
- Many people from the public sector (universities, schools, public bureaucracy)
- Strong feelings of material and immaterial deprivation
 - distrust for parties, parliament, government, courts
 - feel disadvantaged (although they are better off!)
 - public and social security (even personal relations!) were better under socialist rule

Why are the voters of the PDS (relatively) deprived?

- Very interested in politics, high sense of internal political efficacy
- Supporters of a strong, active welfare state
- “Things went wrong, but socialism is still a good *idea*”
- *And:* strong support for democracy and pluralism
- Voters are frustrated by the outcomes of unification

Why do East Germans vote for the PDS?

- Conflict about the desirable shape of the political system (value orientations)
- Conflict about the distribution of material resources (wages, taxes, jobs)
- Eastern identity issues and even party IDs
- No evidence for extremist orientations as defined by Lipset
- Electoral support will probably last for many years

Conclusion: A left-wing extremist party?

- Party has a rather dark, extremist history
- Party's platforms are definitely left-wing but not extremist. So are the party's voters. The party's internal structures are democratic
- Most of the members political apathetic
- Extremist minorities exist within the party while vast majority of the leading figures are democrats
- Chair and executive committee avoid confrontation with the extremists and with the party's past for tactical reasons, but this policy might be changed soon

