



Do They Really Not Know? Survey Mode and Left–Right Self-Placement Responses

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Abstract This research note investigates the influence of the survey mode on left–right self-placement using Eurobarometer data (2019–2024; $N = 771,804$) from 27 European Union countries. We show that people answering the survey via computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) provide “do not know” responses significantly less often than those surveyed through computer-assisted personal interviewing. Analysis of respondents surveyed using CAWI reveals negligible cross-country and generational differences in nonplacement, a finding that contrasts with previous studies that did not account for survey mode. Although a large proportion of “do not know” answers might stem from an unwillingness to respond to perceived sensitive questions in face-to-face settings, these differences could also strongly reflect the impact of the survey mode and the specific features of its implementation. Our findings suggest that traditional explanations of nonplacement on the left–right scale need to integrate methodological factors. We provide evidence based on international repeated cross-sectional data that highlights the survey mode as a critical, often overlooked determinant of political self-placement, urging future consideration in comparative survey research.

Keywords Survey mode · Left–right self-placement · Nonplacement · Political ideology · Eurobarometer · European Social Survey · Response behavior

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Wissen sie es wirklich nicht? Erhebungsmodus und Antworten auf die Links-Rechts-Selbsteinstufung

Zusammenfassung Diese Research Note untersucht den Einfluss des Befragungsmodus auf die Links-Rechts-Selbsteinstufung anhand von Eurobarometer-Daten (2019–2024; $N=771.804$) aus 27 EU-Mitgliedstaaten. Wir zeigen, dass Personen, die an computergestützten Web-Interviews (CAWI) teilnehmen, signifikant seltener mit „weiß nicht“ antworten als Personen, die mittels computergestützter persönlicher Interviews (CAPI) befragt werden. Eine isolierte Betrachtung der CAWI-Befragten offenbart vernachlässigbare länderübergreifende und generationelle Unterschiede bei der Verweigerung der Selbsteinstufung – ein Befund, der im Gegensatz zu früheren Studien steht, die den Befragungsmodus nicht berücksichtigten. Ein großer Teil der „Weiß-nicht“-Antworten könnte auf eine mangelnde Antwortbereitschaft zurückzuführen sein, die möglicherweise durch die wahrgenommene Sensibilität der Frage in Face-to-Face-Situationen bedingt wird; diese Unterschiede könnten jedoch auch den Einfluss des Befragungsmodus und die spezifische Art und Weise seiner Umsetzung widerspiegeln. Unsere Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass traditionelle Erklärungsmodelle für die fehlende Verortung auf der Links-Rechts-Skala methodische Faktoren integrieren müssen. Auf Basis internationaler Querschnitt-Zeitreihendaten zeigen wir, dass der Befragungsmodus eine entscheidende, oft übersehene Determinante der politischen Selbsteinstufung ist, und plädieren für dessen stärkere Berücksichtigung in der vergleichenden Umfrageforschung.

Schlüsselwörter Befragungsmodus · Links-Rechts-Selbsteinstufung · Non-Placement · Politische Ideologie · Eurobarometer · European Social Survey · Antwortverhalten

1 Background

Left–right self-placement is frequently a variable of interest used to compare political orientation across groups differentiated along lines such as gender, birth cohorts, or countries (Dassonneville 2021; Steiner 2024; Nennstiel and Hudde 2025; Gere et al. 2025). In addition, many studies examine how political ideology is related to outcomes such as party preferences, voting, or political perceptions, attitudes, preferences, and values (Thorisdottir et al. 2007; de Vries et al. 2013; Freire 2015; Lesschaeve 2017; Lachat 2018; Dassonneville 2021; Otjes and Rekker 2021; Steiner 2024).

This variable is therefore frequently collected in surveys and also used in many strands of research. The most common way to measure people’s ideology is to ask: On a scale of 1 meaning the left and 10 meaning the right, where would you place yourself? This or a similar question (Kroh 2007) is often used to measure political ideology (de Vries et al. 2013) and is included in numerous international survey programs, such as the European Social Survey, Eurobarometer, World Values Survey, International Social Survey Program, and Comparative Study of Electoral Systems.

High-quality research on political ideology relies on high response rates to this question. However, existing scholarship reveals that a substantial proportion of respondents do not provide a substantive response, instead opting for “refusal” or “do not know” responses (Mair 2007; Geser 2008; Jou and Dalton 2017; Zuell and Scholz 2019; Otjes and Rekker 2021; Wojcik et al. 2025; Steiner 2024; Nennstiel and Hudde 2025; Dassonneville and McAllister 2025). This nonresponse, whether due to inability or unwillingness to answer the question, is discussed in the literature under various terms, including nonplacement, lack of familiarity, lack of acceptance, or left–right illiteracy (Jou and Dalton 2017; Bauer et al. 2017; Otjes and Rekker 2021; Dassonneville and McAllister 2025).

Significant cross-national disparities exist in the proportion of individuals who do not place themselves on the left–right scale. For example, while more than 90% of the respondents in many Western European countries can position themselves, this figure drops to between 60% and 70% in certain postcommunist nations (Geser 2008; Jou and Dalton 2017; Otjes and Rekker 2021; Dassonneville and McAllister 2025). These differences, particularly the higher nonplacement rates observed in former communist countries compared to established Western European democracies, are often explained using theories of political socialization (Mair 2007; Otjes and Rekker 2021; Dassonneville and McAllister 2025). Cross-national and cohort differences in the share of citizens who do not place themselves on the left–right scale may stem from variations in political socialization (Geser 2008; Dassonneville 2021) and the differential salience of the left–right schema itself in countries with varying democratic experiences, such as postcommunist nations or those with a relatively recent right-authoritarian history (Geser 2008; Otjes and Rekker 2021; Dassonneville and McAllister 2025). Thereby, members of older cohorts in postcommunist and right-authoritarian countries, who were socialized under nondemocratic regimes, might often not be able to place themselves on the left–right scale. This contrasts with individuals socialized under democratic rule, which includes people from all generations in long-standing democracies and younger generations in newer democracies.

However, examining recent data from the Eurobarometer surveys (European Commission 2024) shows major variation in nonplacement response patterns that cannot be explained by differences in early-life political socialization or generational replacement (Fig. 1). Specifically, for many (postcommunist) countries—particularly those typically exhibiting high nonplacement rates—a noticeable decline in nonplacement rates is observed around 2020, followed by a sharp rebound. These patterns show a striking concurrence with changes in Eurobarometer’s survey mode. Until 2019, data in all countries were collected face to face through computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). Influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, some, but not all, countries have entirely or partially transitioned to computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) surveys for at least some of the surveys from 2020 onward.

Thus, this pronounced change could indicate an underlying effect of survey mode and mode-specific survey implementation. One substantive explanation for survey mode effects concerns the lack of anonymity for people who would be able to place themselves on the left–right scale but who prefer not to give an answer and reveal their political ideology in a personal interview. A high proportion of refusals, for instance, might indicate that some respondents perceive this question as sensitive

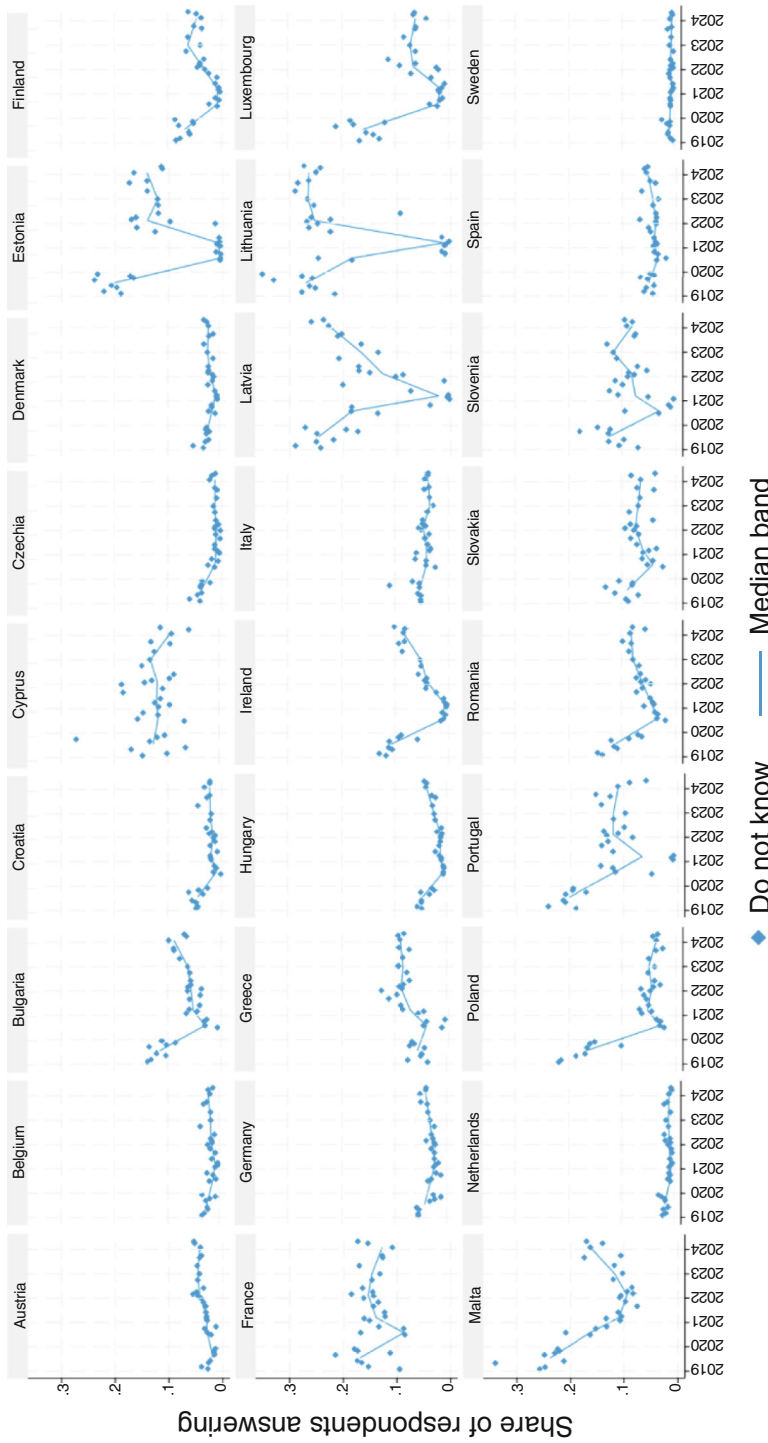


Fig. 1 Share of respondents answering “do not know” when asked about their political left–right self-placement from 2019 through 2024, across countries and surveys. (Source: Eurobarometer data; weighted data; our own calculations)

(Krumpal 2013). If the query about political ideology is perceived as sensitive, different response behaviors might emerge across survey modes (Heerwegh 2009; Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2014; Martin and Lynn 2011; Ejaz and Thornton 2025). Consequently, it might be expected that more anonymous survey modes (Kreuter et al. 2008) would lead to a lower proportion of invalid answers and an increased likelihood of respondents reporting their *true* ideological position (Ye et al. 2011).

However, because this pattern comes from observational rather than experimental data, several other mode-associated features of survey implementation might also affect the share of “do not know” answers. For instance, survey mode can affect sampling strategies, and the share of survey participation vs. nonresponse, including selectivity therein, differs by survey mode (Pforr and Dannwolf 2017; Xena and Lynn 2024). For example, Pforr and Dannwolf (2017) found that CAWI participants had, on average, slightly higher political interest, which could produce a systematically lower share of “do not know” answers. In addition, the specific implementation of the questionnaire design could differ by mode, introducing variation in the salience or visibility of the “do not know” category. If a “do not know” option is explicitly visible rather than only implicitly available (e.g., when it is not read aloud in a CAPI interview and recorded only when respondents state it unprompted), this visual prominence typically leads to a higher rate of “do not know” responses (Krosnick 1991). Moreover, in face-to-face interviews, interviewer behavior might directly influence response behavior (Sanchez and Morchio 1992). Interviewers could actively probe initial hesitations and motivate respondents to provide substantive answers, which could result in a lower probability of recording a “do not know” response. Should cross-temporal and cross-country variation in response patterns manifest primarily under certain survey mode conditions, this would challenge the socialization theory and the idea that some national and cohort groups are frequently unable to place themselves.

Building on existing research concerning nonplacement and prompted by the observed rapid changes in response patterns (Fig. 1), we aimed to investigate the extent to which survey mode is associated with nonplacement on the left–right scale. Our research note thus contributes substantively to the literature on differences in left–right nonplacement across countries (Otjes and Rekker 2021; Dassonneville and McAllister 2025). Furthermore, it offers a methodological contribution to research on potential survey influences on response behavior to this question. Although there is methodological research investigating, for example, how response format and open or closed questions affect ideological self-placement answers (Kroh 2007; Bauer et al. 2017; Zuell and Scholz 2019; Otjes and Rekker 2021), little is known about the extent to which response behavior on the left–right scale varies depending on the survey mode (Vannieuwenhuyze et al. 2010; Liu and Wang 2015; Pforr and Dannwolf 2017). Our study relies on observational rather than experimental data, precluding the identification of a causal survey mode effect. However, our overarching objective is not to pinpoint the exact causal origin of these differences but rather to caution researchers that substantive analyses of nonplacement might be highly sensitive to the survey mode and related aspects of survey administration.

We used Eurobarometer data from 27 European countries for the years 2019–2024 (European Commission 2024), which are ideal for our inquiry due to their cross-

country and cross-temporal variation in survey mode (31 surveys; $N=771,804$). Our approach was guided by existing studies that distinguish nonplacement on the left–right scale across countries, country groups, and birth cohorts (Mair 2007; Geser 2008; Otjes and Rekker 2021; Dassonneville and McAllister 2025). Consequently, we present separate analyses for the 27 European Union (EU) countries, for distinct country groups (postcommunist, post–right-authoritarian, and continuously democratic countries; cf. Otjes and Rekker 2021), and for various birth cohorts in order to contrast the role of survey mode with that of generational replacement.

2 Empirical Approach

2.1 Data

We used the data from the Eurobarometers from 2019 through 2024 (European Commission 2024). The Eurobarometer is a cross-sectional survey conducted in various European countries, in which between 500 and 1000 respondents per wave and country are interviewed, depending on the country’s size. The survey targets residents aged 15 and older in the 27 EU member states who are nationals of the respective country or citizens of another EU member state. We only used data from the 27 EU countries that participated in all surveys during this period. We used all Eurobarometers in which left–right self-placement was surveyed during this period (31 surveys).¹

Prior to 2020, all Eurobarometer surveys were conducted exclusively via CAPI. The standard sampling design for these face-to-face surveys is a multistage random probability sample. In most countries, this relies on a geographic random route procedure to select households, combined with an in-person selection mechanism such as the closest-birthday rule to choose the final respondent. The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a shift toward CAWI where physical interviews were restricted or unfeasible. The sampling procedures for these online surveys differ from the traditional approach because they rely on probabilistic online panels or telephone to web recruitment rather than geographic household enumeration. The sampling for CAPI was generally based on a probabilistic sampling approach, ensuring equal selection chances for all individuals. In countries utilizing a mixed mode approach, respondents were rarely given a choice between the two formats. Instead, mode selection was implemented sequentially; CAPI remained the primary target method, and CAWI was deployed as a supplementary measure to reach sample size quotas when CAPI targets could not be fulfilled within the designated fieldwork period. However, in countries where both methods were deployed concurrently (e.g., Sweden in EB 93.1), there is potential for selection into mode (Pforr and Dannwolf 2017; Xena and Lynn 2024). This potential self-selection required us to control for known confounding variables when analyzing the data (for more detailed informa-

¹ Survey-specific sample sizes and response rates are presented in parts C and D of the electronic supplementary material (ESM).

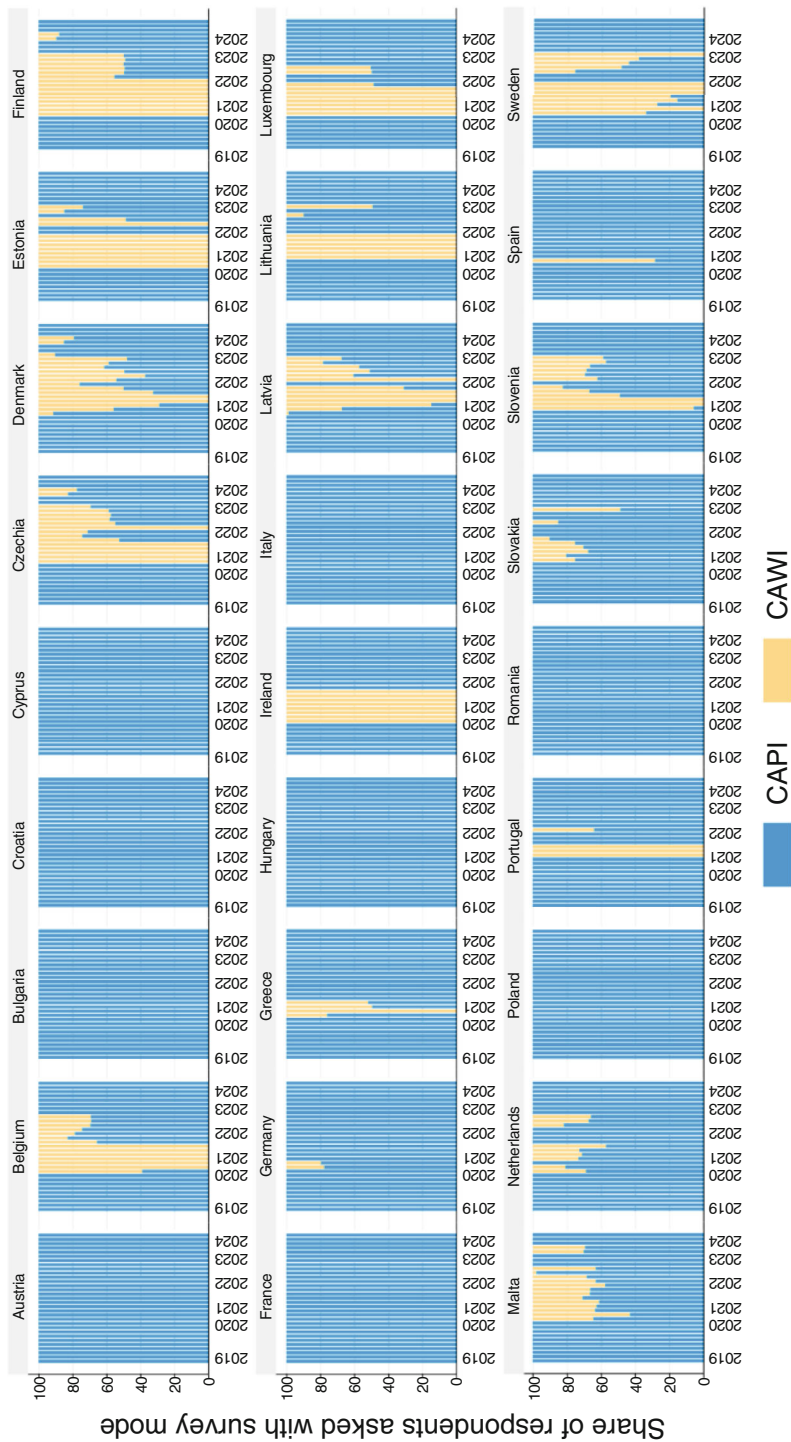


Fig. 2 Share of respondents interviewed with different survey modes from 2019 through 2024, across countries and surveys. Eurobarometer surveys are displayed in chronological (time of survey) order. *CAPI* computer-assisted personal interviewing, *CAWI* computer-assisted web interviewing. (Source: Eurobarometer data; weighted data; our own calculations)

tion regarding the sampling procedures, see Sect. E in the electronic supplementary material [ESM]).

Figure 2 shows the individual Eurobarometer surveys and the proportion of respondents with different survey modes across time. Nine countries never changed the survey mode. Across 18 countries, at least one survey wave incorporated CAWI for some respondents. For some of these surveys, both CAWI and CAPI modes were simultaneously available, and a possible selection into the survey mode and into survey participation must be taken into account. Therefore, in our regression models we control for variables that may act as potential confounders, influencing both the propensity to participate in the survey (mode) and the self-positioning on the left–right scale. Based on the existing literature, gender, age, cohort affiliation, education, subjective social class, financial situation, place of residence, and internet usage were identified as relevant factors and are included in the models (Dalton et al. 2011; Pforr and Dannwolf 2017; Otjes and Rekker 2021; Xena and Lynn 2024; Dassonneville and McAllister 2025; Nennstiel and Hudde 2025). Details on the operationalization of these variables, the wording of the questions, and the answer scale can be found in Part B of the ESM.

Political self-placement was measured on a scale from 1 (left) to 10 (right) using the following question: “In political matters people talk of ‘the left’ and ‘the right.’ How would you place your views on this scale?” Respondents were also given the options of refusal or “do not know.” Both CAPI and CAWI utilized standardized digital frameworks to collect this information. In both the CAPI and CAWI modes, these nonresponse options were programmed as hidden codes. Initially, the screen that the respondent (CAWI) or interviewer (CAPI) saw displayed solely the substantive 1–10 scale points. Hence, the nonresponse options were not prompted or read out to the respondent at this stage. If a respondent in CAWI or an interviewer in CAPI attempted to proceed to the next question without selecting a score, a subsequent screen appeared. Only at this stage did the “do not know” and refusal options become visible and available for selection (Fig. F1 in the ESM). We created a binary indicator that shows whether “do not know” answers were given (1) or not (0). Consistent with existing research (Otjes and Rekker 2021; Dassonneville and McAllister 2025), we exclusively considered “do not know” responses in our primary analysis. For the *survey mode*, we created an indicator that shows whether the survey was conducted using CAPI (0) or CAWI (1).

We operationalized *generation* by birth year, distinguishing the following cohorts (Dassonneville 2021; Steiner 2024): Silent Generation (1925–1945), Baby Boomers (1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1980), Generation Y (1981–1996), and Generation Z (1997–2009). Members of the Greatest Generation (1910–1924) were excluded from the analyses due to an insufficient number of cases. We categorized the *country groups* according to the typology established by Otjes and Rekker (2021) into postcommunist countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, and Slovakia), post–right-authoritarian countries (Greece, Spain, and Portugal), and countries that were continuously democratic after World War II (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, and Sweden).

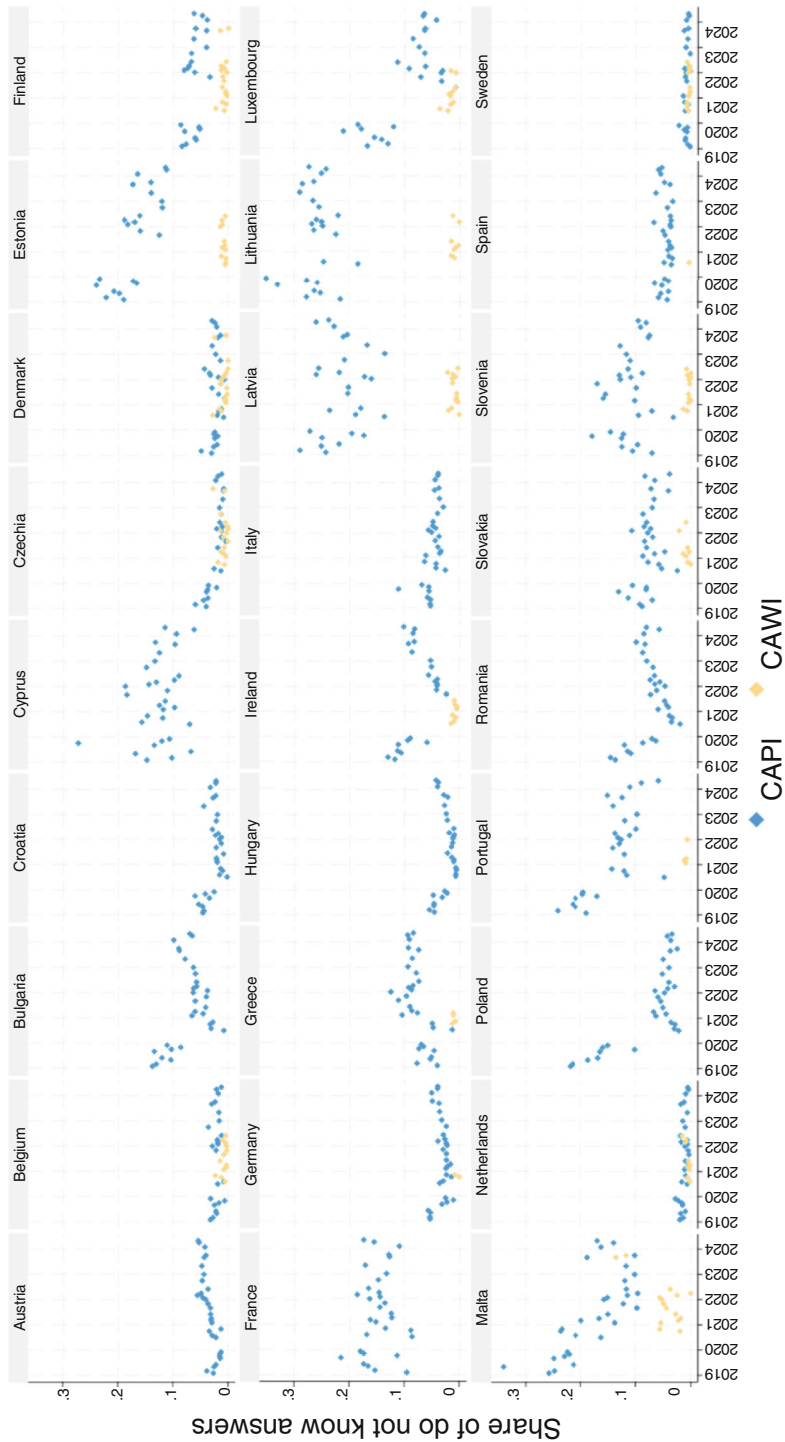


Fig. 3 Share of respondents answering “do not know” when asked about their political left–right self-placement from 2019 through 2024, differentiated by survey mode, across countries and surveys. In nine countries, respondents were interviewed only using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). CAWI computer-assisted web interviewing. (Source: Eurobarometer data; weighted data; our own calculations)

For our analyses, we considered all individuals who were at least 18 years old at the time of the survey and who had no missing values in the model variables ($N=771,804$). In general, the proportion of missing values in the individual variables is quite low (e.g., education 2%, subjective social class 2%, and financial situation 1%).

2.2 Statistical Procedure

We proceeded step by step in our analyses. Reflecting our first step, we present bivariate results for each country. Figure 3 displays the proportion of respondents who selected “do not know,” disaggregated by survey mode.² For these bivariate analyses, we incorporated the poststratification weights provided by the data producer.

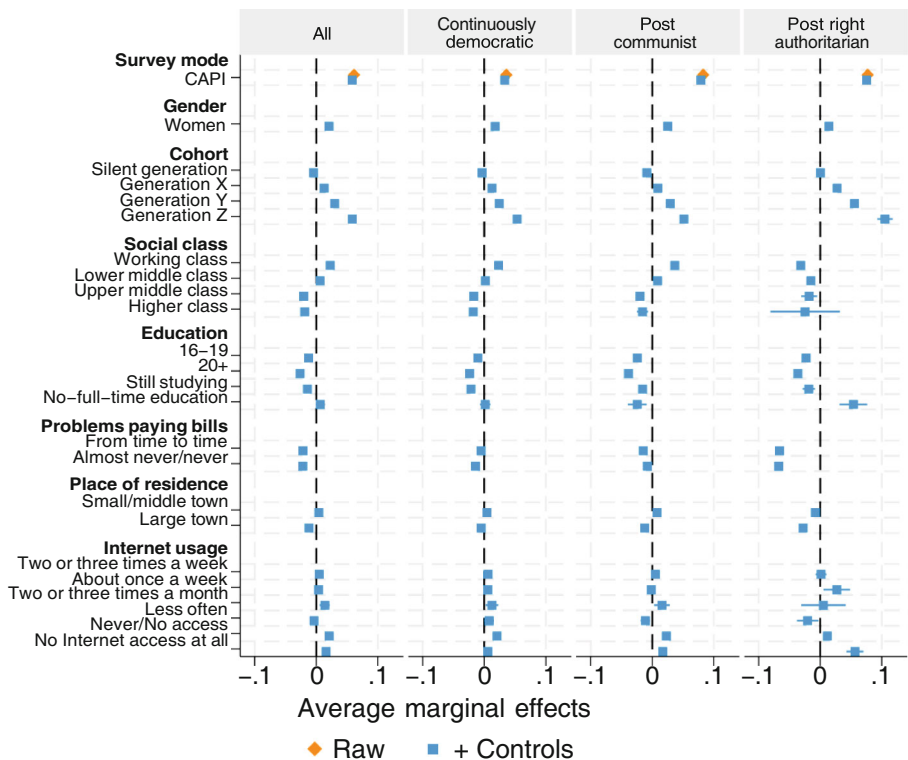


Fig. 4 Average marginal effects on the probability of answering “do not know” when asked about political left–right self-placement (pooled data from 2019 through 2024), differentiated by country groups. Reference categories are survey mode (reference: computer-assisted web interviewing), gender (reference: men), cohort (reference: Baby Boomer), social class (reference: middle class), education (reference: up to age 15), problems paying bills (reference: most of the time), place of residence (reference: village) and internet usage (reference: every day/almost every day). Estimates are based on logistic regression models. Average marginal effects for country fixed effects and survey fixed effects are not displayed. *CAPI* computer-assisted personal interviewing. (Source: Eurobarometer data; our own calculations)

² A bivariate depiction across different birth cohorts, disaggregated by survey mode, is presented in Fig. G1 in the ESM.

In a second step, we estimated two different logistic regression models based on the pooled data. We applied these models sequentially: first to the entire pooled dataset, then separately for continuously democratic countries, postcommunist countries, and post–right-authoritarian countries. In the first model labeled “Raw,” we included survey mode as a key predictor alongside country fixed effects and survey fixed effects to account for time-invariant country-specific variation and uniform temporal shocks. From a substantive point of view, this isolates the average effect of the mode by controlling for baseline differences in response behavior between nations and general shifts in public opinion across time (e.g., the outbreak of the pandemic). Although this assumes that temporal shocks affect countries uniformly rather than controlling for country by wave idiosyncrasies, it provides a robust general baseline of the mode coefficient before individual-level controls are introduced. In the second model, designated “+Controls,” and in accordance with the rationale presented above, we additionally incorporated several sociostructural control variables: gender, birth cohort, subjective social class, education, household financial situation, place of residence, and internet usage. Based on these models, we calculated the average marginal effects (AMEs) for all model variables (Fig. 4).

Finally, to statistically test differences in response patterns by survey mode across birth cohorts, we estimated an additional model (model 3) by incorporating an interaction term between survey mode and cohorts. Based on this model, we then

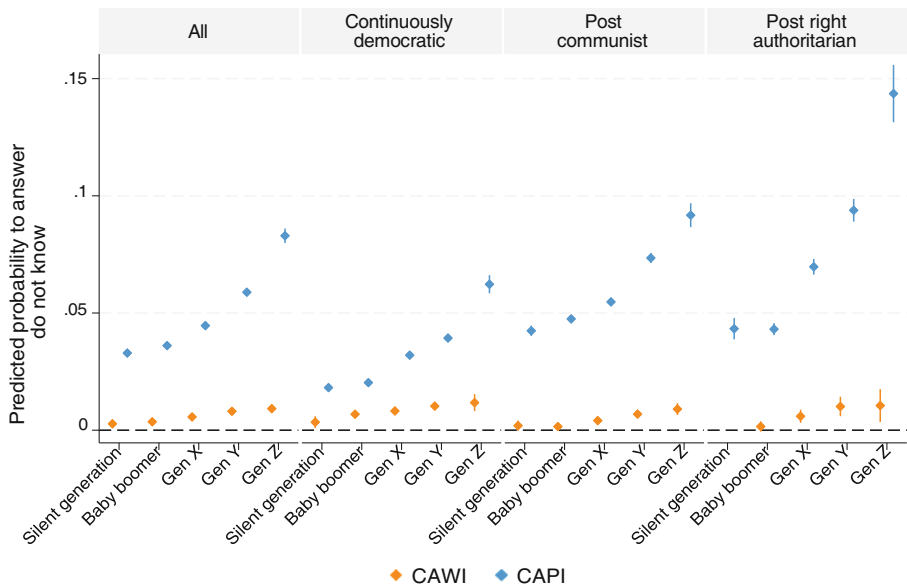


Fig. 5 Predicted probabilities of answering “do not know” when asked about political left–right self-placement (pooled data from 2019 through 2024) for different birth cohorts (Silent Generation [1925–1945], Baby Boomers [1946–1964], Generation X [1965–1980], Generation Y [1981–1996], Generation Z [1997–2009]), differentiated by country groups. Estimates are based on logistic regression models (model 3). Other variables are kept at the mean. See Fig. H1 in the electronic supplementary material for the prediction based on keeping the other variables at the observed values. *CAPI* computer-assisted personal interviewing, *CAWI* computer-assisted web interviewing. (Source: Eurobarometer data; our own calculations)

estimated the probability of responding “do not know” for each country group and birth cohort, disaggregated by survey mode (Fig. 5).

3 Results

3.1 Bivariate Results

Figure 3 illustrates the proportion of “do not know” responses to the left–right self-placement question, differentiated by country and survey mode. First, the figure reveals substantial heterogeneity in the proportion of “do not know” answers across countries (e.g., see the very low levels in Sweden and high levels in Estonia). Second, it is striking that respondents in the CAWI mode provided “do not know” answers significantly less frequently; indeed, this proportion drops almost to zero universally with CAWI. This marked reduction is particularly evident in countries that previously exhibited high nonplacement rates. Interestingly, in some countries that reverted from CAWI to CAPI, the share of “do not know” answers rose to a level comparable to that in 2019 (e.g., Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, and Ireland). These findings suggest that survey mode and related aspects of survey administration may exert a relevant influence on the proportion of “do not know” responses. However, these observations could also be influenced by selective survey participation contingent on the survey mode. Therefore, we now turn to regression models that account for potential confounders.

3.2 Regression Results

Regression models that test the partial link between survey mode (CAPI vs. CAWI) and the probability of responding “do not know” show robust and statistically significant associations. The coefficients for survey mode are consistent in the “Raw” models that include only country and survey fixed effects and those that include sociostructural controls and potential confounders (Fig. 4). Specifically, respondents participating via CAPI are significantly more likely to provide a “do not know” response compared to those using CAWI. Across all countries, this difference amounts to 5.8 percentage points in the models that include potential confounders. More specifically, the discrepancy is 3.3 percentage points in continuously democratic countries, 7.9 percentage points in postcommunist countries, and 7.5 percentage points in post–right-authoritarian countries.³

³ We conducted additional analyses restricted to the 18 countries with at least one CAWI survey wave and respondents who provided a valid placement on the left–right scale ($N=466,639$). These results suggest that the mean left–right self-placement also differs between CAPI and CAWI respondents after potential confounders were controlled for (Fig. J1 in the ESM). In many countries, CAPI respondents place themselves further to the left on the scale; however, in some countries, they place themselves significantly further to the right. This suggests that the survey mode and related aspects of survey administration might influence ideological estimates differently depending on the country. However, it is important to note that this finding is merely descriptive and is based exclusively on those respondents who placed themselves on the scale.

Figure 5 displays the predicted probabilities of a “do not know” response, disaggregated by cohort and survey mode (controlling for potential confounders) across the various country clusters. For respondents using the CAWI mode, the predicted probabilities of a “do not know” response are low and do not substantially differ across country clusters or cohorts. The CAPI respondents have a higher predicted probability of a “do not know” response across all country clusters. There are cohort differences among CAPI respondents, with younger cohorts demonstrating higher predicted probabilities of responding “do not know.” Consistent with previous research, we also observe established differences between country clusters: The predicted probability for “do not know” is lowest in continuously democratic countries, followed by post–right-authoritarian and postcommunist countries.

3.3 Robustness Checks

We conducted additional analyses to assess the robustness of our findings (Part K in the ESM). First, we reestimated our primary models using only the 18 countries (see Fig. 2) that employed the CAWI survey mode at least once ($N=519,504$; Figs. K1–K3 in the ESM). The results are largely consistent with our main findings.

Furthermore, we estimated country-specific regression models for these 18 countries to examine how the probability of providing a “do not know” response differs between CAWI and CAPI respondents across individual nations. In the statistical models accounting for controls (Fig. K4 in the ESM), we observe a positive coefficient for the CAPI indicator in all 18 countries, which is statistically significant in 14 of them. These results support the findings presented above, indicating that respondents surveyed via CAWI are less likely to answer “do not know” than those surveyed via CAPI.

Additionally, results for the “refusal” response category (Dassonneville and McAllister 2025) are reported in the ESM (Part I). The results for this outcome

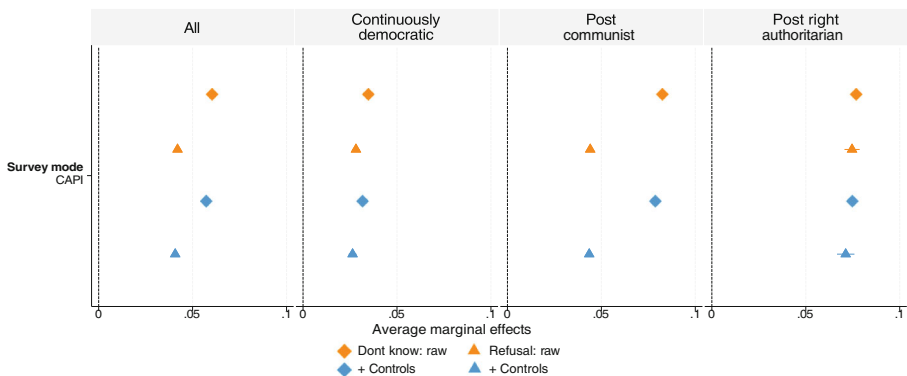


Fig. 6 Average marginal effects of survey mode (computer-assisted personal interviewing [CAPI] compared to computer-assisted web interviewing) on the probability of answering “do not know” or refusing to answer when asked about political left–right self-placement (pooled data from 2019 through 2024), differentiated by country groups. Estimates are based on multinomial logistic regression models. Average marginal effects for control variables, country fixed effects, and survey fixed effects are not displayed. (Source: Eurobarometer data; our own calculations)

point in a similar direction to those for the “do not know” outcome, indicating that respondents surveyed via CAWI are less likely to answer “refuse” than those surveyed via CAPI. Moreover, to explicitly and simultaneously incorporate both forms of item nonresponse, we conducted supplementary analyses using multinomial logistic regression models (see Fig. 6 and Fig. K5 in the ESM for all coefficients). Existing methodological research emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between “do not know” answers and explicit refusals because they might stem from distinct cognitive processes (Shoemaker et al. 2002; Silber et al. 2021). “Do not know” responses are generally associated with the cognitive effort required to process a survey item, whereas refusals are connected to both cognitive effort and the perceived sensitivity of the question. The results demonstrate that respondents surveyed via CAPI exhibit a higher probability of refusing to answer as well as to answer “do not know,” which aligns with the findings from the binary logistic regression models in which refusal and “do not know” were included as separate outcomes.

Finally, we performed additional analyses using data from the European Social Survey (ESS), specifically waves 9, 10, and 11, collected between 2018 and 2023. In ESS wave 10, some countries utilized self-administered survey modes. Because the ESS data do not distinguish between “do not know” and “refusal” for nonplacement in these countries, we report the overall proportion of respondents who did not place themselves (Fig. K6 in the ESM). Here, too, we observe that the proportion of nonplacement answers is lower in self-administered modes. This difference is particularly notable in countries with comparatively high preexisting nonplacement rates (e.g., Latvia and Poland). Additional logistic regression models based on the countries that implemented a self-administered mode at least once also show that the proportion of nonplacement answers is lower in self-administered modes (Fig. K7 in the ESM). However, when the different self-administered formats are compared, it becomes apparent that variations exist between them. The fact that CAWI and paper and pencil interviewing (PAPI) appear to differ despite both being self-administered suggests that additional mechanisms beyond the mere presence or absence of anonymity likely contribute to the observed nonresponse patterns.

In summary, these robustness checks support the substantive conclusions of this research note.

4 Summary

Our research note utilizing Eurobarometer data from 27 EU countries ($N=771,804$; 2019–2024) demonstrates that response behavior to the left–right self-placement question differs significantly between respondents surveyed via CAPI and CAWI. Specifically, individuals surveyed through CAWI are significantly less likely to provide a “do not know” response.

The substantial cross-country differences in nonplacement commonly reported in the literature (e.g., comparing postcommunist and Western European countries; Mair 2007; Geser 2008; Jou and Dalton 2017; Zuell and Scholz 2019; Otjes and Rekker 2021; Wojcik et al. 2025; Steiner 2024; Nennstiel and Hudde 2025; Dassonneville

and McAllister 2025) are markedly reduced among CAWI respondents. Among those surveyed via CAWI, left–right literacy or acceptance of this scale exceeds 90% across the observed countries. Furthermore, unlike with CAPI, individuals surveyed via CAWI exhibit scarcely any substantial generational differences in their nonplacement behavior. These findings lead us to conclude that prevailing explanatory models based on political socialization, characteristics of the party system, and political culture (Geser 2008; Jou and Dalton 2017; Otjes and Rekker 2021; Dassonneville and McAllister 2025) must be complemented by methodological considerations related to the survey mode.

These core findings are further supported by our robustness checks. Supplementary analyses using multinomial logistic regression reveal that CAWI respondents exhibit a lower probability both of answering “do not know” and explicitly refusing to answer compared to CAPI respondents (Shoemaker et al. 2002; Silber et al. 2021). In addition, analyses utilizing data from the ESS confirm that the proportion of nonplacement answers is generally lower in self-administered modes. Interestingly, however, comparing different self-administered formats in the ESS reveals variations between CAWI and PAPI. This suggests that mechanisms beyond the mere presence or absence of anonymity likely contribute to the observed nonresponse patterns.

One potential mechanism worth noting relates to the visual and functional design of the survey interface. As detailed in our operationalization, translating a spontaneous response from an interviewer format into a self-administered one can pose a substantial challenge for mode equivalence. The nonresponse options were not explicitly shown on the screen that the interviewer was supposed to read out during the personal interviews. However, the dynamics of a natural conversation may allow respondents to express uncertainty more easily. In a conversational setting, a hesitant respondent can simply vocalize their indecision, prompting the interviewer to record a spontaneous lack of knowledge or refusal. Further, interviewers may have known that the nonresponse options existed on the next screen and might have deviated from the protocol and offered these options, for instance, when the respondent did not answer immediately. In the Eurobarometer CAWI implementation, by contrast, these options were hidden behind an additional action, requiring respondents to attempt to proceed without answering before the choices became visible. Sitting alone in front of a screen that initially displays only the 1–10 scale, a respondent might feel more compelled to select one of the visible numbers rather than attempting to skip the question. This interface choice rendered these options less salient in the web format, which might, at least in part, contribute to the exceptionally low nonplacement rates in CAWI. Consequently, the apparent mode differences we observe may reflect not only differences in the social interview situation but also the interface decisions required to translate spontaneous responses across modes. Ultimately, we argue that this points to a broader measurement challenge in mixed-mode and changing-mode surveys: There might often be no straightforward way to transition between survey formats while perfectly maintaining the equivalent availability and salience of nonresponse options.

A limitation of our study is its reliance on repeated cross-sectional data in which the assignment to a survey mode was not randomized within an experimental setting (Vannieuwenhuyze et al. 2010; Pforr and Dannwolf 2017; Xena and Lynn 2024).

Consequently, we do not claim to have identified causal survey mode effects. While our descriptive findings provide strong evidence that response behavior varies by survey mode, we cannot separate the possible sources of these differences. Substantively, a large proportion of “do not know” and refusal responses might reflect an unwillingness to answer a perceived sensitive question in a face-to-face setting, making respondents more forthcoming in a more anonymous mode (Kreuter et al. 2008; Krumpal 2013). However, we cannot rule out alternative methodological explanations driven by mode-associated features of survey implementation. Differences in sampling strategies, varying degrees of selection bias into specific mode questionnaires, design variations such as the explicit visual prominence of a “do not know” option (Krosnick 1991), and the absence of interviewer probing (Sanchez and Morchio 1992) could all systematically affect the share of nonplacement answers.

Given that survey programs are increasingly shifting from face-to-face interviews to self-administered modes of interviews, it is crucial to keep the findings on the response behavior to the left–right self-placement question in mind. In particular, researchers must consider how specific interface choices might alter the salience of nonresponse options when transitioning between survey formats. Ultimately, these results should prompt a thorough examination of whether the survey mode and its specific implementation features can be conclusively ruled out as potential explanatory factors for observed differences in (repeated) cross-sectional or cross-country analyses.

Supplementary Information The online version of this article (<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11615-026-00691-5>) contains supplementary material, which is available to authorized users.

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Data availability statement See Part A in the ESM for the datasets used and how to obtain them. Replication materials, including the Stata code for data management and analysis, are available at <https://osf.io/q9smw/>.

Declarations

Conflict of interest R. Nennstiel and A. Hudde declare that they have no competing interests.

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