SECURITY OR HUMANITY: GERMAN IDENTITY AND THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

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**Abstract**

*Under the leadership of Angela Merkel, Germany has committed to greeting refugees and asylum-seekers with open borders and open arms. But Germany has also seen the rise of a right-wing populist party and a divide within a conservative alliance between two parties. Literature on the topic of migration highlights the debate between protectionist and humanitarian principles, and the contradiction of Germany’s inclusive refugee policy but exclusive citizenship process. There is, however, a gap in research detailing how discourses on refugees reflect and co-construct different conceptualizations of German identity and responsibility. This discourse analysis examines the underlying international norms and inclusive conceptualizations of German identity that are represented and challenged by discourses on refugees from five German political parties. The debate between understandings of Germany as a multicultural society or as one with a leading culture (Leitkultur) shape discourses on deservingness and national interest. This research finds that parties with identity-inclusive discourses on refugees favor a humanitarian response, whereas parties with identity-exclusive discourses favor protectionism. The analysis helps to understand the prominence of German Leitkultur in discourses about refugees and its connections to protectionist policy recommendations.*

**Introduction**

On October 3, 2016, most of Germany was celebrating German Unity Day. The city of Dresden, however, was the scene of an anti-Islamic and xenophobic demonstration led by the Pegida movement (Gruber and Meiritz 2016). Shouting “Merkel must go” and calling her a “folk traitor,” the demonstration voiced a concern about the negative implications that liberal refugee policy adopted by Merkel has on the German identity (Ibid). On a national holiday intended to celebrate the creation of a united Germany, the demonstration protested the changing face of Germany as a result of the Syrian refugee crisis. The Syrian civil war and the resulting global refugee resettlement crisis has particularly impacted Europe, warranting different reactions from EU member states and reflecting a general trend towards more restrictive asylum and refugee policies (Spiegel Staff 2015). Under the leadership of Angela Merkel, however, Germany has committed to greeting asylum-seekers and refugees with open borders and open arms (“Creating a Viable Humanitarian System” 2016). While this is the policy, is it truly the reality that migrants encounter?

The answer is complicated by the passage of Asylum Packet II in February of 2016, which restricted refugee policy through establishing reception facilities to facilitate quicker deportation when necessary, prohibiting migration of families, and demanding refugees’ financial participation in the cost of integration courses (Schuler 2016). In May of 2016, the Integration Act specifically for refugees and asylum-seekers was passed in Germany, making cultural integration an imperative (Die Bundesregierung, “Merkel: Integrationsgesetz ist Meilenstein,” 2016). It provided easier access to the labor market and job training, while also making integration courses a requirement for maintaining refugee status (Ibid). The laws present questions about who is truly deserving of protection and what protections are justified – and, importantly, to what extent does cultural identity play a role in determining deservingness. Some argue that they are measures meant to reassure the voters and counter the rise of anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments which were associated with the rise of the AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland) –* a right-wing party established in 2013 on an anti-immigration platform (Kern 2016). At first a small fringe party, the AfD continues to make gains in state elections while the CDU loses support (BBC News 2016).

The discourse of the *Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands* (CDU) party reflects an understanding of refugees and migration a humanitarian issue, emphasizing human rights and dignity (Die Bundesregierung, *Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel at the Annual Reception for the Diplomatic Corps in Meseberg on 11 July 2016* 2016). Despite this, they promote rigid integration policies (CDUa., 2015; CDUj., 2016; CDUe., 2017). In its multi-party system, German political parties have contrasting discourses on refugees, and this research seeks to understand how those discourses shape policy and reflect different conceptualizations of German identity and responsibility in the world. This topic, although very specific to the context of Germany, is relevant to the rise of right-wing groups and the ongoing conflict between instituting humanitarian or protectionist values in immigration policy. It also helps to understand the existence of strict integration policies despite the adoption of an open border policy on a humanitarian basis (Mowat 2016).

This study involves an inquiry into the discourses on refugees during the Syrian refugee crisis by representatives of five German political parties, as it relates to different interpretations of German identity and responsibility regarding migration. I’ve observed that the different discourses on refugee policy from political parties in Germany exist and have created opposing images of refugees as humanitarian concerns and as threats to national security and identity. This discourse analysis establishes that discourses on German identity based on culture, basic law, and humanitarian considerations shape the conversation about refugees. I find that the understandings of German identity are consistent with specific policy measures which explain the contradictions in German policy and the conflict between doing what is considered to be “good” and what is considered to be “right” in terms of societal values. The next section serves to review relevant literature to the topic of migration policy and outlines three approaches: the protectionist, institutional, and identity approaches. I then outline the interpretivist methodological choices in more detail, and move onto my findings and conclusions.

**Literature Review**

On the topic of migration, most scholarship lies in the realm of immigration policy, more specifically the European models of immigration policy and how attitudes towards immigrants and immigration as well as institutional factors interact to shape policy. The literature on migration policy primarily determines that policy is decided under two schools of thought: the protectionist approach and the institutionalist approach (Cerna 2016; Freeman 2006; Boswell 2007). The protectionist approach highlights the importance of security interests in determining policy, while the neo-institutionalist approach discusses the importance of institutions and social norms (Joppke 2007; Boswell 2007). Under a third approach, which I will be calling the identity approach, scholars discuss the influence of identity on refugee policy, specifically highlighting a tension between tolerance and feelings of nationalism. The three approaches represent realist, liberal, and constructivist explanations for refugee policy, respectively. This literature review outlines each of these approaches and the different conceptualizations of policy model, state interest, and normative influence when approaching the topic of migration.

*Protectionist Approach*

In terms of international relations theory, the protectionist approach to migration policy tends to take a more realist perspective in terms of policy model and state interest. Scholars find there exists a national model for migration policy, leading a state to choose a national policy based on state interest defined as national and economic security. Lavenex (2001) finds the argument that international or converging models of policy exist is disproven by states reluctance to transfer sovereignty, as demonstrated by the failure of a supranational asylum policy.[[1]](#footnote-1) As a result, commitment to humanitarian values takes a back seat to security consideration, and cooperation only occurs as needed to reduce the number of asylum-seekers to protect internal security (Ibid, 857-860). In this model, state interest is defined as physical, economic, and cultural security within national borders, making it incompatible with the movement for global security. Scholars justify restrictive migration policies, seeing migration as a danger to public order, cultural identity, and domestic labor markets, as well as a tool of political coercion (Huysmans 2006; Greenhill 2010). As a result, humanitarian norms and values would take a back seat to the crisis of national security in the case of a crisis. As Kofman (2002, 1040) argues, the “notions of universal rights and duties to refugees as human beings in need of protection come into conflict with national interests and sovereignty justifying more restrictive and selective policies.” Although this has not been the case in Germany, where the right to asylum has been guaranteed as a humanitarian right, it is helpful in identifying policy contradictions within the specific context (“Creating a Viable Humanitarian System” 2017). The literature also points out the limit to the humanitarian perspective of migration policy and supposed liberalization. The integration policies are liberal in theory, but, when implemented, they become somewhat problematic and illiberal in order to maintain protectionism. As a result, despite increasing European cooperation and the influence of human rights in the asylum policy, states implement programs that restrict liberal policy through prohibiting deeper integration (Kofman 2002, 860-861). This distinction could be particularly useful in explaining the context of Germany, where rigid integration and citizenship procedures have been adopted alongside seemingly liberal asylum policy (Die Bundesregierung, “Merkel: Integrationsgesetz ist Meilenstein,” 2016).

*Institutionalist Approach*

The protectionist approach, however, does not provide an explanation as to why liberalization of refugee policy in various European countries, and particularly in Germany, has occurred and resulted in enhanced rights for refugees and asylum-seekers (Thielemann 2016, 644).[[2]](#footnote-2) If it means going against national security, are states acting irrationally when responding to humanitarian concerns? The institutionalist approach takes a liberal perspective in defining state interest, focusing more on how state actors and international institutions, or a complex combination of the two, influence immigration policy in Europe (Joppke 2007; Lavenex 2001; Freeman 2006; Freeman 2004). In the international model of immigration, scholars examine the convergence of policy in the European Union as a result of increased institutional capacity and the creation of a transnational asylum system (Ibid; Laubenthal 2011). Scholars favoring the institutionalist approach find the protectionist argument weak because it disregards the role of international norms and institutions in determining state interests (Boswell 2007, 78). When deciding on what immigration policy to adopt, the state must consider the fairness, wealth accumulation, security, and institutional legitimacy of the policy (Ibid, 91). The protectionist approach emphasizes importance of wealth accumulation and security, but the institutional approach stresses that institutional legitimacy outweighs those considerations in the age of globalization; in order to preserve institutional legitimacy, a state will not dismantle a liberal migration policy whenever it stands in the way of a protectionist migration policy if it is fundamental to maintaining favor under the scrutiny of the international community (Ibid, 89). In order to maintain favor, it is in the state's interest to maintain humanitarian values such as liberty, freedom, and democracy on policies associated with liberalism and the EU (Joppke 2007, 3-5).

*Identity Approach*

Although Merkel has been promoting these values in response to the refugee resettlement crisis, Germany has seen the rise of a right-wing extremist group, promoting nationalism, Euro-skepticism, and protectionism (Kern 2017). The humanitarian values continue to be promoted at an international level, but the legitimacy of those values are being challenged within the national context. A focus on identity and internal dynamics can be useful to explain the particular dynamics within Germany. The third approach takes on a constructivist perspective toward migration policy, understanding policy models and state interests as determined by identity and attitudes towards refugees and asylum-seekers. This approach differs from the formerly discussed approaches in its emphasis on the role of societal ideas and norms in defining interests as opposed to the state. Along with questions of liberalization, migration brings up the issues of multiculturalism, nationalism, and xenophobia through challenging the myth of national cultural homogeneity (Huysmans 2000, 762). In examining how prejudices, identities, and ideologies influence and shape attitudes toward migrants, scholars recognize that the main rationale for restrictions is economic security, but public fears and prejudices are responsible for the general attitudes towards migration (Burns 2000; Ceobanu 2010). Blank (2003) and Kurthen (1995) examine how conceptions of migrant identity provide an insight to German identity, detailing the debate between the inclusive and exclusive definitions of national identity, which then shapes refugee and integration policies. While Germany’s liberal asylum law promotes universal rights and inclusivity, it is contradicted by rigid citizenship laws that promote nationalism and exclusivity out of a fear of diluting “Germanness” (Kurthen 1995; Checkel 1999). Different understandings of national security create a conflict between valuing cultural homogeneity and fearing the revival of extreme nationalism and xenophobia (Huysmans 2000, 766; Langenbacher 2008; van Munster 2009). The identity approach assists in understanding how the discourses about refugees reflect and contribute to the contradiction between different conceptions of what it means to be German.

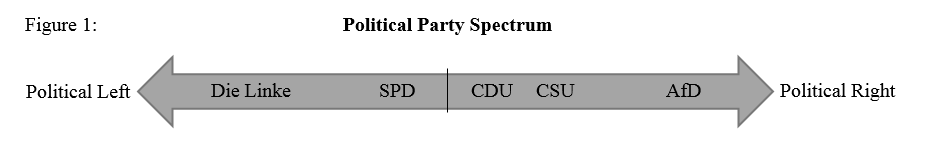
The literature has provided variables impacting both domestic and international politics that are present in discussions about migration policies. Questions of state interest are influenced by economic and cultural security, as well as international humanitarian and multicultural values. In evaluating the influence of norms on migration policy, a debate between national security and human rights emerges. In the protectionist approach, states choose national policies based on fears of a threat to physical, economic, or cultural security. In the institutional approach, states choose to adopt international or social norms to establish legitimacy (Langenbacher 2008, 81-84; Freeman 2006). In the identity approach, migration policy is decided based on questions of identity and understandings of responsibility. Based on how state interest is defined, discourse may emphasize either a national or international model of policy, which also ties to inclusive or exclusive conceptualizations of German identity (Luedke 2005). Guided by these concepts, this research will serve to show how values and conceptualizations of German identity are conveyed and contribute to rationalizations of different approaches to migration policy.

**Methodology**

This discourse analysis seeks to understand how discourses on refugees draw on and co-construct discourses about refugees, and how these discourses then influence positions on contested issues. In an analysis of the discourses of five German political parties on refugees and asylum-seekers, I aim to understand how they are constructed and as a result convey specific understandings of German identity and responsibility. As opposed to a neopositive study, which has been used by other scholars to examine national policy with a comparative international perspective, this interpretivist approach allows for a closer look at the contradictory aspects of German asylum policy, and perhaps a better indication of the direction in which the policy is headed. I chose to analyze five discourses on identity in order to be exposed to different meaning-making across the political spectrum. Through analyzing party platforms and party press releases[[3]](#footnote-3), this analysis shows how refugees are framed within political discourse on refugee policy, and also how conceptualizations of German identity are constructed. In this section, I outline and justify my methods of gathering evidence and analyzing data, and then address the credibility of the methodology.

In terms of conceptualizing European security, some scholars argue that this tension creates a conflict between the fear of multiculturalism and the fear of a revival of extreme nationalism (Huysmans 2000, 766; Langenbacher 2008, van Munster 2009). Other scholars, such as Blank (2003) and Kurthen (1995), have studied how conceptions of migrant identity detail and provide an insight into the debate between inclusive and exclusive definitions of national identity. An example of this contradiction can be seen in Germany’s open asylum policy but rigid integration and citizenship requirements. Based on these concepts, my research will examine the interaction between discourses on refugees in Germany and discourses on identity.

The five parties creating the discourses that I analyze are the *Christlich* *Demokratische* *Union* *Deutschlands* (CDU), the *Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern* (CSU)*, the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (SPD), *Die Linke*, and the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD).The CDU and the CSU are both liberal-conservative parties to the center-right of the political spectrum and part of a conservative coalition (Große Koalition) for a Bundestag majority (national parliament). The AfD is a right-wing populist party, which currently does not hold seats in the Bundestag, but has been making gains in state elections. The SPD is a democratic socialist party in the center-left of the spectrum and, after the Große Koalition, holds the most seats in the Bundestag. Die Linke is a party that holds some of the same principles as the SPD but is more socialist and has a smaller base of supporters.

Although there are more German parties than those selected for this analysis, I have chosen these specific parties based on party membership and different positions on the political spectrum (see Figure 1). In this analysis, the actors producing the discourses and creating meanings are the representatives from each of the political parties. The specific context being addressed by the research is the period following the declaration of a refugee crisis and a German open-border policy regarding asylum-seekers in fall of 2015. This context provides insights into the current state of the discourse as it becomes a central concern for German internal and external policy.

I analyzed party platforms on refugee policy and integration policy as it pertained to refugees and asylum-seekers. I also analyzed party press releases that presented an argument on refugee policy in a three-month period preceding state elections in March and September of 2016.[[4]](#footnote-4) The time period before the elections is an important period of analysis as a result of increased attention to the discourses. The combination of these texts provides an in-depth understanding of how the discourses on refugees and asylum-seekers produce meanings and change over time, while also paying attention to how they interact with discourses on German identity. More specifically, I paid attention to how refugees were framed as deserving or undeserving through characterizations as criminals, *Schützbedurftigen* (deserving of protection), and humanitarian responsibilities. Within these discourses, I analyzed how German culture was framed by mentions of culture and basic law, whether it focused on *Leitkultur* (leading culture) or multiculturalism, basic law or humanitarian law. In order to do this, in the analysis I ask who refugees and asylum-seekers are in each party’s discourse, who is considered to be deserving, and what makes them so. I then consider how the German identity is represented within the discourses on refugee identity and deservingness. I also consider how the different understandings of German responsibility are represented in debate between the right and left, especially in discourse portraying AfD as un-German because of their discourse on refugees and asylum-seekers.

In analyzing 40 press releases from five different political parties, I have been exposed to different meanings and developed intertextuality, which contributes to trustworthiness. Having advanced German proficiency will allowed me to read and analyze texts from the political parties, which are written in German. An interpretivist methodology places limits on the generalizability of my research by grounding it in a specific context; however, it allows for a more in-depth analysis of how identity and values can influence policy and attitudes toward refugees. Through examining these discourses of five political parties, I encountered different meanings that are assigned to refugees through a specific framing of the German identity. I explain that the discourses make certain policy choices seem more rational, but more research can be done to determine which discourse is dominant. This research design also addresses intertextuality through analyzing texts from two time periods and analyzing how they reflect or invoke each other. I pay attention to how the ideas about German identity are presented across political parties in discussions about *Leitkultur, Grundordnung,* and multiculturalism. I analyze how these concepts are present in discourses about refugee policy and bring about constitutive understandings as a more nationalistic and identity-exclusive discourse regarding migrants gains influence.

**Analysis**

The issue of migration brings up not only the issues of economic integration, but also cultural integration and issues of multiculturalism, nationalism, and xenophobia (Huysmans 2000, 762). This discourse analysis seeks to understand how discourses on refugees draw on and co-construct discourses about identity, and how these discourses then influence positions on contested issues. The literature examines the debate between inclusive and exclusive definitions of national identity, which then influence refugee policy (Kurthen 1995; Checkel 1999). This analysis shows how inclusive and exclusive conceptualizations of German identity are represented in discourses about refugee deservingness of protection and social services, and looks at the different understandings of German society and culture represented in the arguments. The analysis is concluded with a discussion of alternate interpretations and work that remains to be done on the topic of discourses about refugee and asylum-seekers.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2018) defines refugees as people fleeing conflict or persecution who, according to international law, are not to be returned to situations where their life and freedom are at risk. Similarly, asylum-seekers are people fleeing conflict or persecution who qualify for international protection (UNHCR 2018). The distinction between the two terms is that “asylum-seeker” is used to refer to individuals whose requests for sanctuary have yet to be processed, often occurring during mass movements of refugees (Ibid). Both of these terms are distinct from concepts of immigration and economic migration, which are pull factors. The terms are also not limited to Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers, which is reflected by the discourse. This study concerns itself less with how the German political parties define refugees and asylum-seekers, but rather in how the discussions about deservingness frame German culture and the identities of refugees and asylum-seekers.

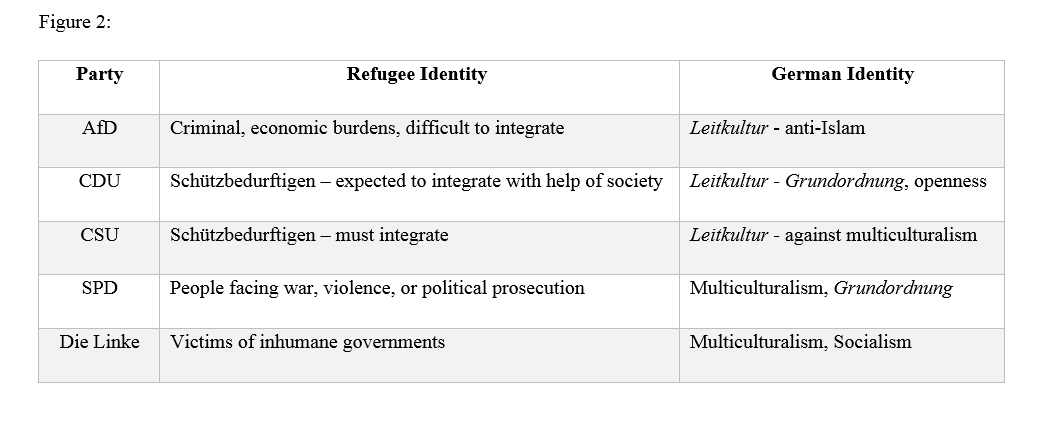
The five parties creating the discourses that I analyze are the CDU, CSU, AfD, SPD, and Die Linke.[[5]](#footnote-5) Each of the five German political parties converge in acknowledging that some asylum-seekers need protection, but diverge on qualifications of deservingness and the extent of German responsibility. Deservingness is a recurring concept in the CDU discourse, with eight of the eleven releases from the CDU referring to refugees and asylum-seekers as people in need or *Schützbedurftigen*, which literally translates to “those deserving of protection” (CDUa., 2015; CDUj., 2016; CDUe., 2017). This is an interesting concept, because it not only introduces the idea that there is a right to protection, but also indicates that some asylum-seekers are undeserving. Within the discourse on deservingness, a refugee is qualified for protection if they are facing persecution or have protection claim, whereas economic or illegal migrants and criminals do not (CDUa., 2015; CDUj., 2016). Those who are deemed to be deserving of protection are entitled to equal opportunity based on German basic law, or *Grundordnung*, but refugees and asylum-seekers are also expected to integrate (CDUi., 2016; CDUd., 2017). In the discourse on integration, the responsibility for integration falls both on German citizens to be open and welcoming and on refugees to learn the way of life, respect the culture, and learn the language (CDUd., 2017; CDUh., 2016; CDUi., 2016; CDUc., 2016). Two of the texts mention German *Leitkultur,* or leading culture, which is described as basic law and a free society with the sense of a leading culture (CDUc., 2016; CDUi., 2016). While they do not use the specific word, seven other texts describe German basic law, values, and way of life into which *Schützbedurftigen* are expected to integrate (CDUg., 2016; CDUa., 2015; CDUf., 2015; CDUk., 2016; CDUh., 2016; CDUd., 2017*;* CDUe., 2017). The discourse on *Leitkultur* presents an opening for refugees and asylum-seekers to be accepted and incorporated into German society, but only if they conform to the culture.

The discourse of the CSU on refugees and asylum-seekers similarly focuses on deservingness and migrants deemed to be *Schützbedurftigen* (CSUa., 2016; CSUe., 2016). Reflective of humanitarian values, the CSU party platform states that Germany has a “humanitarian responsibility for the bombed, prosecuted, and abused people from areas of crisis (humanitäre Verantwortung für ausgebombte, verfolgte und misbrauchte Menschen aus Krisengebieten)” (CSUa., 2016). Although the party recognizes that German basic law protects refugees and asylum-seekers, the CSU conceptualization of *Leitkultur* is more based on culture and security than *Grundordnung*. In five of the six texts analyzed, refugees and asylum-seekers were framed as security threats by discussing criminality, terrorism, and cultural incompatibility (CSUd., 2016; CSUe., 2016; CSUc., 2016; CSUa., 2016; CSUf., 2016)*.* According to the CSU party platform, refugees “must live with us instead of next to or against us (muss mit uns leben, statt neben oder gar gegen uns)” (CSUf., 2016). In a press release about integration, former CSU chairman Erwin Huber stresses that those who do not acknowledge and accept values undermine peaceful coexistence, and thus forfeit guest rights (CSUd., 2016). CSU understands society as being dominated by German *Leitkultur* instead of multiculturalism, and discussions of refugee culture criminalize them and set them irrevocably at odds with German culture (CSUb., 2017).[[6]](#footnote-6)

The AfD discourse places refugees and asylum-seekers not just at odds with culture, but also with economic and physical security. It centers on the theme of undeservingness, characterizing refugees and asylum-seekers as economic burdens, and criminals, and difficult to integrate in nine of the eleven texts analyzed (AfDg., 2016; AfDc., 2016; AfDe., 2016). Repeating a phrase from the CSU party platform, the AfD platform states that German society is characterized by “*Leitkultur statt Multikulturalismus* (leading culture instead of multiculturalism),” with cultural practices and a legal system that is at odds with Islam (AfDd., 2017). Six of the texts tie refugee identity to Islam and serve to characterize refugees and asylum-seekers as threats by linking them to terrorism and women’s roles that are at odds with a German *Leitkultur* values (AfDi., 2016; AfDb., 2016). Further reinforcing the skepticism of deservingness, not a single one of the texts uses the term *Flüchtling* (refugee), but rather use immigrant, migrant, or asylum-seeker. Since refugees are people who are granted state services, the avoidance of this term is important because it disassociates the individual from deservingness and humanitarian considerations. It also indicates that most refugees are not, in fact, refugees, but rather outsiders and societal disruptions. This discourse places refugees on the fringes of society, in a state of identity limbo between fleeing from a war, violence, or prosecution and trying to integrate into a society that does not want them.

The left-leaning parties take a different route than the right-leaning parties when it comes to conceptualizing refugee and German identity. In seven of the nine texts analyzed, The SPD describes refugees and asylum-seekers as people facing war, violence, or political prosecution, framing them as a humanitarian responsibility (SPDe., 2016; SPDg., 2015). In the SPD party platform, social diversity is noted as a strength of Germany (SPDf., 2017). Other press releases stress the values of openness and tolerance, which is considered to be “the basis for everyone who lives here whether they have a German passport or not (die Grundlage für jeden, der hier lebt – ganz gleich, ob mit oder ohne deutschen Pass)” (SPDi., 2016; SPDh., 2016). Describing refugees as “victims” of both persecution and right-wing violence, the SPD describes a policy focused on ensuring peaceful coexistence and societal cohesion rather than conformity in five of the texts (SPDb., 2016; SPDg., 2015; SPDi., 2016*;* SPDh., 2016; SPDf.,2017). This indicates that the party holds a more inclusive perspective of identity and see Germany as a multicultural society rather than one with *Leitkultur.* In the SPD discourse, basic law and social democracy are also considered to be indispensable aspects of German politics (SPDb., 2016; SPDf., 2017; SPDc., 2016; SPDd., 2016; SPDa., 2016).

Similarly, Die Linke frames refugees and asylum-seekers as deserving recipients of protection; however, the discourse deviates from that of the SPD in framing refugees and asylum-seekers as victims of government policy decisions that take away basic social protections in all eight texts (Die Linkeh., 2016; Die Linkef., 2016; Die Linkec., 2016; Die Linkea., 2016; Die Linkee., 2015; Die Linked., 2016; Die Linkeg., 2016; Die Linkeb., 2016). Three of the texts point to the UNCHR as a model for German asylum policy which has been challenged by rising nationalism and increasing restrictions (Die Linkeh., 2016; Die Linkee., 2015; Die Linkea., 2016). Integration is not mentioned in any of the texts, highlighting that humanitarian and socialist values place responsibility on the government rather than on refugees. This indicates that the deserved humanitarian rights and services should take the main focus, rather than maintaining a German cultural identity. Die Linke’s discourse on refugees and asylum-seekers stresses that the government is not adequately committed to German humanitarian and socialist values, but also disregards the possible existence of a German national identity.



In the various discourses, refugees are generally framed either as threats to German *Leitkultur* or contributions to a multicultural society. The CDU, SPD, and Die Linke expressed concern about how the fear of cultural heterogeneity led to a revival of nationalism and xenophobia. Specifically targeting the discourse from the AfD on refugees, the parties stress that right-wing extremism and racism in the name of “patriotism” go against the basic law and democratic values of German society (CDUi., 2016; SPDe., 2016; SPDg., 2015; SPDb., 2016). The AfD on the other hand argues that the refugee policy is not consistent with values and needs of German society, especially in terms of security and women’s rights (AfDf., 2016; AfDh., 2016). Interestingly, the CSU is absent in both of these discourses, indicating These discourses contribute to the contradiction and conflict between different conceptions of what it means to be German, and how that ties specifically to refugee policy.

These discourses on refugee and German identity contributed to how each of the parties framed the crisis, specifically the issues discussed and the identified solutions; each party presents a distinctive understanding of deservingness of protection which were tied to exclusive or inclusive discourses on German identity. The discourses on the refugees and asylum-seekers and the ties to German identity reflect what the parties consider to be the main challenges of the time. The main policy issues that are discussed are distributive politics in the EU, border regulation, and integration.

The disparities within the Große Koalition’s recommendations were particularly interesting, since they united on the basis of similar interests and values. Both the CDU and CSU stress the importance of protecting EU borders and working on international cooperation, reducing migration, and ensuring integration, but the CSU takes a more conservative stance on border and integration controls (Ibid). This is made understandable on the basis that the CSU’s discourse emphasizes cultural unity and a specific German way of life that is not consistent with that of refugees. The CSU frames the refugees and asylum-seekers as more of a threat to Germany’s dominant *Leitkultur* and physical security (CSUe., 2016; CSUc., 2016; CSUa., 2016). It would also make sense that, despite being led by the woman who called for open borders, the CDU also calls for rigid integration. Refugees and asylum-seekers were framed as deserving in terms of humanitarian norms and basic law, but since German *Leitkultur* is also cited an important aspect of identity, reducing migration and enforcing integration is an important focus of their refugee policy in order to maintain cultural unity. Consistent with characterizations of refugees as criminals and undeserving, as well as exclusive understandings of identity, they push for a closed borders and strict integration requirements (AfDa., 2016).

The SPD pushes for more equitable distribution in Europe and international cooperation on migration policy to reduce migration so that Germany can fulfill humanitarian obligations more effectively (SPDf., 2017). In terms of regulating migration, the SPD calls for a quota and secured borders in order to provide more services to refugees and make integration easier (Ibid). The discussion of social services relates back to refugee deservingness and values of multiculturalism that are also expressed by Die Linke. The difference between the left-leaning is interesting, because despite stressing a social safety-net and multiculturalism, Die Linke differs from the SPD in defining German society as socialist; thus, the party disparages efforts to institute quotas and stricter integration policies, and finds that the government is repeating the victimization process (Die Linkeh., 2016; Die Linkef., 2016; Die Linkec., 2016).

**Conclusion**

In the discourses, there exists a clear divide between the understandings of German society as one of *Leitkultur* or one of multiculturalism. The debate between the center parties, which maintain the largest membership and each claim to be the “party of the people,” and express different understandings of what it means to be “the people.” The SPD emphasizes multiculturalism and the CDU and CSU emphasize German *Leitkultur*¸ but in each instance they are understood in different ways. Both the CDU and SPD discuss basic law as a key aspect of German identity, but paired with a sense of a leading culture, the CDU represents a more exclusive conceptualization of identity; thus, a preference for a more restrictive approach to refugee policy is not as surprising. The parties of the Great Coalition, center parties banded together on the basis of similar values and goals, differ in the emphasis placed on the role of a set of German culture and values. The CSU, as well as the AfD, placed the Islamic religion at odds with German values which could tie back to the Christian identity of the party (CSUc., 2016; CSUb., 2017; AfDd., 2017; AfDi., 2016; AfDb., 2016). Although it was not mentioned in the analysis, many of the discourses on refugees across parties brought up Islam and the connection to terrorism, but only the CSU and the AfD directly associated refugees with Islam (Ibid). The CSU mentions Muslim culture and terrorism in four of the texts, and the AfD does so in six. While the SPD and CDU also discuss terrorism as it relates to refugee policy in six different texts, they stress the separation of refugees from the terrorist acts. There seems to be a misunderstanding about Muslim culture and whether or not it has a place in German society. It would be interesting to further research the role of religious identity in Germany and how it relates to Islam. A longitudinal study on the changes within the discourse on refugees and asylum-seekers would also help to understand how discourse may shape policy.

Rather than simply characterizing party values based on policy position, the analysis provides an in-depth understanding about how German identity is being constructed in the context of the refugee resettlement crisis. This research also contributes to the identity approach to studying and understanding migration policy. Along with exposure and intertextuality which were addressed in the methodology section, Schwarz-Shea and Yanow (2012) explain that it is necessary to address reflexivity and trustworthiness when conducting interpretivist research.[[7]](#footnote-7) It is also important to recognize my status as an outsider and that American norms and values shape my own perceptions about liberalism and what is ‘good,’ although this paper does not make an argument on morality.

In my analysis of the discourses on refugees and asylum-seekers, I explained the interaction and co-constructions of discourses on refugees and German identity. This research was intended to understand how different political parties understand German identity and responsibility, and thus does not address how discourses have changed over time or make an argument about which discourse is the most dominant. In this analysis I primarily used press releases and party platforms that are made available in the archives on the websites of each party, but this does not necessarily account for the official discourse of the German government. If one were to consider only government documents, it would provide insight into official national discourse but not exhibit the debates. The concept of German *Leitkultur* was represented in a majority of the analyzed texts but was defined differently within each discourse, as was the concept of a multicultural society. Essentially, this research provides an insight to the importance and prevalence of discussions about German identity that have been brought up in the period following the refugee crisis. With respect to the state of German democracy, it shows that a variety of opinions and understandings are being represented and debated within the state and national parliaments and there is not a clear dominant narrative on German identity and history. Since these discussions are so prominent in press releases, it can be assumed that similar questions are also troubling the German public.

Although other policy debates were involved in determining the results of the state elections in March and September of 2016, it is important to note that the results showed continued political domination of the central parties - the CDU and the SPD. In all cases, however, the parties are down in seats, which have been claimed by the AfD. Refugee policy is only one of many issues that demands voter attention, but with these two parties in the lead, the discourse on policy will center on basic law with questions about a German cultural identity. The rise of the AfD contributes to the sense of an exclusive German identity.

On September 24, 2017, Germans took to the polling booths to vote for the German Chancellor and a political party for the Bundestag (Hawley 2017). The CDU/CSU led with 32.8% of the vote, followed by the SPD at 20.7%, but both parties were facing losses as the AfD claimed an unpredicted 13% of the vote (Ibid).[[8]](#footnote-8) As a result, Merkel gained a plurality of the votes for the position of Chancellor, but is unable to hold the position without the backing of a majority coalition within the Bundestag (Ibid). Meanwhile, the AfD became the first right-wing party in over half a century to win seats in the Bundestag (Ibid). On October 9th, Merkel agreed to placing a cap on the refugee intake, which she had consistently rejected up until that point, and her attempts to form a coalition continue without the support of the SPD continue (Vonberg 2017). The rise of more nationalistic and identity-exclusive discourses in Germany analyzed in this research helps to understand and explain this turn in policy. The German political spectrum has been tilted towards the right with the rise of the AfD and the fall of the SPD, which will play an important role in how the issues regarding refugee and German identity will be addressed in the upcoming years.

Appendix

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1. The Tampere European Council in 1999 tried to establish a supranational asylum policy, but it was limited by the Treaty of Nice. Lavenex uses this example to demonstrate the tension between national security and human rights. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Specifically, the definition of what constitutes protection needs has been expanded as well as safeguards against removal. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The press releases, specifically articles and interviews, were accessed from each party’s online archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Landtag elections in March of 2016 took place the states of Baden Wurttemburg, Rheinland-Palatinate, Saxony-Anhalt. The elections in September of 2016 took place in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Berlin. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Figure 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The party platform establishes that multiculturalism leads to intolerance, ghetto formation, and violence. It is also argued that aspects of Muslim culture, such as wearing the Burqa or Niqab, do not fit within the German culture or understanding of women. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Reflexivity is defined as a “consideration of how the researcher’s own characteristics matter and, where feasible, assessments of the ways in which his particular scholarly community and even the wider social milieu impact the research endeavor” (101). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The AfD was predicted to receive 7% of the vote. With the results, the SPD is facing their worst election result since World War II. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)