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### Is left/right still the 'super glue'? The role of left/right ideology and issues in electoral politics in Western and East Central Europe

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# **Introduction**

## SETTING THE SCENE: BLURRING LEFT AND RIGHT

Until the 1990s, behaviour of parties and voters alike has been largely structured by left/right (Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990; Klingemann et al., 1994; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Hix, 1999). Citizens use the left/right dimension to orient themselves in a complex political world (Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990; Zechmeister, 2006). They use information about their left/right positions and those of parties to assess which party is ideologically closest to their own position and which party to vote for at the ballot box. Similarly, political parties refer to their left/right positions to inform voters about their positions on concrete issues. Given these characteristics, left/right has been the most important predictor of party support in European democracies (Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990; Franklin et al., 1992; Klingemann et al., 1994; Oppenhuis, 1995; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). However, there are reasons to believe that the capacity of left/right to structure party competition and voter behaviour has weakened over the last two decades.

In the first place, the meaning of the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ has become less clear (e.g. Mair, 2009). This is partially caused by the processes of globalisation and European integration, as a result of which the traditional meaning of left/right has changed. Scholars have shown that economic liberalisation has not only restructured conflicts among economic actors (Hiscox, 2005) but also reshaped mass politics as traditional issues have become less salient and new ‘globalisation issues’ such as immigration and EU integration have become more salient (e.g. Kriesi et al., 2008; De Vries et al., 2011a). Market integration, both globally and within the European Union, has led to the formation of a new structural cleavage, while old cleavages have been reshaped (Kriesi et al., 2008). The cultural, economic and political forms of competition have led to new disparities between social groups structured along gains and losses from globalisation. The traditional cleavages such as social class and religion are being overshadowed by new divides around the level of education and the form of occupation. In addition, the traditional moral or religious issues, or issues advocated by new social movements, which have long defined the meaning of left/right, have become less important than the issues of immigration and EU integration (Kriesi et al., 2008). As with the passage of time some issues become associated with left/right, while other issues become less structured by left/right (e.g. De Vries et al., 2011a), the left/right dimension may lose its importance as a cue for conveying information about issue positions.

Secondly, there is a trend among mainstream parties to converge on the ideological centre, which can be traced both to historical developments and to processes of globalisation. In the aftermath of the victory of democracy after the Cold War and the absence of any serious contemporary alternative to the market economy, mainstream parties began to share more and more of their policies. This trend has been strengthened by the process of globalisation that has imposed policy constraints on political parties in government (Mair, 2009: 216). Such a programmatic convergence of mainstream parties has made them look more similar in the eyes of voters (Pennings and Keman, 2003). As a result of this convergence, left/right may have become a less effective instrument for voters to choose a party at the ballot box.

Thirdly, the traditional meaning of ‘left’ and ‘right’ has been undermined by the emergence of parties that have generated support by campaigning on issues which are weakly related to the traditional left/right

dimension. Radical, post-materialist and often green political parties which have emerged on the left side of the political spectrum have little attachment to conventional working-class organisations that used to dominate the political left (Mair, 2009: 215). These parties “*conform neither to traditional conservative nor to socialist programs, but link libertarian commitments to individual autonomy and popular participation with a leftist concern for equality*” (Kitschelt, 1988: 195). Similarly, right-wing populist parties have emerged that combine right-wing appeals to decrease immigration with traditionally left-wing appeals to protect the rights of women and homosexuals or a clear separation of church and state (Akkerman, 2005). As a consequence of these developments scholars noticed that the left/right positions of parties are less clear-cut and less meaningful to voters (e.g. Mair, 2009: 217).

Last but not least, the meaning of left/right has changed as a result of developments in the character of political parties. In recent years scholars have observed a shift towards a more presidential as opposed to a bottom-up form of decision making in political parties, in combination with the emergence of cartelised party systems and the professionalization of the political leadership of parties (Katz and Mair, 1995; 2002; Puguntke and Webb, 2005). This has led them to prioritise office-seeking above policy-seeking electoral strategies and it promoted a style of competition that relies on issues of political management and efficiency rather than engagement with substantive political or ideological oppositions. As a result of these changes, the ideological terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ have become less relevant (Mair, 2009: 216).

Given these developments, this dissertation examines the role of left/right ideology in relation to issues in contemporary electoral politics. While we know a lot about the importance of the abstract left/right dimension for party competition and voter behaviour (e.g. Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996), our knowledge of the role of issues and their inter-relationship with left/right ideology in the electoral process is limited. Although left/right ideology has been described as structuring diverse policy issues, the link between left/right and concrete issues has often been assumed but rarely explicitly tested. This dissertation fills these lacuna by examining the role of the abstract left/right dimension and issues in electoral politics. It focuses on two aspects of electoral politics. The first aspect focuses on the choice process and the second relates to the outcome of this process, namely political representation (or the lack thereof). For both aspects of electoral processes (party support and representation), this dissertation studies how individual and contextual heterogeneity mediate the role of left/right and issues.

Studies contained in this dissertation tie into the picture of considerable changes in the electoral behaviour that scholarly literature has painted over the years. Scholars have observed that a process of de-alignment has been under way in the last decades. Since the 1960s stable electoral patterns with voters strongly tied to specific parties began to crumble and traditional cleavages such as social class, religion and the urban/rural divide started to lose their importance for electoral politics (e.g. Franklin, 1992; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000). Recent literature shows that also left/right ideology has lost some of its importance for the electoral process in Western Europe (Van der Brug et al., 2007; Van der Brug, 2010). These processes have allegedly been accompanied by the increase in the importance of issues and performance evaluations for voting behaviour (e.g. Rose and McAllister, 1986; Nieuwbeerta and De Graaf, 1999; Karvonen, 2010). Other scholars have pointed out that, rather than de-alignment, a process of re-alignment along the socio-cultural

dimension is under way in Western Europe (Kitschelt 2003; Kriesi et al., 2008). As a result of intensified globalisation, new cultural issues such as immigration and EU integration have become more important in the electoral process. At the same time, the traditional divisions of social class and religion have been overshadowed by new divisions in the society such as educational divide or the 'new class' divide between unskilled workers and socio-cultural specialists (Kriesi et al., 2008: 248). This dissertation ties into the literature on trends in electoral politics by examining the role of left/right and issues for party support and representation in contemporary Europe.

This introductory chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, I elaborate upon the connection between left/right and issue attitudes. Secondly, I discuss the research questions that will be answered in this dissertation and I elaborate on the importance of a comparative research design. Thirdly, I present the plan of this dissertation.

## **BACKGROUND: LEFT/RIGHT IDEOLOGY AND ISSUE ATTITUDES OF VOTERS**

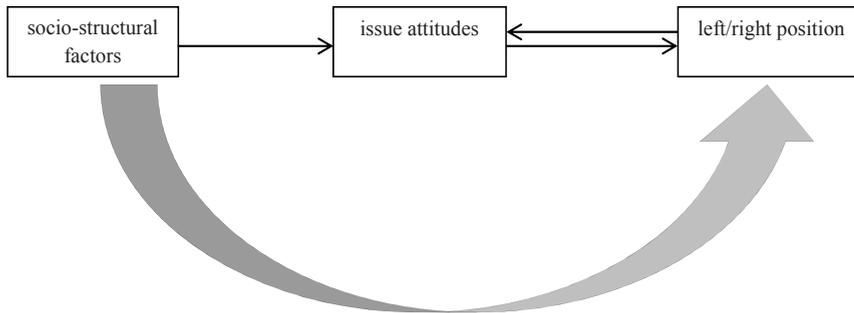
Positions of political parties and preferences of voters towards political issues have been frequently described in European countries in left/right terms (Downs, 1957; Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976; Klingemann, 1979a, 1979b; Van der Eijk et al., 2005). The left/right dimension has been seen by scholars as an abstraction for political conflicts in a political system (e.g. Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976; Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990; Hix, 1999). It has been considered an ideology which summarises positions of voters and political parties towards a number of issues important in a political system (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008: 207). As left/right summarises a variety of issues in the political arena (Huber, 1989; Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990), it has been dubbed an ideological 'super issue' (Pierce, 1999: 30). What scholars understand under issues are general or specific political questions which arise in a political system (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008: 161). They may be related to the domestic arena, such as the issue of redistribution of wealth to the poor, or to the international arena, such as the issue of a country's engagement in a military mission abroad. In addition, a distinction can be made between position and valence issues (Stokes, 1963). Position issues are those on which various stances can be taken, for instance some voters and parties support redistribution of wealth to the needy, while other voters and parties oppose it. With regard to valence issues there is a broad agreement about a desired goal e.g. achievement of low unemployment, but the ways of tackling this problem or the question of competence in solving it play a role in electoral considerations.

Attitudes towards all sorts of issues are expected to be important for electoral processes (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008). Attitudes denote preferences for certain issue positions or ways of tackling problems (Rokeach, 1968: 124). Attitudes differ from political opinions as the former are characterised by a higher degree of stability (Feldman, 2003: 479; McCarty and Shrum, 2000: 272). When opinions have a certain degree of stability and are well organised they are referred to as political attitudes. Further, if attitudes towards a number of issues are related to each other, or constrained to use the phrase coined by Converse (1964), scholars refer to them as an attitude structure, a belief system or an ideology (Converse, 1964; Lewis-Beck et

al., 2008: 203). The left/right dimension has been described as such an ideology because it constitutes a dimension of well constrained attitudes towards a number of basic policy issues which are of importance in a political system.

How people see themselves in left/right terms depends, among other things, on their social background and their attitudes towards political issues (Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976; Freire, 2006). According to the sociological approach in electoral research, social characteristics such as, for example, social class or religious denomination, affect how voters' see themselves in ideological terms (e.g. Campbell et al., 1954, 1960; Butler and Stokes, 1969). For instance, having a working class background may lead someone to consider herself to be left-wing. Similarly, socio-structural factors affect issue attitudes of voters. Belonging to a certain social class or having a certain level of religiosity affects issue attitudes. We can imagine that the working class would be more in favour of income redistribution than the upper class, and that religiousness influences attitudes towards abortion. Although the relationship between social characteristics on the one hand and issue positions and ideology on the other has diminished, it still remains important (e.g. Franklin et al., 1992; Van der Brug, 2010). Furthermore, which attitudes voters hold towards issues affects how voters see themselves in left/right terms (e.g. Huber, 1989). For instance if a respondent is against state involvement in the economy, she will probably see herself as right-wing. However, the relationship between left/right positioning and issue attitudes may be reciprocal (e.g. Weber and Saris, 2010). Scholarly literature offers evidence that voters can deduce their positions on issues from where they see themselves in left/right terms (e.g. Peffley and Hurwitz, 1985). This causal relationship between socio-structural factors, issue attitudes and left/right is graphically displayed in Figure 1.0.

**Figure 1.0 Causal Relationship between Socio-Structural Factors, Issue Attitudes and Left/Right Self-Placement**



While studying the inter-relationship between issue attitudes and left/right, two phenomena have to be acknowledged. Firstly, voters do not necessarily hold clear-cut attitudes, but their attitudes may be ambivalent (e.g. Alvarez and Brehm, 1995; 1997; 1998; 2002). Ambivalence denotes that respondents are uncertain or contradictory in their attitudes. Such ambivalent attitudes exhibit lower levels of temporal stability than non-ambivalent attitudes and people holding them are more open to persuasion (Martinez et al., 2005; Armitage and Conner, 2000). The ambivalence of attitudes may affect the way voters see themselves in left/right terms, but this linkage has not been empirically explored yet and it will remain out of the scope of this dissertation. Secondly, the relationship between left/right and issue attitudes is affected by competition dynamics among political parties (Huber, 1989; Kitschelt and Hellemans, 1990; De Vries and Edwards, 2009; Lachat, 2011). Political elites can influence the meaning of left/right through agenda setting i.e. which issues they bring on the political agenda and how they link them. If parties discuss issues in left/right terms, voters will associate left/right with these issues and the ideological position of voters will be affected by such issues. Kitschelt and Hellemans (1990) have demonstrated that green parties have influenced the content of left/right by mobilising ‘new politics’ issues such as the environment and lifestyle issues. Freire (2006, 2008) has shown that in highly ideologically polarised systems, political attitudes of voters are more strongly anchored by the left/right dimension. Similarly, there is evidence that when elites take more polarised positions, voters are more likely to follow party cues and match their issue preferences with their party and ideology (Baldassarri and Gelman, 2008; Levendusky, 2010). This dissertation acknowledges the importance of party agency for the meaning of left/right and the ambivalence of voter attitudes, but does not explicitly focus on the consequences of party agency for electoral politics.

The left/right dimension structures attitudes on important issues. The salience of issues varies across countries and over time. Therefore, the meaning of left/right may be different across countries and within these countries over time (e.g. Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990; Gabel and Huber, 2000). Knutsen (1995a, 1995b) stresses that the meaning of left/right may become modified by incorporating new issues when such new issues appear on the political agenda. In the course of time left/right, at least as it has been studied in Western Europe, has structured several issues which can be classified in three issue domains. The first

domain which has been traditionally linked to left/right contains various socio-economic issues, in particular those related to the functioning of the free market and to the role of the state in the economy (e.g. Hix, 1999; Hooghe et al., 2002). With regard to these issues, the left stands for state involvement in the economy and a more equal distribution of income and wealth in society, while the right is connected to economic freedom of individuals devoid of state control and support for income differences. These issues were originally associated with left/right as in the post-war industrial societies the left/right division was related to the materialist conflicts between social classes. In this dissertation, I refer to these types of ‘materialist’ conflicts as ‘socio-economic’ issues.

The second domain encompasses attitudes towards societal and personal freedoms such as equality of women and rights of sexual minorities as well as issues related to law and order and the importance of authority (Inglehart, 1977, 1984, 1990; Dalton et al., 1984; Flanagan, 1987; Hooghe et al., 2002; Knutsen, 2006). This issue domain has been labelled post-materialist/materialist (Inglehart, 1990), new politics/old politics (Franklin et al., 1992), or green/alternative/libertarian (GAL) vs. traditional/authoritarian/nationalist (TAN) (Hooghe et al., 2002). In this dissertation, I refer to these issues as ‘libertarian-authoritarian’ issues.

The third domain is related to attitudes towards immigration and EU integration. Recent literature asserts that these issues form together with the libertarian-authoritarian issues a dimension which at the level of parties and voters is weakly related to socio-economic attitudes (Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008; Bornschier, 2010). However, Van der Brug and Van Spanje (2009) have questioned this finding by showing that positions of *parties* are largely structured by one single dimension, with the sole exception of positions on European unification. Attitudes of *voters* are indeed structured by two dimensions. Given this academic discussion, this dissertation will take such issue domains into account which both traditionally and since recently have been associated with the left/right ideology.

This dissertation sheds light on the relationship between the left/right dimension and its issue-based component (Inglehart and Klingemann, 1976). It focuses on two aspects of electoral politics – party support and representation. Left/right predominates in electoral research, but the role of its issue-based component in the electoral process remains largely unexplored. A considerable number of studies examine the role of the left/right distance between voters and parties in determining party support (e.g. Van der Eijk and Oppenhuis, 1990; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Van der Brug et al. 2008). Similarly, several scholars have focused on how well represented voters are on the left/right dimension and which factors affect the congruence between voters and governments or political representatives on this dimension (e.g. Powell, 2000; Powel and Vanberg, 2000; McDonald and Budge, 2005; Blais and Bodet, 2006). However, our knowledge is more limited with regard to the role of issues in electoral politics. Some studies have contributed to the literature on party support or representation by including issues, although such literature remains scarce (e.g. Van der Eijk et al., 1996; Thomassen and Schmitt, 1997; Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999). The need to look beyond the abstract left/right dimension into its issue-related content becomes more salient as scholarly literature of the recent years has observed a decreasing role of socio-structural factors and left/right for electoral politics and an increasing importance of issues with this regard (e.g. Rose and McAllister, 1986; Franklin et al., 1992; Nieuwbeerta and De Graaf, 1999).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THE NEED FOR A COMPARATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

The central question that this dissertation addresses is *which role left/right and issues play in contemporary electoral politics.*

The role of left/right and issues in the electoral process will be examined by focusing on two aspects thereof, namely party support and representation. With regard to party support, this dissertation asks two sub-questions. Firstly, *which factors can explain cross-country differences in the effects of left/right and issues on party preferences?* And secondly, *can we observe differences across generations in how the effects of left/right and issues affect party preferences?* With regard to representation, this dissertation asks *how well voters are represented in issue domains that are associated with left/right and which factors account for the voter-elite congruence in these issue domains.*

In order to better understand the role of left/right and issues in the electoral process, a cross-national comparative perspective is employed in this dissertation. A cross-national approach allows for exploring the contextual variation in the importance of left/right and issues. While extensive literature exists which looks into the role of left/right in a single country or several countries in Western Europe, there are very few studies which analyse a wider spectrum of countries. With the view to explore the relationship between left/right and its issue-based component it is necessary to ‘go comparative’ because only a comparative study offers enough contextual-variation to allow for generalisations on this relationship. This dissertation undertakes such a comparative approach by including 27 countries of the European Union. This results in an interesting cross-country variation as the current EU countries encompass both established democracies of Western Europe with a long tradition of democracy and consolidating democracies of East Central Europe with a long period of communism and relatively short democratic history. There are two reasons why a broad cross-country variation is important within the framework of this study.

The first reason stems from the different societal and political cleavages that the established and consolidating democracies may have. Western and East Central European countries have a different historical background, which has resulted in different historical legacies. Western European countries have a long tradition of democracy. Understandably, variation exists also within Western European countries such as Greece, Cyprus, Malta, Spain and Portugal, which had their first parliamentary elections in the 1960s and 1970s. East Central European countries were under communist rule for over 40 years and democracy has been introduced in the region slightly over 20 years ago. These different historical experiences may have resulted in various issues being on the agenda across countries and regions. As a consequence of such cleavages, left/right may take a different meaning both across West and East and across countries because it may structure different issues. Scholars have indeed pointed to observable differences in how socio-structural characteristics of voters and the issue of EU integration affect electoral behaviour in West and East Central European countries (Tworzecki, 2002; Van der Brug et al., 2008; De Vries and Tillman, 2011). Similarly, the role of left/right and issues can vary across regions and countries. A comparative study which spans established and post-communist democracies offers sufficient cross-country variation to explore how contextual variables moderate the effects of left/right and issues.

The second reason lies in the differences with regard to how electorates have been socialised in the established and consolidating democracies. Western European countries have experienced democratic freedoms and a substantial level of wealth for decades. In turn, East Central European countries have had a lower level of material wealth and political freedoms have existed there for a relatively short period of time. Nevertheless, in Western European countries political debates have been waged on various issues, with certain issues becoming more salient over time or new issues such as environmental issues in the 1980s or immigration more recently appearing on the political agenda. In these countries left/right has structured several issue domains and has played an important role in the electoral process in the last 50 years (e.g. Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). In turn, in the much younger electoral systems of East Central Europe voters had less time to get acquainted with political conflicts structured along the left/right dimension. Scholarly literature demonstrates that it took some time for political parties in East Central Europe to mobilise voters on cleavages such as social class and to structure political conflicts in left/right terms. As a result, in the first elections considerations regarding left/right and social class were less important for voters than in subsequent elections (Szelényi et al., 1996). As the electorates in the East have been to a lesser degree socialised into the use of left/right in comparison to the electorates in the West, we may see differences in the role that left/right and issues play for party support and representation across established and consolidating democracies. This dissertation explores this natural variation in the political context across established and consolidating democracies.

In addition to cross-country variation, this dissertation accounts for the heterogeneity at the individual- and party-level. The individual-level heterogeneity relates to political sophistication and belonging to specific generational cohorts. Political sophistication matters in the context of this research as the ability of respondents to recognise and link their issue attitudes to their left/right position and recognise where parties are located on the left/right dimension depends on how knowledgeable and how interested in politics people are (Converse, 1964; Klingemann, 1979a, 1979b; Zaller, 1992). In addition, generational differences in how left/right and issues affect party support are important to study given the extant literature which shows the decreasing importance of social class, religion and the urban/rural divide alongside the potentially increasing role of issues for electoral behaviour (e.g. Franklin et al., 1992; Van der Brug et al., 2007; Van der Brug, 2010). As socialisation is key for the political expression of attitudes (Inglehart, 1985; Hooghe, 2004), generational replacement may play a role with regard to the changes in how left/right and issues affect party support. Generational change may be of particular importance in East Central Europe where only the youngest cohorts have been socialised in a democratic system, while older cohorts have experienced repression of political attitudes and political participation under the communism. Another source of heterogeneity accounted for in this dissertation stems from the large variety of political parties. This source of variation is of particular importance for representation as parties stress different issues and may ultimately vary in how they represent voters on these issues.

This dissertation employs the European Election Study 2009 (EES 2009; Van Egmond et al., 2010) and the European Parliament Election Candidate Survey 2009 (EECS 2009; Giebler et al., 2010). These are representative surveys of citizens and political elites in 27 countries of the European Union. The EES 2009 is a population survey which was fielded immediately following the elections to the European Parliament in

June 2009, with independently drawn samples of over 1000 respondents in each of 27 EU countries. The EECS 2009 is a survey of 6500 political candidates running for the elections to the European Parliament. A great advantage of these surveys is that they tap into left/right self-placement and attitudes of citizens and political elites towards a range of basic policy issues, using exactly the same questions in the two studies. With their rich variation in political context these studies lend themselves perfectly to examining the inter-relationship of left/right and issues in electoral politics.

## **PLAN OF THE BOOK**

Next to this introductory chapter and a concluding chapter, this dissertation consists of four empirical chapters. Chapter 1 and 2 focus on the role of left/right and issues in party support, while Chapters 3 and 4 tackle the question of representation. In short, we present here the leading research question of as well as the data and methodology employed in each chapter.

### **Chapter 1**

This chapter explores which factors account for the differences in the extent to which left/right and issues affect party preferences in 27 countries of the EU. Scholarly literature has revealed significant cross-country variation in the extent of structural voting, ideological voting and issue voting. Several of these studies focus on such a variation between established democracies of Western Europe and consolidating democracies of East Central Europe. This chapter looks beyond such a crude East-West distinction by setting out to explain cross-country variation in the effects of issues and left/right on party support with a general model. This chapter employs the European Election Study 2009 and employs a research design developed by Van der Eijk and Franklin (1996).

### **Chapter 2**

This chapter explores cross-generational differences in the extent to which long- and short-term factors affect party preferences in the established democracies of Western Europe and the consolidating democracies of East Central Europe. Scholars have shown that younger cohorts in Western Europe are less likely to be guided by their background, in terms of social class, religion or the place of residence, as well as left/right considerations. Little is known, however, about the extent to which cross-generational differences exist in how short-term factors such as issue attitudes and performance evaluations affect party support. Similarly, our knowledge about how long- and short-term factors affect party support across different generations in the consolidating democracies of East Central Europe is very limited. In exploring cross-generational differences in party support, this chapter employs the European Election Study 2009 and a research design developed by Van der Eijk and Franklin (1996).

### **Chapter 3**

This chapter examines whether a common belief system exists among mass publics and political representatives to the European Parliament and whether this belief system varies for citizens with different levels of political sophistication. Moreover, it explores at the aggregate level how well voters are represented by parties they voted for in the EP elections. Scholarly literature sees a common structure of attitudes between mass publics and political elites as a precondition for effective representation. This chapter examines the presence of a common belief system on a range of issues. It employs Mokken scale analysis on the European Election Study 2009 and the European Parliament Election Candidate Survey 2009.

### **Chapter 4**

This chapter examines which individual-, party- and system-level characteristics influence the issue congruence in various issue domains between voters and their representatives in the European Parliament. Congruence of issue attitudes between representatives and mass publics has been seen as crucial for representation. While substantive literature has established that preconditions for effective representation are fulfilled in European elections, little is known about factors that affect issue congruence. This chapter employs a multi-level model to analyse issue congruence on a range of issues. It employs the European Election Study 2009 and the European Parliament Election Candidate Survey 2009.