

Electoral Choices in Mature and Consolidating European Democracies

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0. Introduction

This article is about the context dependence of the vote function.¹ While this expression was first coined in studies of aggregate election results (e.g. Goodhart & Bhansali 1970; Kramer 1971), we are interested in the choices that individual citizens make in national legislative elections. The general question which we are trying to answer is the following: are the determinants of vote choices of citizens dependent on the socio-political environment in which they are operating? The analytical instruments that we will utilise are hardly breathtaking. They are derived from the Michigan funnel of causality in which social background factors are going first in predicting the vote, partisanship comes secondly, and short-term factors like issues and candidates are coming last. Given the profound and lasting differences in party alignments of citizens in mature and consolidating European democracies (measured at the aggregate level), we expect to find systematic differences in the vote function of individual citizens for these two groups of countries too.

¹ This is a thoroughly revised version of a paper that was presented at the International Conference on the European Social Survey in Nikosia, Cyprus, November 23-25, 2012. We would like to acknowledge helpful comments of the participants of this conference. Remaining shortcomings are entirely our own.

1. Parties and voters

In representative democracies, elections are at the heart of the process of public opinion formation and political decision-making. Political parties organize these elections. The relation between voters and parties is central for the quality of representative democracy. Political science has developed several aggregate indicators to describe this relation, and we will put those to use. The comparison of determinants of voting behaviour can provide us with additional information; we will turn to them in a second step.

We will first assess the degree of consolidation of the electoral and party systems under study. Four standard indicators are used to do this. The first two characterize the party system – its fragmentation (how many parties there are) and ideological polarization (how distant the parties are from one another). The other two describe voters' partisan attitudes and behaviour – namely their partisanship (whether they have a standard preference and if so for which party) and their electoral volatility (whether they vote for the same party in successive elections). These are all aggregate data. The analysis of aggregate data provides only limited information. In the following, we therefore focus our analysis on the determinants of individual voting behaviour in 19 European party systems, including east and west Germany separately. In the Michigan tradition, we estimate fairly straightforward models of vote choice which distinguish between the social-structural antecedents of the vote, the role of partisanship, and the impact of the ideological distance between voters and parties (the latter standing in for issue effects). Leader effects cannot be estimated with the dataset we use.

Given that the predictors of the vote that we can employ in the current analyses require some time to acquire their full potential, we generally expect the models for the post-communist systems to display a somewhat weaker explanatory power. Social inequalities have had little time to be transformed in and represented as socio-political cleavages in the new post-communist democracies. Similarly, there was little time for party attachment to solidify, or stabilise and grow, in repeated elections, or for a powerful and consequential understanding of the left-right dimension of political conflict to develop. The four rounds of the European Social Survey offer an opportunity to investigate the relevance of three key determinants of electoral behaviour – social position, partisanship, and the left-right distance to relevant parties – for the voting behaviour of individual citizens in the consolidated western democracies and in the new post-socialist democracies.

2. Party systems in consolidated and post-communist democracies

We consider aggregate-level contrasts between consolidated and post-communist party systems first before we move to the individual level of analysis. In doing so, we use the stability of party choice (volatility), the number of relevant parties (fragmentation), the degree of partisanship and the degree of ideological conflict (polarization). For indicators based on election results, we study the elections between 2000-2005 and 2006-2010; for survey-based measures, we base our indicators on ESS survey rounds 1 and 2 (2002-2004) and rounds 3 and 4 (2006-2008).

The results are straightforward. Party systems in post-communist countries are more fragmented and more polarized than those in western Europe. In addition, voters there are more volatile and less partisan (Table 1). Over time, fragmentation is increasing in the west, while polarisation is increasing in the east. If we look at the German samples, partisanship is more common in the west than in the east. Ideological polarization in the east is higher than in the west, even though it increased from a very low starting point in west Germany as well in the second half of the 2000s.

Table 1
The developments of the party systems in east and west Europe
and in eastern and western Germany in the first decade of the
21st century (index values)

	Europe West		Germany West		Germany East		Europe East	
	2000- 2005	2006- 2010	2000- 2005	2006- 2010	2000- 2005	2006- 2010	2000- 2005	2006- 2010
Volatility ^a	10	8	7	12	11	12	18	21
Fragmentation ^b	4.4	4.8	4.1	5.6	4.1	5.6	5.4	4.3
Partisanship ^c	49	50	44	49	35	37	35	37
Polarisation ^d	28	30	28	30	27	38	30	37

Notes:

- a) The volatility index, calculated according to Pedersen (1979), measures the amount of volatility in aggregate party choice.
b) Based on the values put online by Gallagher (2010); he uses the effective number of electoral parties according to Laakso and Taagepera (1979).
c) Proportions of respondents who feel “close to a party” according to the ESS survey; data are weighted.
d) Polarisation index according to van der Eijk et al. (2005); data are weighted; countries are weighted equally in the European averages, while Germany is excluded from those averages.

The most obvious east-west contrasts concern volatility and partisanship. They correspond to the central pattern in explanations of the fluidity of post-communist party systems: the lack of partisanship leads to increased volatility in party choice and, in turn, adds to the high fluidity of the party system. However, one cannot attribute the instability of party systems to electoral

volatility alone, but must also observe the supply side, i.e. the changing identities and alliances of political elites. Not every new party is really new, and what looks like a change in party choice may reflect loyalty to the previously chosen party in a new guise (Sikk 2005). Margit Tavits (2008: 537) puts it this way: “The choices of elites may be more responsible for instability in the early stages of party system development than the erratic behaviour of voters.” The degree of volatility has indeed reduced visibly after the first decade of democratic politics, but the causes and thus the sustainability of such development is not entirely clear (Agh 1998; Tavits 2005).

We will discuss possible explanations of these aggregate-level differences between the electoral systems of the post-communist and democratically consolidated western Europe with regard to three categories: social cleavages, partisanship, and the left-right dimension. All three are long-term factors affecting behaviour. The higher degree of consolidation in western Europe should reflect itself in a superior role that these long-term determinants of voting behaviour play.

2.1 Social Structure

Social cleavages are historical social conflicts which are interpreted and organized by political parties in society and represented by them in the political arena, most visibly and effectively in parliament (Lipset and Rokkan 1967, Bartolini and Mair 1990). A cleavage involves more than basic social conflicts and clashes of interests; it requires political elites who interpret the two sides of the conflict and organize it. Interpretation and partisan organisation require time and opportunity. A sustained and firmly established political representation of social conflicts can thus hardly have evolved in the new democracies of Eastern Europe.

After an initial overestimation of socio-structural explanations of party system development (see Whitefield 2002), the cleavage concept has not proved to be particularly helpful in understanding political processes in Eastern Europe. Allan Sikk (2006: 164) concludes: “[...] Sociological explanations of party system change and new party emergence that have worked well in the past elsewhere are not particularly useful in explaining the success of major new parties in the Baltic countries.” And this applies not only to the three Baltic States, but for the post-communist systems of eastern Europe in general (e.g. Zielinski 2002).

The two parts of Germany might represent a special case here because re-unification fostered a sizeable population exchange. This was primarily from east to west, but also in the

opposite direction, especially for members of the professional classes with leadership roles. Eastern Germany is not a post-communist society shielded by national borders and language barriers, and internal migration has also affected western Germany, which has not retained the same consolidated and structured political system from before unification. As for the importance of social structure for party choice, in eastern Germany we should find the social contours of the electoral choice familiar from the old Federal Republic (see Schmitt 2001 for a comparison over time), while the relative clarity of these contours should have become less sharp in the west since unification.

2.2 Partisanship

Partisanship is less common in post-communist systems than in consolidated democracies, and it also works differently. It is less common because it needs time to develop and stabilize (Converse 1969). Two decades are only a short time span in this regard, in particular when the development of partisanship in many places has to start from scratch with little memorable history and organisational continuity to build on (disregarding the communist party in this respect). The development and stabilization of partisanship, in addition, requires favourable conditions and here in particular a party system with stable parties whose political behaviour and electoral appeals offer the public a sound basis for building their judgements on. Also in this respect, the preconditions for the development of partisanship known from consolidated democracies are still limited in the post-communist world. It is thus hardly surprising that partisanship there is still shaky and that it has less of an impact on individual electoral choices (Schmitt 2009; Dalton and Weldon 2007).²

The two parts of Germany can again be considered to be a special case, because the division between East and West Germany was not impermeable (e.g. Schmitt 1992). With only few exceptions GDR citizens could over decades participate virtually in the party politics of the West³, even though the consolidation of party preferences through the act of voting was not possible in the East. We therefore expect that partisanship in consolidated democracies is much better developed than in the post-communist systems, and that both parts of Germany follow the model of the consolidated democracies.

² However, this does not mean that a different or negative type of party attachment has developed, as suggested by earlier analyses (e.g. Rose and Mischler 1998).

³ West German radio and television could be received everywhere in the GDR except the area around Dresden – the “Valley of the Ignorant”. A good example of the attitude of East Germans towards West German parties and their political leaders manifested itself in the public celebration of FRG chancellor Willy Brandt’s visit to Erfurt in March 1970 – two decades before unification.

2.3. Policy issues and the left-right scheme

Differences between electoral systems in post-communist eastern Europe and the consolidated West might also originate in the political problems faced by actors. Ideological orientations of political actors manifest themselves in positions that political actors adopt in political controversies and in the salience they assign to problems. These ideological orientations, in Europe and beyond, relate to the left-right dimension. This can be regarded as a heuristic that allows citizens and voters to make rational choices, even with limited and incomplete information (Downs 1957; Sniderman et al. 1991). The left-right dimension is therefore sometimes referred to as a super-issue that bundles together a range of policy preferences (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976).

However, both the performance and the meaning of the left-right heuristic are context-specific (Schmitt and van der Eijk 2009). “Left” and “right” do not always have the same connotations, and the left-right dimension does not always satisfactorily integrate all current political issues. We know for the post-communist systems of eastern Europe that during the transition process and shortly thereafter the meaning of ideological terms were actually inverted: “During perestroika the ‘left’ came to denote the free-market democrats and liberals, and the ‘right’ the devotees of socialism and the communist system” (Sakwa 1996: 44; with similar findings Park 1993; Markowski 1997; Whitefield and Evans 1998). In addition, the left-right position of political parties in post-communist systems has significantly less to do with their current policies than in the west (van der Eijk and Schmitt 2010).

Again, we expect a special case for Germany. The fact that political actors from both parts of Germany live in a single public sphere and are in constant communication means that the left-right heuristic is largely identical in west and east.

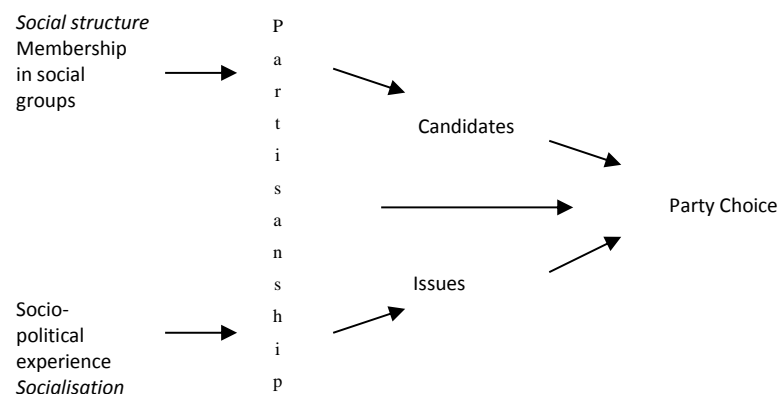
3. Factors influencing voting behaviour

The Michigan tradition of electoral research distinguishes between stable, long-term determinants of electoral choices and short-term factors that can vary from election to election. Visualized in the so-called *funnel of causality*, long-term factors influence the electoral choice both directly and also indirectly through their effect on short-term factors (Figure 1). At the wide-end of the funnel we find the effects of social structure. Coalitions between social groups and political parties as assumed by the cleavage theory (Stinchcombe 1975) do not

change in short periods. They can break, however, as the American research on *critical elections* and *realignment* demonstrates (for a review see Mayhew 2000). At long intervals – in the United States this seems to be about half a century – large groups of voters have changed their party preferences permanently. In the European debate, however, the opposite perspective is rather prominent: Here we speak more of *dealignment*, i.e. the erosion of established coalitions, and thus the uncoupling of social background and political orientation (Dalton et al. 1984, Franklin et al. 1992; for the particular case of Germany cf. Müller 2000 and Schmitt 2001).

Figure 1

The theoretical model



Source: Adapted from Campbell et al. (1960)

Although social structure and socialization may well have a direct effect on voting behaviour, in developed democracies they primarily act indirectly through their contribution to partisanship. Even though individual partisanship is less durable than socio-political coalitions, they are generally seen to be a stabilizing factor in party choice. There was a long discussion in Germany, France and the United Kingdom on whether the concept of party identification, originally developed in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, could be transferred to European electoral systems. More recent analyses have revealed that the original doubts (e.g. Kaase 1976) were probably based on insufficient empirical evidence (Arzheimer 2006, Schmitt-Beck et al. 2006; Kroh & Selb 2009).

Parties tend to be stable entities over a series of elections, while candidates for political leadership and the key issues at stake can vary from election to election. For this reason

alone it is obvious that partisanship must be expected to influence party choice indirectly through its impact on voters' perception of candidates and their perspectives on political issues. However, the whole model is indeterminate in regard to what the cause and what the effect is (i.e. whether the stipulated effects go in the right direction and are actually non-recursive).⁴

Leaving aside the question of causality and the direction of the effects, we expect all these relationships to be much weaker in the post-communist democracies than in the consolidated democracies. This applies perhaps least to social inequalities, which (organized or not) should find their way into vote choices. For partisanship, however, we expect weaker effects, as we do for issue effects as they find their expression in the left-right scheme and, operationally, in left-right distances. Within Germany we expect similar differences as between eastern and western Europe, though perhaps less pronounced.

4. A general model of party choice

4.1 The data base

For the comparative analysis of the determinants of European voting behaviour we can make use of regularly collected data from the European Social Survey on the recall of turnout and party choice in the last general election as well as information on respondents' social background, on the direction and strength of their party identification, and on their left-right orientation. Due to the lack of survey questions about left-right positions of parties in the ESS, we use the relevant data from the Chapel Hill Expert Survey 2002 and 2006 (e.g. Hooghe 2010).

National ESS surveys are conducted independently of election dates. This means that the polls are administered at different stages of the national electoral cycle and levels of political mobilization (Reif and Schmitt 1980, Erikson 1988, Stimson 1999). In contrast, election studies in the strict sense are conducted 'around election day' with a post-electoral cross-sectional survey as central element of them. In addition, ESS surveys do not ask for party positions and candidate evaluations. While we can find substitute information for the former, we cannot include the latter short-term determinant of the vote in our study. These shortcomings of the ESS may all have an impact on the results of our analysis.

⁴ We just give some examples: a charismatic candidate can contribute to a generalized support for their party, even if this seems to be the exception rather than the rule in European politics (Oscarsson and Holmberg 2011). Similarly, voters' issue orientations and the performance of the party can have an effect on partisanship (see e.g. Fiorina 1981). Finally, the repeated choice of a party strengthens the identification to it (cf. Converse 1969), just as partisanship influences party choice.

We investigate all ESS surveys conducted in EU member countries that participated in three out of four ESS rounds. In addition to Germany (west and east), these are twelve countries from western Europe and five countries from central and eastern Europe.⁵

4.2. The construction of stacked data files

In the following, we apply a research strategy that was developed and first applied in the series of European Parliament election studies in order to estimate a general model of party choice. It concentrates on the analysis of a stacked data matrix. As many stacks are created as there are relevant parties in an election. In this research strategy, units of analysis are no longer the respondents, but their evaluations (good vs. bad, close vs. far, etc) and choice (elected vs. not) of each of the stack parties in the party system. These generic variables allow analysing “the vote” rather than e.g. the “SPD vote” even in multi-party systems. Generic variables therefore measure party assessments and party choice in general. Party-specific variables – e.g. the strength of partisanship for the SPD in 2008 – are recoded in order to represent the general partisanship variable in the SPD stack of the stacked matrix of the 2008 German data file.

Stacked data files are computed for every ESS wave in every country. For each country and ESS round, each respondent is included in the stacked data matrix as many times as the country has relevant parties at this time.⁶ The list of parties in the countries under study is documented in an appendix to this paper (Annex 1). In each party stack, the generic variables represent the scores measured for the stack party. The ‘vote’ variable indicates whether respondents have voted for the stack party or not. The ‘partisanship’ variable displays how close respondent feels to the stack party.⁷ Our measure of ‘ideological distance’ is the absolute difference between the left-right self-assessment of each respondent and the “objective” ideological position of the stack party based on expert judgements.⁸

⁵ Western Europe: Austria (not 2008), Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Finland, Greece (not 2006), Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, United Kingdom. Eastern Europe: Estonia (not 2002), Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, Slovakia (not 2002).

⁶ The relevance of a party is assessed by its representation in the national parliament.

⁷ Measures of partisanship have a directional and a strength component. The directional component identifies the relevant party stack. The strength component then determines the score of stack-specific partisanship variable on a scale from 0 = no identification to 3 = very strong identification.

⁸ Party positions were taken from the Chapel Hill Expert Surveys 2002 for Rounds 1 and 2, and 2006 for Rounds 3 and 4 (cf. Hooghe et al. 2010). The ESS and the Expert Survey use the same 11-step scale (from 0 = left to 10 = right). On the individual level, we had to deal with considerable numbers of missing cases in the left-right self-assessments of respondents, in some countries. It was therefore decided to “impute” those missing values with a regression-based imputation. A great number of predictors of left-right self-placements formed 14 factors, the values of which formed the basis for the imputation. For each country only those factors were considered which

The effect of the social background of respondents on party choice is calculated in party-specific binomial logistic regressions of the ‘vote’ (stack party elected or not) on selected socio-structural variables in each stack.⁹ The predicted probabilities resulting from this regression are used as representative of the social-structural effect in the further analysis.¹⁰ To demonstrate the procedure, we first present in the following section these ‘auxiliary calculations’ of the effect of social structure on party choice in the first German ESS round (2002). In doing so, we report on ten of the 424 binomial logistic regressions that we have conducted in order to determine the social structural effect on the vote.¹¹

5. The effects of social structure, partisanship and left-right distance in Germany

5.1. Social structure and the vote in Germany in 2002

What was the effect of social background factors on the vote choice of Germans in 2002? Is this effect different for different parties, or between west and east? Based on Nagelkerke’s pseudo R-squares we find that in three of five parties – namely, the CDU/CSU (the Union), the Greens, and the PDS – the predictive power of social structure for party choice was stronger in west Germany. The SPD shows similar values in west and east Germany, and the FDP shows more pronounced social contours in the east than in the west (Table 2).

Older and religious voters, the more-highly educated and the middle-classes are more likely to vote for CDU/CSU, while women and trade union members are less. The social contours of the Union voters in eastern Germany are somewhat less clear. Again, church affiliation (both Catholic and Protestant) plays an important role. While income poverty favours the CDU vote, the unemployed are less likely to be Union voters; and like in the west,

showed a significant correlation with the left-right self-placement of the respondents. See Annex 2 for the list of factors.

⁹ The predictive values are estimated from party- and round-specific regressions for the following variables: gender, age (survey year minus year of birth), level of education (number of years of full-time education), socioeconomic status calculated as European Socioeconomic Classification (see Harrison & Rose 2006), trade union membership, frequency of church attendance, religious denomination (with dummy values for Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, and others), employment status, dependence on social security, and income poverty (dummy value for “unable to make ends meet”).

¹⁰ We use the original (non-centred) predictive values because we consider further predictors for the explanation of differences in the constants of the regression slopes, and also only report on country-specific analyses (cf. Enders & Tofghi 2007).

¹¹ The party stacks are produced in the same way in each country and merged over all parties, waves, and countries in a file containing 424 party stacks. The numbers of party stacks per country and wave are documented in Annex 3.

Table 2
Socio-structural determinants of voting behaviour in western and eastern Germany, 2002
(z-coefficients [exp (B) / S.E.] and Nagelkerke's R square)

	CDU/CSU	SPD	FDP	Greens	PDS
WESTERN GERMANY					
Sex ^a	-2.2*			+5.3***	-2.0*
Age ^b	+11.6***	+2.2*		-4.1***	-2.1*
Education ^c	+3.5***		+2.3*	+9.0***	+3.2**
Church attendance	+2.4*	-3.1**			
Catholic	+7.8***	-2.9**		-6.4***	
Protestant	+3.3**			-3.1**	
Trade union member	-2.9**	+5.2***			+3.1**
Lower class ^d		+4.9***		+2.3*	-2.1*
Middle class ^d	+2.9**	+4.4***		+2.1*	-2.2*
Upper class ^d		+5.4***		+3.8***	
Unemployed ^e					
Receiving social benefit		-2.2*			
Income poverty ^f					
Pseudo R2	0.15	0.07	0.02	0.15	0.29
EASTERN GERMANY					
Sex ^a	-2.5*				
Age ^b	+2.0*				+5.6***
Education ^c			+2.4*	+5.4***	+4.3***
Church attendance	+2.4*	-2.9**			
Catholic	+3.9***				-2.2*
Protestant	+5.2***		+3.9***	+2.9**	-5.9***
Trade union member					
Lower class ^d		+4.2***	-2.1*		
Middle class ^d	+2.2*	+4.4***			
Upper class ^d		+2.9**			
Unemployed ^e	+2.9**	-2.8**	+3.3**		
Receiving social benefit				-2.0*	
Income poverty ^f	-3.0**	-2.3*			2.1*
Pseudo R2	0.08	0.07	0.06	0.13	0.13

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001

Data base: *European Social Survey, East and West Germany, 2002.*

Method: Logistic regression, empty cells indicate no significant effect (p > .05).

Notes : (a) 1=male; 2=female; (b) Year of birth minus survey year (19xx); (c) Years of education and training; (d) European Socioeconomic Classification after Harrison & Rose (2006); Reference category is the non-classified respondents; (e) 1=yes; 2=no; (f) Dummy "cannot make ends meet".

men, members of the middle-class (and here also the upper class) and the elderly vote CDU more often than the average. These data show more similarities than differences in the social composition of the electorate of the Union in western and eastern Germany.

The situation for the SPD is similar. In western Germany, trade union members are likely to vote for the SPD. Above-average support for the SPD comes from those who do not

attend church and are not Catholic, are older, and do not receive social benefits. In the east, trade union membership does not add to SPD voting, while the middle-class tends to support it, those who do not attend church, and those who are not unemployed or poor. The main difference between west and east Germany is the lacking contribution of trade union membership for the SPD vote in eastern Germany.

The FDP is in a less sound situation. The social contours of its voting base are relatively weak in the west, while some can be identified in the east. In the west, only the more educated are more likely vote for the FDP. The effect of higher education can be found also in eastern Germany; but in addition, a Protestant denomination, unemployment, and membership in middle or upper class contributes to the likelihood of an FDP vote.

Green votes in the west are more prevalent among the non-religious, women, and young voters. In eastern Germany, the Greens are better represented among the educated, unemployed, and non-Protestant voters. Education is obviously the unifying element between the two sub-electrates. Otherwise, the social structure of the Green Party vote is quite different in the two parts of Germany.

The PDS received above average support in 2002 in western Germany from voters with higher levels of education and trade union membership; in addition, men as well as lower and middle class voters tended to support the PDS. In the east, the PDS vote also increases with the level of education and with age, and religious non-belief, and is higher among members of the lower or middle class, and those in modest economic circumstances. The PDS is the German party in 2002 for which the difference between the socio-structural factors in eastern and western Germany was the strongest.

These German findings are meant to serve as an example. We conducted similar regression analyses for all relevant parties in all the countries and for all ESS waves. We then saved the predicted vote probabilities in a synthetic socio-structural variable and used this in subsequent steps of the analysis. This procedure will allow us in the following to speak of the effect of social structure on voting behaviour, rather than of the effect of religion or social class etc.

5.2. Determinants of voting behaviour in east and west Germany 2002-2008

We determine the effects of social structure, partisanship and ideological distance on the party vote using binary logistic regressions.¹² Robust standard errors are computed to control for auto-correlation problems associated with the analysis of stacked data matrices (Table 3).

Table 3
**The effect of social structure, party identification, and left-right distance
on the vote choice in western and eastern Germany**
(z-coefficients [exp (B) / S.E.] from multiple logistic regressions)

I	Predictor	2002	2004	2006	2008	Ø	Trend?
Western Germany	Social structure	21	23	19	18	21	↘
	PI	28	26	26	28	27	→
	L-R distance	-10	-9	-9	-11	-10	→
	R ²	0.32	0.35	0.34	0.34	0.34	
Eastern Germany	Social structure	19	14	15	14	16	→
	PI	20	18	19	19	19	→
	L-R distance	-8	-6	-7	-7	-7	→
	R ²	0.30	0.27	0.28	0.27	0.28	

Data base: *European Social Survey, East and West Germany, 2002-2008. For numbers of cases see Annex 4.*

Given our predictors, we understand the reasons of peoples' party choice somewhat less well in eastern Germany. The explanatory power of individual predictors is weaker there than in the west. In particular, partisanship contributes to a much lesser extent to the predictions of the vote in eastern Germany than in western Germany. Overtime trends can hardly be identified over the four waves of the ESS, unless one interprets the slight decrease in the socio-structural effects on the electoral behaviour of western Germans as such.

6. A Europe-wide perspective

Social inequalities are known to have some effect on electoral choices. We have elaborated on this above with regard to possible differences between eastern and western Europe. Table 4 lists the countries under study (those that have run at least three of four ESS waves) according

¹² An alternative is the estimation of structural equation models which can determine the relationships between the variables more accurately. We have not used these here because the direction of the causal relationships as already mentioned is controversial. However, such analyses are on our agenda.

to the average strength of the effect of social structure on voting behaviour. Topping the list we find Spain, Great Britain and Ireland, three very concentrated party systems in which the members of different social groups feel represented by one or the other major party.¹³ A middle group follows which includes many multi-party systems – the Netherlands is just one example. Four of the six post-communist systems are at the bottom of the list, two more on

Table 4
The effect of social structure on the vote
(z-coefficients [exp (B) / S.E.] from multiple binary logistic regressions with social structure, partisanship and ideological distance as predictors)

	2002	2004	2006	2008	∅	Trend
ES	23	27	29	36	29	↗
GB	26	27	31	31	29	↗
IE	30	31	25		29	-
BE	23	21	20	30	24	
FI	24	21	24	25	24	↗
NL	23	24	24	26	24	↗
SI	29	21	23	23	24	-
SE	20	25	23	25	23	-
PL	10	24	28	30	23	↗
DE-W	21	23	19	18	21	↘
FR	14	15	22	24	21	↗
DK	20	20	18	23	20	-
PT	14	19	24	23	20	↗
HU	19	17	20	25	20	↗
EE		20	18	20	19	-
AT	18	18	18		18	-
DE-E	19	14	15	14	16	↘
GR	20	16		12	16	↘
SK		16	16	18	16	-

Only significant effects are shown (p<.001). The countries are sorted according to average effect strength. Grey lines identify post-communist countries. Data base: *European Social Survey*, 2002-2008. For numbers of cases see Annex 4.

the bottom of the upper half. We conclude that social inequalities are less clearly represented in post-communist party systems than they are in consolidated Western systems. The movements in the coefficients in Table 4 are also striking. Eight of the 19 countries registered

¹³ Although it is noticeable that Greece, Hungary and Portugal, also with concentrated party systems, are much further down the list, but without clear social contours in voting behaviour.

a positive trend in the strength of socio-structural effects on voting behaviour (defined as an increase in the coefficient in at least three of the four observation dates). In two other countries the strength of the coefficients decreases more or less continuously. But perhaps the time period under investigation is too short for any substantial conclusion.

The two parts of Germany replicate the West-East gradient in the influence of social structure on party choice. While west Germany is in the middle of the western European countries, east Germany ranks behind the post-communist countries. A convergence between the two parts of Germany in the size of these effects is not observable.

Regarding partisanship, we expect at least as clear contrasts between eastern and western Europe, because in the post-communist east stable party attachments which are impervious in the face of the political struggles of the day have still to emerge. We find our expectation being confirmed very impressively (Table 5). Five of the six post-communist systems in our sample are at the lower end of the list, only Slovenia is in the upper midfield. The effect of party identification is largely stable over the four waves of the ESS. The only noteworthy trends we find are a negative trend in the Netherlands, where the effect of partisanship on voting behaviour is decreasing, and a positive trend in Spain, where the effect of partisanship is increasing.

In both parts of Germany, the effect of partisanship on electoral choices is relatively weak: West Germany ranks at the bottom of the western European countries, and east Germany at the bottom of the post-communist systems. Here again, Germany replicates the European pattern: the difference in the effect size is considerable and stable; assimilation by a growing effect of partisanship in east Germany is not observed.

Our third predictor of electoral choices is the left-right distance between voters and the parties that present themselves at an election. This distance is measured as the difference between the left-right self-placement of respondents and the left-right positions of the relevant parties, as identified by the Chapel Hill expert surveys. We expect the effect of this distance to be much less pronounced in the post-communist systems of eastern Europe than in the west, because the integration of current political issues into the frame of left-right schema is less developed there than in the democracies of western Europe. We find this expectation again largely confirmed by our analyses of the ESS data (Table 6).

The six post-communist systems find themselves at the bottom of our list of countries, accompanied only by Ireland and Britain on one side and Belgium on the other. UK and Ireland are two countries for which the left-right scheme can only incompletely absorb the political and social conflicts, which is why the left-right scale is used only sporadically in

Table 5

The effect of partisanship on the vote

(z-coefficients [exp (B) / S.E.] from multiple binary logistic regressions with social structure, partisanship and ideological distance as predictors)

	2002	2004	2006	2008	∅	Trend
FI	36	38	36	41	38	-
NL	42	37	35	34	37	↘
BE	32	39	42	36	37	-
GR	37	37		34	36	-
SE	38	33	37	32	35	-
SK		27	35	34	32	-
AT	31	32	31		31	-
GB	31	26	34	32	31	-
DK	29	33	33	30	31	-
PT	27	30	28	28	29	-
ES	27	28	27	31	28	↗
FR	26	30	26	28	28	-
DE-W	28	26	26	28	27	-
IE	25	26	26		26	-
EE		26	24	26	25	-
HU	26	22	29	22	25	-
SI	24	24	23	24	24	-
DE-E	20	18	19	19	19	-
PL	22	17	21	16	19	-

Only significant effects are shown ($p < .001$). The countries are sorted according to average effect strength. Grey lines identify post-communist countries. Data base: *European Social Survey*, 2002-2008. For numbers of cases see Annex 4.

British Elections Studies, with more reliance being placed on the explanatory power of concrete issues or of class membership. In Belgium, the problem is that the voters usually have two parties corresponding to their ideological preferences (one Flemish and one Walloon), so that the left-right-heuristic is only of limited value in explaining the electoral choice, unless qualified by the membership of a linguistic group.

Regarding the importance of left-right distance for the electoral choice, most of the new post-communist democracies are in lower positions. The top positions are occupied by west European multi-party systems: Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark are at the front, followed (after Greece) by Finland, west Germany and Austria. The left-right distance is obviously a particularly valuable heuristic for the electoral choice in consolidated multi-party

Table 6

The effect of ideological distance on the vote

(z-coefficients [exp (B) / S.E.] from multiple binary logistic regressions with social structure, partisanship and ideological distance as predictors)

	2002	2004	2006	2008	∅	Trend
SE		-16	-17	-17	-16	-17
NL	-12	-12	-14	-12	-13	-
DK	-11	-10	-12	-15	-12	↗
GR	-12	-12		-13	-12	-
FI	-11	-12	-10	-10	-11	-
DE-W	-10	-9	-9	-11	-10	-
AT	-9	-7	-14		-10	-
ES	-7	-7	-9	-14	-10	↗
FR	-9	-7	-11	-12	-10	↗
PT	-8	-9	-11	-11	-10	↗
HU	-7	-10	-9	-9	-9	-
GB	-7	-7	-9	-8	-8	-
PL	-6	-9	-7	-6	-7	-
DE-E	-8	-6	-7	-7	-7	-
BE	-9	-5	-6	-6	-6	-
IE	-6	-7	-4		-6	-
SK		-5	-3	-7	-5	-
SI	-4	-4	-4	-5	-4	-
EE		-3	-1	-4	-3	-

Only significant effects are shown ($p < .001$). The countries are sorted according to average effect strength. Grey lines identify post-communist countries. Data base: *European Social Survey*, 2002-2008. For numbers of cases see Annex 4.

systems, while it only starts to fulfil this function in a few post-communist democracies, especially Hungary and Poland.

East Germany ranks among the post-communist democracies showing a stronger impact of ideological distance on the vote. The reason could be that, through unification, east German voters were confronted with an existing party system and an existing left-right-heuristic. Here too, however, the distance between west and east Germany remained unchanged over the observation period.

The overall picture reveals the relative strengths of the three factors. Party identification has the strongest effect on party choice, followed by social structure, and ideological distance. However, this hierarchy should be viewed with caution in view of possible measurement errors. Changes over time in western Europe tend mostly to point in the

direction of an increasing importance of social factors for party choice, while in the South of Europe the effect of ideological distances seems to be increasing.

The two parts of Germany largely replicate the differences between established and post-communist democracies. Western Germany appears as a typical established democracy, while there are some indications of eastern Germany being a special case as compared to the post-communist democracies. This speciality seems to be originating in the fact that eastern Germans were presented with an existing ideological frame of reference and party system and did not have (a chance) to develop it by themselves.

6. Discussion: Candidates and issues

The explanatory power of the different factors of vote choices varies according to the socio-political context. This became apparent in the 1990s, as successive comparative election studies made their data available for secondary analysis (e.g. the European Election Studies, the data of the European Voter and the True European Voter, and not least the now three waves of the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems).¹⁴ Hardly any important book is now based on a single election, and single-country studies focussing on several elections are becoming increasingly rare.

We have focused in this paper on a very powerful context variation, namely whether an electoral choice is made in a consolidated system of western Europe or in one of the ‘fluid’ systems in the post-communist east. We take into account that this context variation also concerns the two parts of Germany and have therefore not reported the various estimates for the unified Germany as a whole, but for west and east separately.

Even though we had to deal with analytical problems arising from the limited instrumentation of the ESS, our results are quite clear and unambiguous. The conventional instruments to explain the electoral choice – the social situation of the voters, their party identification, and their policy distance towards the political parties – are much less useful for our understanding of the motivation of the electoral choice in the post-communist eastern Europe than in the consolidated west.

This seems to suggest that electoral choices in the post-communist eastern Europe react to shorter-term stimuli – stimuli that we could not consider in this analysis, like the perceived issue competence of parties and candidates standing for election, or how the

¹⁴ The *Mannheim Eurobarometer Trendfiles*, the *European Value Studies*, the *World Value Surveys*, and the *European Social Surveys* on which we base this work are all not election studies in a strict sense. This tends to limit the indicators available for analysis and thus the analytical use of these studies.

performance of the incumbent government coalition on key issues. These instruments might have significantly improved our understanding of electoral choices in post-communist systems. What we have learned nevertheless, however, is that partisanship does not yet play the role in eastern Europe that it plays in many consolidated western democracies. It is also clear that the social location of voters in eastern Europe does not contribute as much to the vote as it does in western Europe, despite obvious dealignment tendencies existing there too.

In a nutshell: a quarter of a century after regime change, vote choices in post-communist eastern Europe still seem to be based more on circumstantial than on structural factors.

Annex 1

The relevant political parties for which party stacks were formed

(as in the *Chapel Hill Expert Survey*)

Western Germany: Christian Democratic Union (CDU), in Bavaria: Christian Social Union, Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), Free Democratic Party (FDP), Alliance 90/The Greens (B90/Grüne), Party of Democratic Socialism / Left Party (Linke-PDS)

Eastern Germany: Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), Free Democratic Party (FDP), Alliance 90/The Greens (B90/Grüne), Party of Democratic Socialism / Left Party (Linke-PDS)

Austria: Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), The Greens (Grüne), Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ, since R3)

Belgium: Green! (Agalev/Groen!), Flemish Liberals and Democrats (VLD), Flemish interest (VB), Ecolo (Ecolo), Socialist Party (PS), Christian Democrat and Flemish (CVP/CD&V), New Flemish Alliance (N-VA), Socialist Party Different Spirit (SP/SPA), Humanist Democratic Centre (PSC/CDH), Reformist Movement (MR)

Denmark: Social Democrats (SD), Radical Left / Social Liberal Party (RV), Conservative People's Party (KF), Socialist People's Party (SF), Danish People's Party (DF), Liberal Party of Denmark (V)

Estonia: Pro Patria and Res Publica Union (IRL), Estonian Centre Party (EK), Estonian Reform Party (ER), Estonian Social Democratic Party (SDE), Estonian People's Union (ERL),

Finland: National Coalition Party (KOK), Swedish People's Party (RPK/SFP), Centre Party (KESK), Christian Democrats (KD), Green League (VIKR), Finnish Social Democratic Party (SDP), Left Alliance (VAS)

France: National Front (FN), Communist Party (PC), Socialist Party (PS), Union for Popular Movement (UMP), Union for French Democracy (UDF), Green Party (Verts)

Greece: Panhellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK), New Democracy (ND), Communist Party of Greece (KKE), Coalition of the Radical Left (SYN/SYRIZA)

Ireland: Fianna Fail (FF), Fine Gael (FG), Labour (Lab), Progressive Democrats (PD), Green Party (GP), Sinn Fein (SF)

Hungary: Hungarian Civic Union / Hungarian Democratic Forum (Fidesz-MDF, until R2), Hungarian Civic Union (Fidesz-M, since R3), Hungarian Democratic Forum (MDF, since R3), Hungarian Socialist Party (MSZP), Alliance of Free Democrats (SZDSZ)

Netherlands: Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA), Labour Party (PvdA), People's Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), Pim Fortuyn (LPF), Democrats 66 (D66), Green Left (GL), Socialist Party (SP), Christian Union (CU)

Poland: Alliance of Democratic Left (SDL-UP), Civic Platform (PO), Self Defence (SRP), Law and Justice (PiS), Polish Peoples Party (PSL), League of Polish Families (LPR)

Portugal: Left Block (BE), Democratic and Social Centre / People's Party (CDS/PP), Unitarian Democratic Coalition (CDU), Socialist Party (PS), Democratic People's Party / Social Democratic Party (PPD/PSD)

Slovakia: People's Party – Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (LS-HZDS), Slovak Democratic and Christian Union/Democratic Party (SDKU-DS), Direction – Social

Democracy (Smer), Party of the Hungarian Coalition (SMK), Christian Democratic Movement (KDH), New Citizens' Alliance (ANO, only R2), Slovak National Party (SNS, since R3)

Slovenia: Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS), Liberal Democracy of Slovenia (LDS), United List of Social Democrats (ZLSD), New Slovenia – Christian Peoples Party (NSI), Slovenian National Party (SNS), Democratic Party of Pensioners of Slovenia (DESUS), Slovenian People's Party (SLS)

Spain: People's Party (PP), Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), United Left (IU), Convergence and Unity (CiU), Republican Left of Catalunya (ERC, since R3), Basque Nationalist Party (EAN/PNV), Galician Nationalist Bloc (BNG)

Sweden: Centre Party (C), Liberal People's Party (FP), Christian-Democrats (KD), Greens (MP), Moderate Rally Party (M), Workers' Party - Social Democrats (SAP), Left Party (V)

United Kingdom: Conservative Party (Cons), Labour Party (Lab), Liberal Democratic Party (LibDems), Scottish National Party (SNP), Plaid Cymru (Plaid), Green Party (Greens, since R3)

Annex 2

Factors for imputing missing values for left-right self-assessment

- Factor 1: Trust in western alliances (European Parliament, United Nations).
- Factor 2: Trust in state institutions (parliament, politicians, legal system).
- Factor 3: The importance of a modern lifestyle (adventure, pleasure, success, variety, fun, admiration, money).
- Factor 4: Satisfaction with government actions (education system, health system, economy, government performance, the functioning of democracy).
- Factor 5: The importance of social orientation (listening to people, helping others, environmental protection, equal opportunities, loyalty).
- Factor 6: The importance of conformity (good behaviour, following rules, respect, safety, a strong state).
- Factor 7: Religiosity (belief, church visits, confession).
- Factor 8: Attitude to immigration (effects of immigration on country, culture, and economy).
- Factor 9: Trust in others (other people are fair, helpful, trustworthy).
- Factor 10: Political participation (involvement in a political party, contact to politicians, working in an organisation, participation in an approved demonstration).
- Factor 11: Satisfaction with life (satisfaction with life, happiness).
- Factor 12: Efficacy (forming opinions, understanding politics).
- Factor 13: Equality (state should reduce differences in income).
- Factor 14: Democratic attitudes (ban of anti-democratic parties).

Annex 3

Number of party stacks per country and per wave

	2002	2004	2006	2008	Σ
DW	5	5	5	5	20
DO	5	5	5	5	20
AT	4	4	5		13
BE	10	10	10	10	40
DK	6	6	6	6	24
ES	6	6	7	7	26
FI	7	7	7	7	28
FR	6	6	6	6	24
GB	5	5	6	6	22
GR	4	4		4	12
IE	6	6	6		18
NL	7	7	8	8	30
PT	5	5	5	5	20
SE	7	7	7	7	28
Σ WE	73	73	73	66	285
EE		5	5	5	15
HU	3	3	4	4	14
PL	6	6	6	6	24
SI	7	7	7	7	28
SK		6	6	6	18
Σ EE	16	27	28	28	99
$\Sigma\Sigma$	99	110	111	104	424

Annex 4

Number of cases per country and per wave

	2002	2004	2006	2008
DW	9105	9255	9380	8920
DO	5490	5095	5200	4835
AT	9028	9024	12025	0
BE	18990	17780	17980	17600
DK	9036	8922	9030	9660
ES	10374	9978	13132	18032
FI	14000	14154	13272	15365
FR	9018	10836	11916	12438
GB	10264	9624	0	8288
GR	12276	13716	10800	0
IE	18912	15048	15112	14224
NL	7555	10260	11110	11835
PT	13993	13636	13489	12810
SE	10260	9485	14364	14112
EE	0	9945	7585	8305
HU	5055	4494	6072	6176
PL	12660	10296	10326	9714
SI	10633	10094	10332	9002
SK	0	9072	10596	10860

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