One electorate or many? Differences in party preference formation between new and established European democracies

Wouter van der Brug [a,*], Mark Franklin [b,c], Gábor Tóka [d]

[a] Department of Political Science, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Oudezijds Achterburgwal 237, 1012 DL Amsterdam, The Netherlands
[b] European University Institute, Florence, Italy
[c] Trinity College, Hartford, CT, USA
[d] Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

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ABSTRACT

We investigate differences in the factors influencing citizens' votes between elections conducted in established and new democracies using data collected at the 2004 European Parliament elections, comparing 7 former communist countries with 13 established democracies. Despite contrary expectations in some of the extant literature, voters in 'new' democracies make their political choices in ways that are very similar to the decision processes found in more established democracies. The only systematic difference is that voters in post-communist countries are somewhat less likely to make use of ideological location as a cue to the policy orientations of political parties. Perhaps in compensation, somewhat greater relative use in those countries is made of cues from social structure (particularly religion) and from issues.

1. Introduction

Do voters at elections in consolidating democracies behave differently than voters in established democracies? Put another way, does it take many years of practice for an electorate to perform their electoral duties in a sophisticated fashion? What are the differences in terms of influences on vote choice between an election conducted in an established democracy and in one that has only been conducting free elections for 15 years or so?

The elections to the European Parliament conducted in June 2004 provide us with a unique laboratory for evaluating these and other questions that require comparisons between mature and consolidating democracies. For ten of the 25 countries that participated it was their first experience of European Parliament elections. Other countries had already participated in between 2 and 5 such elections, depending on their dates of accession to the European Union and its predecessor entities.

In this study we are not so much interested in what these elections tell us about the governance of the European Union as in what they tell us about voters. We treat the elections as windows into the *national* political processes of 20 countries in which we interviewed random samples of their electorates in the weeks following the European Parliament elections,[1] affording us the opportunity to pose a standard set of questions in standard circumstances to voters in each country. Many of the survey questions relate to the European arena in which the elections were held, but we focus on questions relating to voting in general. For our present purposes, the elections can be seen as providing a convenient opportunity to conduct a Europe-wide study of national party preferences in circumstances that are as identical as possible across countries.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 (0)20 525 2765; fax: +31 (0)20 525 3681.

E-mail address: w.vanderbrug@uva.nl (W. van der Brug).

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[1] The data needed for the analyses presented in this paper are not available for Lithuania, Malta, Belgium, Luxembourg or Sweden.

In this endeavor we take advantage of the fact that elections to the European Parliament are not 'real elections' that determine the allocation of political power in the European Union. Indeed, the very first studies, conducted after the elections of 1979, characterized them as 'second order *national* elections' (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Reif, 1984). The stress on the word 'national' in that identifying phrase informs us that these elections did not bring to bear concerns that would divert voters from the orientations that characterize their behavior in national political contexts. Effectively, elections to the European Parliament constitute quite separate elections in each country—elections in which national political processes and concerns are paramount. Recent research (Schmitt and Mannheimer, 1991; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999; van der Brug and van der Eijk, 2007) has not queried this characterization.

The question why European Parliament elections should fail to have a European flavor has permeated much research in past years and will certainly continue to provoke scholarly concern. One reason for conducting separate elections in each country might have been that the electorates of the member states had such very different orientations towards the political world that a common election campaign and verdict would have been impossible. One of the primary questions addressed by van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) was precisely whether, in 1989 and 1994, the citizens of the then members of the European Union were capable of operating as a single European electorate should they have the opportunity to do so. The answer given in that research was unequivocal:

> "Another party system, another electoral system, a new set of political issues, [are] all it would take to turn Dutch voters (for example) into Spaniards… If Dutch voters could through the presentation of relevant stimuli have been turned into Spaniards, then why not into Europeans?" (p. 38).

Much of the van der Eijk and Franklin study was devoted to explaining why relevant stimuli are not presented in European Parliament elections, and their explanation (though refined in subsequent research) still holds true today. Yet the question of whether, through the presentation of relevant stimuli, today's European citizens could perform as one electorate has acquired new relevance through the accession in 2004 of ten more countries, eight of which have no long experience of democratic elections. If, in order to produce an election outcome faithfully reflecting citizens' preferences, an electorate needs to have had many years of practice in the performance of democratic choices, then those eight countries might not yet be in a position to take part on equal terms in a common electoral experience. This question, of course, parallels one that has motivated much research on voting behavior in the new democracies of Eastern and Central Europe. Does the short period of time elapsed since their transitions to democracy allow social divisions, performance evaluations, issue conflicts, ideological cleavages and other common determinants of the vote in established democracies to acquire a similar importance in these new democracies, or are elections there decided by inherently idiosyncratic factors (Evans and Whitefield, 1993; Kitschelt et al., 1995)?

In this paper we ask the same question about the electorate of today's European Union that van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) asked of the European Union of 1994. Do voters in the different countries make up their minds in similar ways when making political decisions? We will explicitly focus on the existence of differences in the heuristics used by voters in *older* and in newer democracies. If the heuristics would turn out to be similar, then voters in the new member states have, in important respects, already acquired the behavior patterns that a more 'mature' electorate displays. The question of how to go about conducting truly Europe-wide elections to the European Parliament will remain as important as ever, but at least we will know that, in widening the European Union through the accession of eight consolidating democracies, no new impediments to the conduct of real European elections were introduced.

2. Theoretical expectations

What differences in voting behavior do we expect to find between established and consolidating democracies? The fundamental expectation that underlies all research on voting behavior, though seldom stated so baldly, is that people are the same wherever they are found. If they behave differently in some countries than in others it is because they find themselves in different circumstances, such that if those circumstances were replicated in another country the behavior of voters in that country would respond accordingly. Research on political behavior in different political systems finds repeatedly that behavior responds to systemic and contextual differences.

The differences relevant to vote choice concern the sources from which voters get their cues. After all, in no political system do voters spend much time researching the details of the political alternatives on offer at an election. In most circumstances, most voters find shortcuts to the knowledge they need (Downs, 1957; Conover and Feldman, 1984; Granberg and Holmberg, 1988; van der Brug, 1997). They follow the lead of trusted sources, most frequently the social, religious, and political bodies that they are affiliated with or feel attached to (Beck et al., 2002; Cutler, 2002). In established democracies, the most important of these social reference groups, in terms of their influence at election time, are political parties. Parties are, above all, the actors that give meaning to the political world by organizing the policies on offer and providing voters with simple menus of packaged alternatives that may change from election to election.

At a slightly higher level of sophistication, voters in established democracies also evaluate the political alternatives available to them in terms of higher order concepts such as liberalism and conservatism. In Europe the most commonly used higher order concepts of this kind are those of left and right. Policies are often typified in left–right terms, and parties locate themselves in relation to each other in the same terms. The new post-communist democracies seem to be no exception (Benoit and Laver, 2005; Marks et al., 2006). Quite complex political differences are customarily simplified to a position on a left–right scale, and citizens use the latter accordingly (Laponce, 1981; Fuchs and Klingemann, 1989; Huber, 1989).

At the same time, voters are also concerned with strategic considerations. Above all, in established democracies they prefer parties that have a good chance of exercising significant influence on government. Parties that are unlikely to play a major role in government formation are unlikely to attract the support of many voters, and voters are thought to adjust their preferences to take account of these 'realities of power'. When two parties are ideologically close, voters with a similar ideological position will generally prefer the larger party over the smaller one (Tillie, 1995).

So voters in established democracies take their cues from reference groups, locate themselves and the policy alternatives in left–right terms, and take account of strategic considerations. How might these things be different in a consolidating democracy? Will all these forces have the same relative strength there as in established democracies?

Historically speaking, emerging democracies (those that are now established) had electorates with strong group loyalties, which supposedly involved strong effects of social structure on electoral alignments (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). There is some controversy in the scholarly literature as to whether this happened when democratic governments were instituted in countries that had previously been ruled by communist regimes (for overviews see Kitschelt et al., 1999; Tucker, 2002; Whitefield, 2002; Evans, 2006). On the one hand, there is the historical fact that communist regimes did their best to eliminate or suppress religious and class differences, leading to an expectation of rather minor effects of these influences in post-communist societies (Lindström, 1991; White et al., 2000; Meulemann, 2004). On the other hand, in countries where party systems are new and especially where they are in flux, voters are in desperate need of other cues which may be 'cheaply' provided by social and ethno-religious distinctions (Kitschelt, 1992; Evans and Whitefield, 1993, 1998, 2000; Schopflin, 1993; Evans, 1996; Szelényi et al., 1997; Shabad and Slomczynski, 1999; Tomka and Zulehner, 1999; Gijsberts and Nieuwbeerta, 2000). While at the beginning of the post-communist transformation observers often noted specifically political and ideological obstacles to mobilization along economic and especially class interests (Heyns and Bialecki, 1991; Szelényi and Szelényi, 1991; Ost, 1993), the situation may have changed rapidly in this respect. The market opening, privatization, property restitution, and deregulation that followed the fall of communism increased existing socio-economic inequalities and created new class divisions (Heyns, 2005). Empirical evidence from some countries suggests that these developments rapidly affected political attitudes and electoral alignments, even if the supply side of politics changed relatively little in the meantime (Gibson and Cielecka, 1995; Mateju et al., 1999; Whitefield and Evans, 1999).

Though the impact of socio-economic status on the vote is known to be weak in several East European countries, other social characteristics often provide far stronger cues. In countries where ethnic and state boundaries did not fully coincide, conflicts over minority rights, center–periphery relations, and redefined statehood and nationhood readily provided bases for conflict and firm political identities independently of socio-economic roots (Birch, 2000; Evans and Need, 2002). In countries where political Catholicism had significant traditions, a clerical–secular cleavage quickly emerged in voting behavior in the 1990s (Tóka, 1992; Whitefield and Evans, 1998; Tworzecki, 2002). One might thus expect that electoral competition, even in the absence of a dense network of societal organizations articulating diverse interests, could have provided sufficient incentives for political entrepreneurs to mobilize electoral support along lines of social and attitudinal cleavage (Evans and Whitefield, 1993, 2000). Still, past findings yield no very clear expectations for the importance of social structure relative to other effects, or relative to their importance in established democracies.

However, we do have quite strong expectations regarding the relative importance of policy positions compared to those in established democracies. This is because one of the most important things that might be different in a consolidating democracy, compared to established democracies, is the clarity of the party system. Established democracies have party systems that remain much the same over long periods. Having the same parties competing for political power from the same locations in the left–right spectrum at election after election serves an educational function. Voters learn their way around their political system over the course of their first two or three elections by experiencing it at work. In a consolidating democracy the necessary consistency may not be present. Parties do not necessarily appear fully formed on the political scene with a reasonably stable size and left–right location. In a newly democratizing country, parties are more likely to repeatedly adapt their policies and ideological profiles in the face of changing opportunities for political mobilization. Frequent changes in the identity and location of political parties will be confusing to voters and prevent the sort of learning that would occur in more established systems. In addition, some of the new and relatively fragmented East European party systems developed complicated patterns of several cross-cutting electoral cleavages, with socio-economic, ethno-nationalist and religious divides failing to define a single left–right axis of competition (Markowski, 1997). If the dimensionality of the party system is relatively complex and the parties are in constant flux, voters may fail to learn where parties stand in left–right terms, and may even be unsure of such fundamental facts as which parties are large and which small (cf. Rose, 1995; Rose and Mishler, 1998; Miller and Klobucar, 2000). Without knowledge of which parties are serious contenders for power, voters will be unable to employ the strategies that in more established systems enable them to winnow down the contenders to those with a serious chance of becoming major parties of government. In the next section of this paper we will discuss how ignorance of party system characteristics might manifest itself in survey data.

Before we take that step, we should stress that we do not expect all consolidating democracies to have the same characteristics any more than we expect this of all established democracies. Countries differ in the speed

with which their party systems consolidate and in the extent that consolidated systems present voters with clear and simple choices. Enough time may have elapsed in some of the new EU member countries for their party systems to having become quite well consolidated (Kitschelt et al., 1999).

So there may in practice be as many differences among consolidating systems as there are between the two groups of countries. However, we would expect the effects of left–right location to be generally less in post-communist states, and effects of issues to be correspondingly greater, relative to each other. This follows findings in past research showing that in countries where ideology is less important, issues play a correspondingly greater role (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). In particular, one might think that elections where ideology has a smaller effect on the vote allow more space for performance evaluations of all sorts to impact the outcome (Bellucci, 1984). Yet, we do not as yet know whether this expectation is met in new democracies. Previous research has found considerable variation in the impact of issue-related attitudes on vote choice across East European democracies, with apparently strong effects in some (Evans and Whitefield, 1995; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Tworzecki, 2002; Deegan-Krause, 2006; Tucker, 2006), but to our knowledge no previous study has undertaken a large-scale comparison of strictly comparable indicators between Eastern and Western Europe.

2.1. Understanding the political system in left–right terms

This paper does not put forward a new theory of electoral behavior in post-communist societies. Rather it starts from the expectation that existing theories have much to tell us about differences in the behavior of voters in new as opposed to consolidating democracies, and sets out to test the validity of that expectation. One theory is expected to be particularly useful: the theory that voters learn their way around their party systems over a period of time (longer or shorter depending on the clarity of that party system) and with the passage of time become better able to make use of left–right location (their own and that of the parties in their political system) as a short-cut to aid decision making. This theory has been expressed in passing on a number of occasions in past research (Oppenhuis, 1995; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; van der Brug, 1997), but has never received detailed attention. In this section of the paper we set out our expectations in regard to shared knowledge of this aspect of a party system in more detail than has been done previously.

It is well known that left–right distances between voters and parties are good predictors of party choice. The reasoning goes back to Downs (1957) who argued that voters will use their knowledge of the left–right locations of parties together with their own self-identified location in left–right terms as a heuristic on the basis of which to choose a party to support. Downs assumed that voters would simply choose the party closest to them in these terms. In subsequent research the utility of this theory has repeatedly been confirmed, but its limitations

have also been established. Left–right location, though a powerful predictor of party choice, is by no means the only heuristic that voters use in deciding which party to support.

What has seldom if ever been spelled out are the conditions under which left–right location will prove more or less important as one of the heuristics that voters employ. Evidently if voters have no idea where they themselves stand in left–right terms, or no idea where the parties in their political system stand, left–right locations of parties or voters themselves will be of little help to them when making political choices.

It has been our contention in past research that the ignorance of voters regarding the locations of parties in left–right terms will be manifested in the extent to which they agree with others in their political systems regarding where the different parties are located. Political systems in which voters are largely in agreement about where the parties stand are systems in which left–right location will constitute a useful heuristic helping voters to make their party choices. Political systems in which voters lack agreement in these terms will be systems in which left–right location will not be found very useful by voters looking for cues, and not very helpful to researchers trying to understand the choices that voters make (Tóka, 2002; Alvarez and Nagler, 2004).

It might be argued that voters could make their party choices on the basis of left–right location even though they were completely mistaken about their own or about their party's position in terms of left and right. However, in this case voters' perceptions of parties' left–right positions would not serve as a predictor of the future actions of these parties. Voters who misperceived their own or their party's location would not be happy in retrospect with the choices they had made, and would not consider left–right to be a useful cognitive shortcut. So, a precondition for left–right location being helpful in predicting party choice is that there be a high level of agreement among citizens on where parties stand in terms of left and right. It is expected, therefore, that in political systems where left–right location proves helpful to voters (especially political systems with multiple parties), political learning will take place and voters will in due course learn to correctly place the parties in their political systems. Past research has demonstrated that this is indeed the case for voters in established democracies. One of the reasons why voters consider the left–right scheme a useful cognitive shortcut is that positions on concrete issues tend to become integrated in the left–right dimension. However, it takes time for issues to become structured by a single left–right dimension, and we have already mentioned that in consolidating democracies this process may be less advanced than in established democracies. One object of the present research is to determine to what extent we observe the concomitants of such a difference. If there are differences in the effects of left–right distance on party choice between established and consolidating democracies, our expectation is that these differences will be reflected in differences in the extent to which citizens agree about the positions of parties in left–right terms.

2.2. Turnout and party choice

The different expectations that we have for cue-taking in consolidating democracies have implications not only for party preferences but also for turnout. Countries in which party systems lack clarity will be countries in which many voters lack well-developed party identification and will thus fail to respond to appeals from 'their' parties to go out and vote. In such countries we expect turnout to be lower than in established democracies, as indeed we do observe to be the case in countries that recently experienced transitions from communist rule. Franklin (2007) studied turnout at the European Parliament elections of 2004 and established that voters in post-communist countries do not respond to different stimuli than voters in established democracies. Indeed, the stimuli that they do respond to help to explain their lower turnout. In post-communist countries the forces that mobilize voters at the time of an election are more muted.

In this paper we focus on party preferences rather than on turnout (though we do find a link between the two), but our concern is much the same: to evaluate the extent to which political decisions reflect the same forces in transitional as in established democracies. If we discover that there are indeed no substantial differences in the ways in which party preferences are formed, we will be able to conclude that the greater volatility we observe in some consolidating democracies is simply a characteristic of countries with less experience of democratic rule.

3. Methods

This study employs data from the European Elections Study 2004. We compare the determinants of the vote across 13 established democracies (Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain), and 7 consolidating democracies (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia). We employ data from respondents in each country who answered the question whether they voted in the 2004 European election.[2] The total sample size in these countries is 20,497 respondents, which is 1025 per country on average, ranging from 430 in Greece to 1606 in Estonia.

The most fashionable plug-and-play methodologies for analyzing party choice, such as multinomial logit, do not enable us to answer our research questions. In such approaches the dependent variable (party choice) is a nominal variable, which reflects a different choice set in each country. As long as we do not want to redefine this dependent variable to a dichotomy (such as a vote for the government versus a vote for the opposition), we would have to carry out 20 separate country studies, without straightforward means of systematically comparing the

results between the countries. Therefore, our enquiry proceeds along the same lines as in *Choosing Europe?* (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). In each country voters were asked, for each party in their political system,[3] how likely it was (on a scale of 1 to 10) that they would *ever* vote for it. These questions have been carefully designed to yield measures that can be interpreted as the propensity to vote for each of the parties (Tillie, 1995; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; van der Eijk, 2002; van der Eijk et al., 2006). They can be regarded for ease of exposition as preferences, and we know that voters generally decide to vote for the party they most prefer.[4] The determinants of vote propensities are therefore the same as the determinants of party choice. Employing vote propensities as the dependent variable, rather than party choice itself, has been shown to have many advantages (van der Eijk, 2002; van der Eijk et al., 2006). In this paper the most important function is to provide us with a dependent variable that is comparable across countries: the propensity to vote for a party. When the data matrix is stacked so that each voter appears as many times as there are parties for which preferences have been measured, the customary question "why did voters support Party A?" can be reformulated as "what determines party preferences?" We already know that voters virtually always vote for the party they most prefer (see footnote [4]). Thus, an answer to the question "what determines party preferences?" is also an answer to the question "what determines which party is voted for?" This way of analyzing the determinants of party choice has been validated elsewhere (Tillie, 1995; van der Eijk et al., 2006).

The main advantage in the context of the present study is that, even though the question about vote propensities is framed with reference to each particular party, the resulting party preference variable that appears in the stacked matrix no longer refers to a specific party, but to parties in general. So the stacked data matrices from each country can be readily pooled to obtain a cross-national data set for comparative analyses of party preferences.

In such a dataset the unit of analysis is the respondent * party combination, which makes it straightforward to include party characteristics. We included one such variable, *party size* (in parliamentary seats), which represents a strategic consideration that voters may take into account: we hypothesize that when two or more parties are about equally attractive for some voters, then those voters tend to vote for the largest of these parties because it has the best chance of achieving its policy goals.

Adding individual characteristics to these data is less straightforward, however. For left–right location and the position regarding European unification, the surveys not only measured the self-declared positions of respondents, but also how they perceived the locations of each party on the same scale. Therefore, we were able to transform

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[2] We do this, even though we are not specifically interested in respondents' vote in the European Parliament elections, in order to be able to weight our data to the actual (known) election outcome, enabling us to correct for most forms of sampling bias that might be present in our different national samples.

[3] In practice the parties asked about included only those with representation in the national parliament and those widely expected to obtain representation in the European Parliament.
[4] In practice this occurs about 93% of the time in established EU member states.

these variables into the distance between each voter's own position and the position of each party. If voters preferred parties close to them in left–right terms or in terms of position regarding European unification, then the resulting measure should exert a negative effect on vote propensities: the smaller the distance between voter and party, the greater the preference for the party. Note that if a respondent did not answer the question about the position of any particular party, we replaced the missing value with the national sample mean of the perceived party position.[5]

In principle, similar deductively transformed measures could be constructed for any variable for which we could relate party characteristics to voter characteristics. For example, a measure of Catholic affinity could be coded 1 for each voter–party record in which a Catholic voter was paired with a Catholic party or a non-Catholic voter with a non-Catholic party, and 0 otherwise. In practice we often do not know on theoretical grounds where a party stands in terms of particular independent variables, so making the link between the voter and the party has to be done inductively. We do this before we construct the stacked data matrix in a set of separate analyses, one for each party in each political system, in which we predict party preference from the respondent characteristic(s) in question. For example, if we want to create a variable measuring the affinity between the respondents' social class and party preference, we run a series of regression analyses predicting the propensity to vote for each party on the basis of any measures we may have of respondents' social class. The resulting predicted scores, or y-hats in statistical parlance, are saved and used as the new independent variable. These y-hats are simply linear transformations of the original independent variables, scaled according to the dependent variable (i.e. the ten-point vote propensity scores).[6] They can be added to the stacked data matrix since they are comparable across parties and countries.[7]

So, even though we do not have distance measures for these variables, and thus we cannot express the voter–party relationship in the data matrix deductively, this transformation provides an inductive means to express that relationship. In this way, we created independent variables, one at a time, party-by-party and country-by-country, which could be included in a stacked data matrix in which the dependent variable is composed of party preferences for all parties across all countries. That is the dataset employed in this study.

The relevant literature on party choice tells us that, in addition to left–right distance and distance in terms of

European unification, we should also control for age, social class, education (e.g., Swyngedouw et al., 1998), gender (Gidengil et al., 2005), importance of relevant issues, religion, approval of government, and satisfaction with democracy (e.g., van der Eijk et al., 1999).[8] Class is a subjective measure of self-assessed class location, indicated by a set of dummy variables in the regression analyses that generated a single y-hat variable for social class effects on party preference. Religion is a composite variable of religious denomination and church attendance, again yielding a single y-hat variable. Age in years yielded a single y-hat variable. The importance of issues is measured with an open-ended question about what is the most important problem facing the respondent's country. The response categories were then redefined as a set of dummy variables which in turn yielded a single y-hat variable. "Approval of the government" and "satisfaction with democracy" were also redefined in terms of dummy variables and transformed into y-hat variables in the manner described above.

The methodology thus entails linear transformations of those control variables for which distance measures could not be obtained. As a result of these transformations, the effects of the y-hat variables will—almost necessarily—be positive. The large benefit is that they allow us to conduct comparative research without transforming the dependent variable. This benefit does, however, come at a certain price. Because the variables are transformed party-by-party and country-by-country, after the linear transformation between-country differences will be incorporated in these newly created variables. This makes it unlikely that one will find interaction effects between these transformed variables and country dummies. Therefore, we will not focus in this paper on differences between established and consolidating democracies in the effects of these variables. Instead, we focus on differences between countries in the effects of left–right distance, the issue of European unification, and of strategic considerations (captured by the variable party size)—variables whose measurement did not involve y-hat transformations.

Table 1 provides summary information about the distributions of the variables in our models, for both established and consolidating democracies. All variables transformed in the manner described earlier have a mean of almost 0, which is the result of the transformation employed. For these variables the standard deviations are highly similar in established and consolidating democracies. The largest difference occurs in the case of government approval, where the standard deviation is some 25% smaller in formerly communist countries than in the other states. The means and standard deviations of the dependent variable, of left–right distances, and of distances on European unification are highly similar in the two sets of countries, so any differences in effects will not be distribution artifacts. However, the standard deviation of party size is one-third smaller in consolidating than in established democracies. This is the result of

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[5] In this way, we lost only some 20% of respondents—those who failed to place themselves in left–right terms. If we had only included the respondents who also answered the questions on party positions, we would have lost an additional 25% of the sample.

[6] These scores present problems of analysis unless they are centered around the same mean for all parties. In practice we subtract the mean value for each party, turning all of them into deviations from zero.

[7] For variables like age, where it may seem hard to think in terms of corresponding party characteristics, y-hats can still be generated, and can still be thought of as the extent to which the individual characteristic in question explains party preferences.

[8] We decided to exclude party identification from the model because of endogeneity problems.

Table 1
Distribution of key variables in the two sets of countries in the stacked data matrix

	Former communist countries		Established democracies	
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Vote propensity	3.68	3.00	3.81	3.11
Party size	0.15	0.12	0.16	0.18
Left–right distance	2.83	2.34	2.87	2.40
Distance on European unification	2.45	2.11	2.55	2.26
Social class	−0.00	0.39	−0.00	0.45
Religion	0.00	0.56	−0.00	0.55
Gender	−0.00	0.14	−0.00	0.16
Education	0.00	0.36	−0.00	0.38
Age	0.00	0.32	0.01	0.28
Importance of issues	0.00	0.35	−0.00	0.41
Government approval	−0.00	0.75	−0.00	1.01
Satisfaction with democracy	−0.01	0.49	−0.01	0.50

the larger number of parties in consolidating systems, many of which are similarly sized, and yields a potential problem discussed in note 14 below.

Our dataset is hierarchical in the sense that voter * party records are nested within individuals and individuals are nested within countries. Sampling, however, was conducted only at the individual level,[9] so this is the level that defines our N for testing statistical significance.[10] Possible interactions between country (defined as 20 dummy variables) and lower level effects are exhaustively evaluated as part of our research design (see below) and the only cross-level interactions we found are included in our final models.[11] Because of the large sample size, our coefficients are tested at a significance level of $p = 0.01$.[12]

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[9] Testing whether higher-level units (individual respondents) account for residual variation in lower-level ones (voter*party records) is entirely redundant in this case. We do know that we have not exhausted individual-level explanatory characteristics. Some of these were not present in our data (for example postmaterialism and other value orientations, orientations towards political leaders, information about voters' social networks, etc.). To the extent that we err here, we do so in commission as such factors are standardly omitted in the extant literature, especially that on economic voting. Other omitted variables would include idiosyncratic response tendencies (cf. Saris, 1988) that are not of central concern to us here, particularly because there are no indications that such factors are systematically correlated to the independent variables that we do use (in other words, omitting them is unlikely to generate omitted variable bias in our estimates).

[10] We estimated our models in STATA, using the robust estimate of variance (known as the Huber/White/Sandwich estimate of variance) and the 'cluster' option to adjust for the dependency among observations pertaining to the same respondent (Rogers, 1993; Williams, 2000). Each respondent's vote propensity scores were defined as a separate cluster. We weighted the cases in such a way that each country now has the same weighted number of respondents * party combinations (about 5600 for each country), and thus the same degree of influence on the results.

[11] These are also tested for significance using the N at the individual level, a conservative testing strategy since it ensures that we take account of cross-level interactions that might otherwise have been ignored.

[12] In some of the exploratory analyses below, where we search for interaction effects between country dummies and various predictors of party preference, we will explore as many as 60 interaction terms. The 0.01 level of significance guards us from finding significant effects where these do not exist.

Having discussed these methodological considerations, our investigation proceeds by employing regression analysis to study the effects of independent variables on party preferences. It is to the findings of these analyses that we now turn.

4. Findings

Table 2 shows the effects of the various independent variables, created as explained above, on vote propensities. The table contains three panels, of which the first pertains to all countries and the other two distinguish between established and consolidating democracies. We explain 31 percent of the variance in party preferences for all countries taken together (34 percent among established democracies and 24 percent among consolidating democracies). This proportion of explained variance (though quite respectable) would have been even higher had the dataset included more measures of respondents' and parties' issue positions.[13]

More important than the proportion of explained variance, however, are the striking similarities in the findings for established and consolidating democracies. Because of the way in which we constructed the y-hat variables—from social class through satisfaction with democracy—the unstandardized regression coefficients cannot be compared in a straightforward manner. The standardized coefficients, however, indicate that the strengths of the effects are very similar in the two sets of countries.[14] The former communist states see somewhat stronger effects of religion, satisfaction with democracy and age, and somewhat weaker effects from social class and government approval than more established democracies do. But overall the magnitudes of these effects seem quite comparable.

We now turn to the variables of primary interest: left–right distance, distance on the issue of European unification, and party size. Note that these variables were deductively derived and thus the unstandardized regression coefficients are directly comparable across countries. Because we expect voters to have higher preferences for parties that are close to them in left–right and EU terms, we expect negative effects of those two variables: smaller distances should yield higher party preferences. The results show that the effects of left–right distance are particularly

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[13] In this joint data collection effort, only one position issue was included (positions on European unification). Left–right distance is probably closely correlated with the distance between parties and voters on issues everywhere, but past studies suggest that in most countries distance on a number of specific position issues would explain an additional 5–10% of the variance in party preferences after left–right distance is controlled for.

[14] Standardized regression coefficients can only be compared across datasets with the same distributional characteristics, but the variables we constructed inductively (the y-hat variables) are defined in such a way that they are bound to end up with similar distributional characteristics (summarized in Table 1); and we have shown (in the same table) that these two datasets do have largely similar distributional characteristics even for variables that were measured substantively—similar enough, we believe, for descriptive purposes (especially since what differences we find do not involve inductively defined variables with distributional differences, as we shall see). Our conclusions do not depend on these comparisons, however, but on an analysis of both subsets taken together (see Table 3).

Table 2
Regression models for the explanation of party preference without interaction terms

	All countries together (Model A)			Established democracies only (Model B)			Consolidating democracies only (Model C)		
	b	SE	Beta	b	SE	Beta	b	SE	Beta
Social class	0.529	0.025	0.075**	0.540	0.028	0.079**	0.498	0.055	0.065**
Religion	0.646	0.022	0.116**	0.605	0.028	0.108**	0.750	0.036	0.136**
Gender	0.751	0.071	0.039**	0.724	0.084	0.039**	0.837	0.130	0.040**
Education	0.532	0.031	0.065**	0.563	0.037	0.069**	0.443	0.056	0.052**
Age	0.360	0.041	0.034**	0.340	0.053	0.031**	0.426	0.063	0.044**
Importance of issues	0.650	0.028	0.083**	0.638	0.032	0.085**	0.695	0.054	0.078**
Government approval	0.647	0.014	0.200**	0.635	0.016	0.207**	0.684	0.027	0.178**
Satisfaction with democracy	0.382	0.024	0.061**	0.358	0.029	0.057**	0.442	0.044	0.072**
Issue distance on European unification	−0.086	0.006	−0.062**	−0.078	0.007	−0.057**	−0.106	0.010	−0.074**
Left–right distance	−0.370	0.005	−0.287**	−0.390	0.007	−0.300**	−0.324	0.009	−0.255**
Consolidating democracies (dummy variable)	−0.065	0.026	−0.010						
Party size	4.218	0.063	0.223**	4.293	0.072	0.244**	3.744	0.116	0.154**
R^2-adjusted		0.311			0.339			0.244	
Number of clusters (=respondents)		16,456			11,247			5209	
Units of analysis		112,013			76,412			35,601	

*Significant at $p < 0.01$; **significant at $p < 0.001$.

reduced in former communist states. Strategic considerations also play a lesser role in the former communist states, as shown by the lesser effect of party size. The issue of European unification, on the other hand, seems to play a somewhat more important role for electoral decisions in the new democracies. However, the differences are small in all three cases. Indeed, the strongest message to take from the comparison between established and consolidating democracies is how little difference we see. It is only the variance explained that is notably lower in consolidating democracies, suggesting the presence of rather more unmeasured and perhaps more idiosyncratic effects on vote choices there. That the effect of a dummy variable for 'formerly communist countries' fails to prove significant in the analysis when all countries are pooled together shows that, after controlling for the relevant determinants of party preferences, the overall level of party support is not different in the two sets of countries. This is unexpected, given the emphasis in some of the extant literature on the weakness of citizens' party attachments in the former communist countries (see Rose, 1995; Rose and Mishler, 1998), but has no bearing on the hypotheses examined here.

We now turn to the question of whether our primary independent variables have effects that are significantly different in established as opposed to consolidating democracies. The differences shown in Table 2 might not be statistically significant, and Table 3 addresses this question by including (in Model D) three interaction terms for former communist states with left–right distance, party size and distances on the issue of European unification. Here we see that the effects of left–right distance and party size on party choice in former communist states are indeed significantly weaker (at the 0.01 level) than in the more established democracies. The differences are small however. The main effects (unstandardized) are −0.394 for left–right distance and 4.36 for party size. In former communist states this effect is 0.056 weaker for left–right distance (−0.338) and 0.60 weaker for party size (3.759).

An equally important finding is that the third interaction effect is *not* statistically significant. The issue of European unification is not significantly more important in elections in former communist countries (which are all new member states) than in the more established democracies. So Model D strongly supports the impression gathered from Table 2, which is that the determinants of party choice in the two sets of counties are very similar.

Thus far we have distinguished between two sets of countries only. This separation of countries into two different groups is based on our central research question, but leaves open the possibility that various other types of differences exist between voting patterns across the different countries which are not well captured by the distinction between established and consolidating democracies. Yet, we have said that we would expect differences between countries within both groups. After all, van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) did find differences between the then member states that could only be accounted for by interactions defined at the country level. We would expect this to still hold true and extant research suggests that we can find similar idiosyncratic differences among consolidating democracies in the impact of the different independent variables (Miller et al., 1998: 303–324: Whitefield and Evans, 1998; Kitschelt et al., 1999). An extensive search for interactions between country dummies and individual level variables indeed demonstrated that the effect of left–right on party choice was significantly different from the general pattern in Model D in four countries: Denmark, Portugal, Cyprus and the Czech Republic. Moreover, the effect of party size turned out to be different in several countries.[15]

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[15] We could find no pattern to differences in the importance of party size, which we take to imply that there are idiosyncratic country differences in the extent of strategic voting in different countries. Because we could not account for these differences we do not pursue the topic in this paper.

Table 3
Regression models for the explanation of party preference with interactions (all countries)

	Model D			Model E			Model F		
	b	SE	Beta	b	SE	Beta	b	SE	Beta
Social class	0.529	0.025	0.075**	0.521	0.025	0.074**	0.521	0.025	0.074**
Religion	0.647	0.022	0.116**	0.651	0.022	0.117**	0.652	0.022	0.117**
Gender	0.752	0.071	0.039**	0.747	0.071	0.039**	0.748	0.071	0.039**
Education	0.532	0.031	0.065**	0.530	0.031	0.064**	0.530	0.031	0.064**
Age	0.364	0.041	0.034**	0.353	0.040	0.033**	0.357	0.040	0.034**
Importance of issues	0.649	0.028	0.083**	0.643	0.028	0.082**	0.643	0.028	0.082**
Government approval	0.644	0.014	0.199**	0.636	0.014	0.196**	0.634	0.014	0.196**
Satisfaction with democracy	0.383	0.024	0.061**	0.369	0.024	0.059**	0.371	0.024	0.059**
Issue distance on European unification	−0.077	0.007	−0.056**	−0.087	0.006	−0.063**	−0.078	0.007	−0.056**
Left–right distance	−0.387	0.007	−0.300**	−0.374	0.005	−0.290**	−0.390	0.007	−0.302**
Party size	4.301	0.072	0.227**	4.270	0.063	0.226**	4.360	0.073	0.230**
Consolidating democracies (dummy variable)	0.017	0.033	0.003	−0.058	0.026	0.009	0.031	0.034	0.005
Consolidating democracies * left–right distance	0.056	0.010	0.024**				0.055	0.010	0.023**
Consolidating democracies * issue distance	−0.030	0.012	−0.018				−0.030	0.012	−0.011
Consolidating democracies * party size	−0.556	0.136	−0.011**				−0.601	0.137	−0.019**
LR system agreement * LR distance				−0.433	0.040	−0.041**	−0.434	0.041	−0.041**
R^2-adjusted		0.311			0.312			0.313	
Number of clusters (=respondents)		16,456			16,456			16,456	
Units of analysis		112,013			112,013			112,013	

In the theoretical section of this paper we developed the idea that a systemic variable could explain differences in the effect of left–right distance on party choice. When positions in left–right terms are very clear, these left–right positions provide good indications of parties' ideological complexions, and thus of their future actions. When, on the other hand, parties positions in left–right terms are less clear, left–right positions are less helpful in cueing voters to the political programs of the parties. Therefore, voters are expected to rely more upon left–right positions of parties when these positions are clear, and less when these positions are fuzzy. An indication of the clarity of party positions is the extent of voter agreement about these positions. The more voters agree about where a party stands, the more help they will get from this heuristic when establishing their party preferences, as we explained earlier.

To test whether this is indeed the case, Model E introduces an interaction between the amount of perceptual agreement (see van der Eijk, 2001) concerning left–right positions of parties, on the one hand, and the importance of left–right distances in helping to generate party preferences, on the other. Model E shows that the effect of left–right distance on party preferences does indeed depend upon the degree of perceptual agreement. Van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) and van der Eijk et al. (1999) report similar findings using two other sets of data, so that this pattern turns out to be very robust. We hypothesized earlier that the lower effects of left–right distance in post-communist countries might be due to lower perceptual agreement in those countries, so the question is whether the interaction between former communist states and left–right distance (see Model D) still remains significant after we control for the interaction between left–right system agreement and left–right distance. Model F shows

that it does. So, even though the differences between established and consolidating democracies are small, the effects of left–right distances are significantly weaker in the latter countries, even beyond what can be explained by differences in the extent of agreement on left–right party locations.

Introducing the measure of left–right agreement does, however, account for country differences in the effects of left–right location for all of the four countries listed earlier as being exceptional in these terms, except for Cyprus where the effect of left–right distance is stronger than we would expect even on the basis of the high levels of perceptual agreement found there.

Finally, we checked for the possibility that the slightly different patterns in established and consolidating democracies are the consequence of differences in the levels of turnout in the European election of 2004, which ranges from 17% in Slovakia to 73% in Italy.[16] We found no significant (at the 0.01 level) interactions between turnout levels and the variables of primary concern to us (left–right distance, EU issue distance and party size). We also checked whether the causal mechanism that leads to a weaker explanation of electoral choice by individual level variables is linked to lower turnout (which might itself be linked to democratic consolidation, as discussed earlier). To this end we estimated Model F and saved the residuals. Then we computed the means of the absolute values of the residuals for each country. The lower the mean of the absolute residuals, the higher is the explained variance. These

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[16] Turnout differences might indicate differences in the salience of European elections in different countries, or (given the strong link between turnout in European and national elections) other political features that differ between countries.

absolute residuals are quite strongly correlated with the turnout rates ($r = -0.58$ at the country level), meaning that higher degrees of turnout are related to higher degrees of explained variance. So the weaker explanation of electoral choice in consolidating democracies is partly linked to the lower turnout that we find there. It makes sense that this would be so. Weaker structuring of party preferences would mean less reason for voting. While no previous research has shown this, the reverse might also be true. Less salient EP elections may well provide a less structured context in which not only do we see lower turnout, but also lesser effects of individual-level variables on vote choice.

5. Conclusions and implications

In this paper we analyzed voting patterns in 20 EU countries with very different party systems and with very different historic pasts. Many of these countries have experienced more than a century of democratic rule, whereas other countries have a very short experience with electoral democracy. We searched for differences in the determinants of propensities to support parties between these 20 EU countries and we explicitly distinguished between former communist countries and more established democracies. Some differences were found in the extent to which voters use left–right positions as a cue to decide which party to support, but these differences are largely accounted for when we include in the model a measure of the extent of perceptual agreement about the locations of parties in left–right terms. The main finding is that the determinants of party support are strikingly similar in each set of countries.

Religion has a slightly stronger effect in post-communist countries than in more established democracies, whereas the effect of social class is somewhat weaker. This finding speaks against the notion that the effects of socio-structural variables would be minor because communist parties attempted to suppress religious and class differences, as was argued by Lindström, 1991; White et al. (2000) and Meulemann (2004), and may be explained by the impact of political Catholicism on the salience of the religious cleavage (Whitefield and Evans, 1998; Wittenberg, 2006). This seems to support the counter-argument that in countries where party systems are new and especially where they are in flux, voters are in urgent need of other cues that may be 'cheaply' provided by social distinctions. However, it should be emphasized that in all countries (established as well as consolidating democracies), the effects of socio-structural variables are weaker than the effects of left–right distance, party size or government approval.

Our interpretation of these findings is that, 15 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the party systems in the former communist countries of the EU have crystallized to the extent of being little different from party systems in more established democracies, in terms of providing voters with relevant electoral cues. Where social structure provides adequate fuel for a cleavage to impact voting behavior, political entrepreneurs rarely fail to capitalize on their mobilizing potential, and voters need very little time to respond accordingly. To this extent, voters and party systems in central European countries are not (or are no longer) very different from those of Western Europe—which is not to say that party systems and political culture do not differ between old and new democracies along dimensions that were not examined here.

As mentioned earlier, van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) pointed out the implication of their corresponding finding: that one could take a Dutchman and, by moving him to Spain and giving him time to acclimatize, turn him (for electoral purposes) into a Spaniard. The same is now seen to be true of a Hungarian or Pole (or anyone else in the newly-admitted EU states). This would be good news if European elections were going to demand of such voters that they evaluate EU issues and leadership in a common fashion across EU member countries. Nowadays, EU elections are organized as separate national elections, with separate national lists of national parties, generally attempting to mobilize voters on issues of national concern. This gives to European Parliament elections a fictional character, making it easy for voters to ignore them (van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). If EU member states wanted to create a genuinely European polity whose elections would be taken seriously, they might decide to organize real European elections in which European citizens would be treated as one electorate and would vote for a European list of European parties. An important implication of our findings is that, even after its first Eastern enlargement, the performance of EU voters is no impediment to such elections being held.

From a political science perspective, our findings regarding perceptual agreement about the locations of political parties in left–right terms are important. These findings reinforce earlier findings whose implications have never been spelled out. As previously established, voters do prefer to vote for parties that are close to them in left–right terms, though not to the exclusion of other factors. Importantly, however, this tendency is weaker where there is disagreement about where parties stand on a left–right scale. The lower importance of left–right location in contexts of low perceptual agreement applies equally in transitional as in established democracies and does not account for differences between the two sets of countries. This unexpected finding suggests that something else—possibly a more complicated system of cross-cutting cleavages in post-communist democracies—is responsible for the lower effects of left–right location there. The topic deserves further study since the difference between consolidating and established democracies in terms of the effects of left–right distance (though small) suggests that these countries still have something to teach us about the ways in which contextual differences affect the behavior of individual voters.

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