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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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## **Chapter 1**

# **The Electoral Trade-Off: How Issues and Ideology Affect Party Preference Formation in Europe**

*Co-authored with Wouter van der Brug*

This chapter is largely based on an article that was accepted for publication in the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*.

## **Abstract**

Political science has shown increasing interest in cross-country differences in the extent of structural voting, ideological voting and issue voting. Several studies have identified how voting behaviour is structured in post-communist democracies of East Central Europe and established democracies of Western Europe. This chapter looks beyond a simple East-West distinction by developing a more sophisticated general model to explain cross-country variations in the effects of issues and left/right on party support. We demonstrate that the more issues are related to left/right, the stronger is the effect of left/right on party preferences. This effect occurs at the expense of the effects of issues on party preferences, which become weaker. These general findings help explain why the effect of left/right on party preferences is weaker in post-communist democracies than in more established democracies. Our proposition is empirically substantiated in a two-stage analysis using the European Election Study 2009.

## INTRODUCTION

Scholars of comparative electoral behaviour have been increasingly interested in cross-country differences in the extent of structural voting, ideological voting and issue voting. Several of these studies focus on the differences in the determinants of party support between established democracies in Western Europe and formerly communist countries in East Central Europe. Studies which treat established and consolidating democracies as homogenous blocks of countries show that in the latter the effect of social class and left/right distance on party support is weaker while the effects of religion and EU issue voting are stronger than in established democracies (Tworzecki, 2002; Van der Brug et al., 2008; De Vries and Tillman, 2011). However, these studies have not yet fully accounted for differences within the two groups of countries. The ambition of this study is to fill in this lacuna by proposing and testing explanations for cross-country differences in the effects of issues and left/right on party preferences.

The major argument of this study is that cross-country differences in the effects of issues and left/right placement on party preferences can be explained with 1) the extent to which left/right structures issues in these countries and 2) the degree to which voters agree about the positions of political parties on the left/right dimension. Scholarly literature points us to two opposing hypotheses on the extent to which these contextual variables affect party preferences. One line of reasoning leads us to expect that these contextual variables moderate the effects of issues in the same way as the effects of left/right ideology. When left/right structures issues to a high extent and when voters agree about the positions of political parties in left/right terms, the effect of left/right and issues on party preferences will be strong. The other line of reasoning is that there would be a trade-off between the effect of left/right and the effects of issues on party preferences i.e. when the effect of left/right on party support is high, issues will structure party preferences to a lower extent. Below we will elaborate on these opposing expectations. When testing hypotheses regarding the effect of contextual variables, we will distinguish between groups of citizens with different levels of political sophistication. The ability of voters to link their attitudes towards issues to their left/right position and their capacity to recognise where parties are located on the left/right scale depends on how knowledgeable about and interested in politics they are (Converse, 1964; Klingemann, 1979a, 1979b; Zaller, 1992; Kinder, 2006). Therefore, we expect that the strength of the explanation offered by our opposing hypotheses will vary for the less sophisticated and highly sophisticated voters.

Our analysis is based on a two-stage procedure, in which we first explore the effects of issues and left/right on party preferences at the level of individual countries, and then explain the differences in the size of the effects across countries. The major finding of this study, based on the aggregate (second-stage) analysis, is that in countries where left/right structures voters' attitudes towards issues to a considerable extent, the observed effect of issues on party support is weak. In turn, in countries where left/right structures issue attitudes to a much lesser extent, we see much stronger effects of issues on party preferences. This is related to the effect of left/right: the more left/right structures issues, the stronger is its effect on party preferences. This pattern exists across different levels of sophistication. Our finding offers an explanation for the picture that has emerged from the comparative literature on Western and East Central European countries

so far: the low effect of left/right on party preferences in the East can be largely attributed to the fact that left/right is less strongly related to the most important issues in these countries.

The chapter proceeds as follows. In the next section we discuss the relevant literature, set out our model and elaborate on the opposing expectations about the moderating effect of contextual variables. We will test those expectations in a two-stage analysis based on a research design proposed by Van der Eijk and Franklin (1996). For this purpose, we employ the European Election Study 2009. Subsequently, we present our findings and conclude by discussing their implications for comparative research on party preferences.

## **THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS**

This chapter aims to explain differences in the effects of issues and left/right on party preferences across established and consolidating democracies. We argue that the explanation of such differences should not be narrowed down to a crude West vs. East distinction, because there is substantial variation among Eastern as well as among Western countries that needs to be explained as well. The contextual variables in our study should theoretically account for differences across *all* countries, East and West. We do not focus here on the historical roots of cross-country differences, which may be caused by different factors in the East and the West, but concentrate instead on characteristics of the electorates in each of the European countries. While the historical *causes* of variation across countries and regions are different, we expect these to yield similar *consequences* for the extent to which left/right and issues affect party preferences.

### **Issues, left/right and party preferences**

The crucial explanation for the differences in the effects of issues and left/right on party preferences across countries may be related to the nature of left/right itself. The left/right dimension constitutes an ideological ‘super-issue’ (Pierce, 1999), which structures diverse policy issues in the domestic arena (Marks and Steenbergen, 2002). The meaning of the terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ may vary across countries and over time, depending upon the issues that are salient at that time (Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990; Gabel and Huber, 2000; Dalton, 2006). When parties use the terms of ‘left’ and ‘right’ in explaining their attitudes towards concrete issues, voters will interpret these positions as being left- or right-wing. In various societies we may find differences in how issues relate to left and right. These differences arise as the way in which and the extent to which parties have politicised these issues varies across countries. Over time, certain issues may lose their connotation with the left/right, while new issues may become integrated into this conflict dimension.

**Figure 1.1 Basic Model of the Causal Relationships between Socio-Structural Characteristics, Left/Right Self-Placement, Issue Attitudes and Party Preferences of Voters**

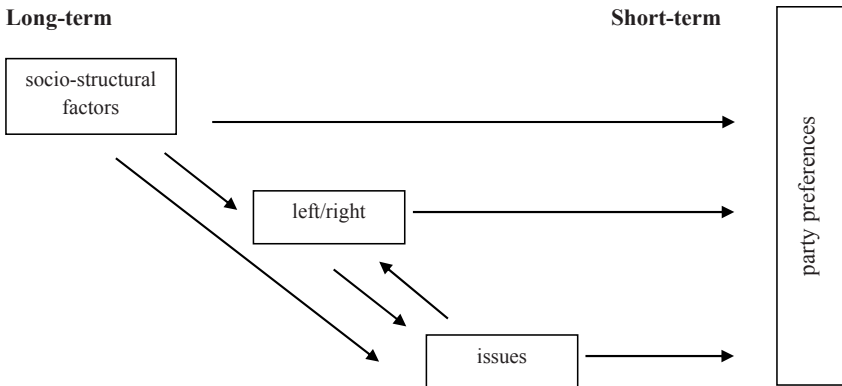


Figure 1.1 presents the inter-relationship between the core elements of our argument. In short, socio-structural characteristics affect to some degree the ideological and issue positions of voters. Having a working class background may determine that a voter sees herself as left-wing and supports redistribution of income and wealth, although this relationship seems to have weakened in the recent years (e.g. Franklin et al., 1992; Van der Brug, 2010). The attitudes voters hold towards issues may be also partially determined by how they see themselves in left/right terms. According to the scholarly literature left/right has been the major dimension of competition between parties in European countries across the twentieth century and provided a cue for voters in their decisions at the ballot box (Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990; Middendorp, 1991; Klingemann et al., 1994; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Van der Brug et al., 2008). To the extent that parties discuss issues in left/right terms, voters' attitudes towards an issue may be affected by their ideological position. Yet, this also works the other way around. When a new issue such as immigration is discussed in left/right terms, a voter who wants a more strict migration policy may see herself as more to the right (or further apart from left-wing parties who propose a more open border policy).

Socio-structural characteristics, left/right and issue attitudes will also exercise an independent effect on party preferences. It is well established in the literature that socio-structural factors such as age, gender or religion impact party preferences although left/right is found to exert the strongest effect on party preferences after controlling for issues and socio-structural factors (e.g. Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). Left/right may also structure some issues to a high extent, while other issues may be independent from the left/right dimension (see e.g. Van der Brug and Van Spanje, 2009). For issues that have been structured by left/right, voters can take recourse to left/right to convey their attitudes towards such issues at the ballot box. However, left/right will not be a very useful cognitive short-cut for issues that are not structured by this dimension. In this case, direct recourse to issues will be necessary for voters to convey their preferences. This means that the effects of issues and left/right on party preferences can exist next to each other. In addition, we cannot account for all issues that define the meaning of left/right for voters in each country of our comparative

analysis. As a result the effects of left/right will still be in operation even after we control for some issues in the model. While we will not (and cannot) estimate the reciprocal relationship between issue attitudes and left/right positions, we argue that the answer to the question why the effects of issues and left/right on party preferences vary across countries lies precisely in the nature of left/right, and in particular in the strength of the relationship between issues and left/right.

This chapter does not examine issues which are specific to political discourse in each country in particular, such as privatisation in post-communist countries or engagement in military missions abroad, which appeared on the political agenda in e.g. Germany or the Netherlands. We focus on attitudes towards basic political issues such as socio-economic, libertarian-authoritarian issues, immigration and European integration. The socio-economic issues that we consider here are related to the functioning of the free market and the role of the state in the economy. They encompass citizen attitudes towards state involvement in the economy vs. economic freedom of individuals without state control and a more equal distribution of income and wealth in society vs. support for income differences. The libertarian-authoritarian issues encompass greater societal and personal freedoms such as equality of women and rights for sexual minorities as well as issues related to life-style and the functioning of the society such as law and order and the importance of authority in education (Inglehart, 1977, 1984, 1990; Flanagan and Lee, 2003; Dalton et al., 1984; Flanagan, 1987; Hooghe et al., 2002; Knutsen, 2006). Finally, we include issues of European integration and immigration, which according to a number of recent studies have gained importance in the recent years in determining voters' preferences towards political parties (Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008; Bornschieer, 2010).

### **What explains cross-country differences?**

We hypothesise that the relationship between the observable effects of issues on party preferences is determined by two explanatory variables: firstly, the degree to which left/right structures voter attitudes towards issues, which we call *ideological constraint*, and secondly, the degree to which voters agree on where parties stand in left/right terms, which we refer to as *perceptual agreement*. *Ideological constraint* denotes how well left/right structures attitudes that citizens hold on substantive issues. If citizen attitudes towards issues coincide with how citizens see their stance on the left/right dimension, then we can speak of issue attitudes being structured by left/right. It means that voters who see themselves as left-wing will have certain attitudes towards an issue that are different from attitudes of voters that see themselves as right-wing. A high degree of constraint, thus, means that the left/right dimension reflects differences in attitudes towards this issue. In this case, we shall observe a strong correlation between citizen positions on left/right and attitudes towards this issue. The stronger the relationship between issue attitudes and left/right self-placement of voters, the more left/right structures this issue. In turn, when citizen attitudes towards issues do not correspond to how citizens see themselves in left/right terms, we can say that left/right does not structure these issues. Here, we will observe a very weak correlation, if any, between citizen stances on issues and left/right.

How well left/right structures issue attitudes at the level of voters may reflect how issues are appropriated by political parties in electoral competition. Differences between countries in the relationship

between issue attitudes of citizens and their left/right positions are likely to reflect the degree to which political parties have integrated these issues into the major dimension of competition and which issues they have politicised. We acknowledge, therefore, that the correlation between citizen issue attitudes and their left/right self-placement results from party agency. How this agency has evolved, however, is not central to our study. We are concerned here only with its observable outcome.

The second variable which may explain cross-country differences in the effects of issues on party preferences is *perceptual agreement*. It denotes the extent to which citizens in a country agree upon where political parties in their country stand on the left/right dimension (Van der Eijk, 2001). This perceptual agreement of voters has been seen as a precondition for voting on the basis of left/right as the left/right cue is only meaningful if there is a considerable agreement about what it signifies (Oppenhuis, 1995; Van der Eijk et al., 1996; Van der Bug et al., 2007). Citizens in one country may strongly agree about the positions of political parties on the left/right dimension, while citizens in another country may have very different perceptions. These differences may reflect historical legacies of countries or party system characteristics. Again, it is not our primary interest here what caused these differences, but we are concerned about how such an observable variation in perceptual agreement affects variation in party preferences.

The existing literature lets us develop two different scenarios with regard to the relationship between ideological constraint, perceptual agreement and the effects of issues on party preferences.

#### Positive Relationship Scenario

One line of reasoning is that we will observe a positive relationship between our outcome and explanatory variables. We know that voters use left/right positions as a cognitive shortcut to assess where parties stand on substantive issues (Downs, 1957; Johnston Conover and Feldman, 1984; Granberg and Holmberg, 1988). In countries where left/right structures issue attitudes to a weak extent, it will be less clear for voters what the terms 'left' and 'right' stand for and where their own attitudes towards issues can be located on the left/right dimension. So, if left/right does not clearly structure issue attitudes, voters will find it more difficult to know where parties stand on substantive issues. As a result, they will find it more difficult to evaluate parties by these issues. In the positive relationship scenario we expect that in such countries we will observe a weaker effect of issues on party preferences. Similarly, when voters have difficulty distinguishing how their issue attitudes relate to the left/right dimension, they will be unsure what the left/right dimension signifies. Subsequently, they will agree to a lesser extent on where political parties stand in left/right terms. We expect, therefore, that in countries where there is little perceptual agreement on where parties stand on the left/right dimension (i.e. where perceptual agreement is low), the effects of issues on party preferences will be weak. In turn, in countries where left/right structures issues to a higher extent, voters will have more clarity about how issues relate to left/right and what left/right means in terms of practical policies. Consequently, voters will find it easier to evaluate parties in terms of their attitudes towards issues. As voters know better what the left/right dimension stands for, they will agree more on where political parties stand on left/right. As a result,



the effect of issues on party preferences will be stronger. In this scenario we expect a positive relationship between the effects of issues on party preferences on the one hand and ideological constraint and perceptual agreement on the other.

*Hypothesis 1a (Ideological Constraint and Issue Effects):* The stronger left/right structures issue attitudes of voters, the stronger will be the impact of these issues on party preferences.

*Hypothesis 2a (Perceptual Agreement and Issue Effects):* The higher the perceptual agreement among voters regarding where political parties stand on left/right, the stronger will be the impact of issues on party preferences.

### Negative Relationship Scenario

A second and competing perspective leads us to expect a negative relationship between the effects of issues on party preferences and our explanatory variables. It is conceivable that in countries where left/right structures issue attitudes of voters to a high extent, voters are more likely to use left/right as a cognitive shortcut, as they know better what this shortcut means in practical policy terms. The same logic applies to perceptual agreement: when citizens agree more on the left/right placement of political parties in their country, they will be more likely to evaluate parties on the basis of their distance from the party on the left/right dimension. In these cases, a direct recourse to issues will be unnecessary as voters can evaluate parties on the basis of their left/right positions. In turn, in countries where left/right structures issue attitudes of voters to a weaker extent, the cognitive shortcut will prove less useful for voters as they will not be able to convey their attitudes effectively through simple recourse to their left/right stance. Similarly, as left/right weakly structures issues, voters will be unsure what the left/right dimension signifies in practical policy terms. Subsequently, they will agree less on where parties stand in left/right terms. Here, the direct recourse to issues will play a more important role for party support. According to this line of reasoning, there is a trade-off between the effect of left/right and the effects of issues on party support (Bellucci, 1984; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996). When the left/right strongly affects party choice, there is less room for issues to have an effect, and vice versa. This leads us to the prediction that there is more room for party support to be influenced by issues when left/right structures issues to a weak extent. In this negative relationship scenario we hypothesise as follows.

*Hypothesis 1b (Ideological Constraint and Issue Effects):* The stronger left/right structures issue attitudes of voters, the weaker will be the impact of these issues on party preferences.

*Hypothesis 2b (Perceptual Agreement and Issue Effects):* The higher the perceptual agreement among voters regarding where political parties stand on left/right, the weaker will be the impact of issues on party preferences.

While measuring the effects of our major explanatory variables, we control for one additional factor that has frequently been cited as one influencing the impact of issues on party preferences, namely *voter polarisation on issues*. Scholarly literature teaches us that the more political parties are polarised on a dimension of competition, the stronger is the effect of voters' positions on this dimension on party preferences. It has been sufficiently proven that a stronger polarisation on the left/right dimension leads to a greater effect of left/right on party support (Van der Eijk et al., 2005; Knutsen and Kumlin, 2005; Ensley, 2007; Lachat, 2008; Dalton, 2008). In a similar vein, we expect that the more voters are polarised on an issue, the stronger will be the effect of this issue on party preferences. Our hypothesis is as follows.

*Hypothesis 3 (Issue Polarisation and Issue Effects):* The higher the degree of polarisation on an issue, the stronger will be the effect of this issue on party preferences.

So far, we have outlined which factors may account for the observed differences in the effects of issues on party preferences. Now we turn our attention to the effect of left/right. We have imagined two alternative scenarios regarding the effect that issues will have on party preferences – when left/right strongly structures issue attitudes of voters, issues will have either a stronger effect (positive relationship scenario) or a weaker effect (negative relationship scenario) on party preferences. However, left/right remains an important cue if it has a meaning for voters i.e. if it assimilates issues to a considerable extent. When left/right strongly structures issue attitudes of voters, voters will know better what left/right positions signify in terms of practical policies and will use this cognitive shortcut while choosing political parties at the ballot box. In this case, we expect left/right to have a stronger effect on party preferences. Conversely, in countries where issues are weakly structured by left/right, the left/right is not a helpful cognitive device for voters in evaluating policies that parties propose. As a consequence, left/right distances between parties and voters will not be a strong determinant of party preferences. Therefore, we hypothesise as follows.

*Hypothesis 4 (Ideological Constraint and Left/Right Effect):* The stronger left/right structures issue attitudes of voters, the stronger will be the effect of left/right on party preferences.

### **Individual level moderators**

Now we turn to individual differences in the extent to which voters are capable of recognising the abstract dimension of competition and linking their own attitudes to it. Scholarly literature tells us that the degree to which voters recognise which issues belong to the left/right spectrum varies across levels of political sophistication. Similarly, how well voters' issue attitudes are constrained by left/right depends on how politically sophisticated voters are (Converse, 1964; Klingemann, 1979a, 1979b; Zaller, 1992). Political sophistication does not necessarily overlap with the level of education (Zaller, 1992). Even highly educated voters may display a low level of sophistication if they are not politically interested or if they lack political knowledge. The importance of political sophistication in attitude formation leads us to expect that the postulated relationships will play out differently for voters with a high and low level of political sophistication. Highly sophisticated voters have the capacity to recognise the left/right dimension of competition and relate their issue attitudes to it. Thus, we expect that the hypothesised relationships (if

supported) will be more robust for this group of voters. Conversely for less sophisticated voters the postulated relationships will be less easily detectable as they will be blurred by the constrained ability of these voters to recognise the higher dimension of competition and link their issue attitudes to it. Therefore, our hypothesis is as follows:

*Hypothesis 5 (Political Sophistication):* For voters with a high level of political sophistication the relationships postulated in Hypotheses 1-4 will display a clearer pattern than for less sophisticated voters.

Now we turn to the discussion of the data and methodology we have chosen in this study.

## DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This study explains differences in the effects of issues and left/right on party preferences across countries of the European Union. For this purpose, we use the European Election Study 2009 (EES 2009; Van Egmond et al., 2010), which is a representative study of the electorates of all EU countries. Although the data was collected at the time of the elections to the European Parliament, we do not study electoral behaviour in these elections. Our research questions pertain to party preferences in general, not to specific elections. The EES 2009 data lends itself for such an analysis as it contains questions on general party preferences. Our analysis involves 28 political systems.<sup>1</sup> The total sample size of the database amounts to 27,369 respondents.

We conduct separate analyses for voters with high and low levels of political sophistication. We measure political sophistication with the degree of political interest and political knowledge that voters display.<sup>2</sup> Political interest is operationalized with a question in which respondents report their level of interest in politics, ranging from 1 ('very interested') to 4 ('not at all interested'). Political knowledge is measured by the respondents' answers to 8 factual questions about national and EU politics.<sup>3</sup> In order to assess whether the questions on political interest and knowledge relate to a single latent dimension, responses to these items were analysed for each country separately by means of non-parametric Mokken scaling (Mokken, 1971; Van Schuur, 2003).<sup>4</sup> In all countries we were able to construct a satisfactory political sophistication scale,

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<sup>1</sup> Belgium is effectively a two-system country as it is not possible for voters in the Flemish region to cast a ballot for Wallonian parties and vice versa. For this reason, Flanders and Wallonia are treated as two separate systems.

<sup>2</sup> Opinion leadership has been cited as another component of political sophistication (De Vries et al., 2011b). It relates to respondents' active participation in following the campaign before the elections to the national or the European Parliament. As we are concerned with voters' general interest in and knowledge about politics and not their specific behaviour to particular elections, we exclude the aspect of opinion leadership from the analysis.

<sup>3</sup> Statements related to the EU are: "Switzerland is a member of the EU", "The European Union has 25 member states", "Every country in the EU elects the same number of representatives to the European Parliament", "Every six months, a different Member State becomes president of the Council of the European Union". Statements on national politics are country-specific and relate to the name of one of the ministers in the country's government, the required age for being eligible to stand as a candidate in the national elections and the number of the members of the country's parliament.

<sup>4</sup> Mokken scaling technique has an advantage over other data reduction methods such as factor analysis as it overcomes the assumption of the same frequency distribution of item responses. Factor analysis assumes that answers to each item are equally distributed i.e. the level of difficulty of each item is the same. Mokken scaling corrects for this deficiency,

including at least two items.<sup>5</sup> For each country we created an index where we added the responses of voters to the political interest and political knowledge questions.<sup>6</sup> We grouped respondents as highly sophisticated if their score on the index was higher than the average country score. In turn, voters displaying a low level of political sophistication are those whose responses are located below the country average.

The purpose of our study is to explore and explain cross-country differences in the effects of issues and left/right on party preferences. In order to do this, we need to employ a methodology which allows for a meaningful comparison of party preferences across 28 systems. We use ‘propensities to vote’ which measure the observed strength of support of a respondent for each of the political parties in his/her country. Propensities to vote are measured with a question, asked in each country, how likely it is (on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 to 10) that a respondent will ever vote for a specific party. This question is asked separately for each of the parties in each country. This measure has similar properties as the better known thermometer scores (or ‘party sympathy scores’). Yet, compared to the latter, the ‘propensity to vote’ scores are more strongly related to actual party choice (see e.g., Van der Eijk et al., 2006). The great advantage of this variable is that it provides a measure of party preferences that is comparable across parties and countries, whereas this is not the case for measures of party choice, which is a different nominal variable in each country.

We employ a two-stage approach. In the first stage, we use propensities to vote as the outcome variable and left/right position, socio-structural characteristics and issue attitudes of voters as explanatory variables. We create a stacked data matrix for each of the 28 political systems under study. As we divide voters into 2 levels of political sophistication, we end up with 56 stacked data matrices. The stacked data matrix is derived from a survey data matrix, in which the unit of analysis is transformed from the respondent to the respondent\*party combination (Tillie, 1995; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Van der Eijk et al., 2006; Van der Brug et al., 2007). The respondent appears here as many times as there are parties for which party preferences are measured. Thus, the level of analysis is effectively changed from the individual level to the individual\*party level.

This research design requires us to transform variables so that they reflect the relationship between a respondent and a political party. For left/right, we create a variable that measures the distance between a voter’s left/right self-placement and her perception where each of the parties in the party system stands in left/right terms. The left/right distance variable is measured on an 11-point left/right scale.<sup>7</sup> To estimate the effects of issues, another procedure has to be followed since party positions are not measured. The procedure

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which makes it more appropriate for assessing latent dimensions of political knowledge questions that we use in this analysis.

<sup>5</sup> Finland is the only country where two questions form a common latent scale. In most of the countries, three, four or five questions form a common scale. In Italy and Slovenia a scale is formed out of 6 items, while in Cyprus, Malta and Portugal it is formed out of 7 items.

<sup>6</sup> The correct answers to political knowledge questions have been coded with 1, 0 otherwise. The political interest question has been collapsed into a binary one, where 1 stands for ‘very’ and ‘somewhat’ interested in politics and 0 otherwise.

<sup>7</sup> If the respondent did not answer the question on the position of a particular party, we replaced the missing value with the national sample mean of the perceived party position. In this way, we lost only respondents who failed to place themselves on the left/right scale.

is that bivariate linear regressions are conducted in which preferences for each political party are explained by positions on a single issue. These regressions per party yield one predicted score (y-hat) for each respondent for each predictor. The predicted scores contain two important components. The first component consists of the extent to which the predictor explains party preferences, and the second component reflects the popularity of the party in question that is not generated by the predictor. The second component is eliminated by centring the predicted scores around the mean (per party) so that the y-hats reflect only variations caused by differences in the independent variable. After these centred y-hats have been computed for each political party separately, they are saved. These y-hats are simply linear transformations of the original independent variables, so that they can be used as explanatory variables in the analysis. As a result of these transformations their values are now comparable across parties, because they reflect the extent to which the predictor explains preferences for each of the parties (the validity of this procedure has been shown by Van der Eijk et al., 2006). These variables are then ‘stacked on top of each other’.

Issue attitudes and socio-structural variables have been constructed using this y-hat procedure. We have data on 12 issues - 4 from the socio-economic domain, 5 from the libertarian-authoritarian domain, 2 related to immigration and 1 on EU integration. Within the socio-economic domain, we use questions on whether private enterprise is the best way to solve the country’s economic problems (variable called *Enterprise*), whether major public services and industries should be in state ownership (*Ownership*), whether politics should abstain from intervening in the economy (*Intervention*) and whether income and wealth should be redistributed towards ordinary people (*Redistribution*). Within the libertarian-authoritarian domain, we employ questions on whether same-sex marriages should be prohibited by law (*Same-Sex Marriage*), whether women should be free to decide on matters of abortion (*Abortion*), whether women should be prepared to cut down on their paid work for the sake of their family (*Family*), whether people who break the law should be given much harsher sentences than they are these days (*Law & Order*) as well as whether schools must teach children to obey authority (*Authority*). Furthermore, we use questions on immigration – whether immigrants should be required to adapt to customs of the receiving country (*Adaptation of Immigrants*) and whether immigration in the country of respondents should be decreased significantly (*Decrease of Immigration*). Voters’ stance on EU integration is measured with the question whether EU unification should be pushed further or whether it has already gone too far (*EU Integration*).<sup>8</sup>

For the socio-structural variables, *Age* is created by regressing the propensity to vote for political parties over a numerical variable describing the age of respondents. *Gender* uses a dummy for male/female in the same procedure. *Social class* is created with a subjective measure of self-assessed belonging to a particular class location. *Education* is represented by respondents’ self-placement according to various levels of education specific for each country. *Religion* is a composite variable of religious denomination, church attendance and level of religiosity, which are regressed separately in a y-hat procedure.

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<sup>8</sup> As literature on attitude formation and party choice postulates the presence of clear socio-economic, libertarian-authoritarian and integration-demarkation dimensions in Western Europe (Kitschelt and McGann, 1997; Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008), we analysed by means of non-parametric Mokken scaling whether each set of issues forms a common scale in each country under study. In most of the political systems, especially those in East Central Europe, no dimensions were found. In some countries attitude dimensions were found, but the issue items forming them varied significantly across countries. Therefore, we treat each issue separately in the analysis.

In the first-stage analysis, we regressed propensities to vote on 12 issues and controlled for socio-structural variables (e.g. Van Deth and Scarbrough, 1995) as well as left/right distance. We include socio-structural controls because we want to obtain issue effects which are not contaminated by considerations relating to cleavages or differences in social stratification of voters (for a similar approach see Knutsen and Scarbrough, 1995). This approach allows us to measure to which extent issues affect party preferences net of considerations regarding the distance between voters and political parties in left/right terms and considerations flowing from voters' social standing.<sup>9</sup> We conduct this analysis for 28 political systems and 2 levels of sophistication of voters. We perform linear regressions, using the Huber-White-Sandwich estimate of variance to account for the dependency among observations pertaining to the same respondent (Rogers, 1993; Williams, 2000).

Subsequently, we stored the coefficients for 12 issues in 2 separate datasets. The first dataset contains coefficients from analysis of voters with a high level of sophistication, while the second contains coefficients for voters with low level of sophistication. The number of observations in each dataset equals the number of political systems, namely 28. These datasets are subsequently used in the second-stage analysis, in which we explain the differences in the effects of issues on party preferences across political systems. As in the first stage, the second stage employs linear regression with White's heteroscedastic consistent standard errors in order to account for heteroscedasticity (Lewis and Linzer, 2005). The choice of the two-stage design, rather than hierarchical modelling, has been dictated by constraints inherent in the  $\hat{y}$  procedure that we discussed above (for details see e.g. Van der Eijk et al., 2006; Van der Brug et al., 2008).

In the second stage we test our *Hypotheses 1-3*, where we regress the effects of each of 12 issues at a time on the following explanatory variables: 1) ideological constraint, 2) perceptual agreement, and 3) voter polarisation on issues. The number of explanatory variables that we can include in this analysis is limited as in the second-stage analysis we have only 28 observations at each level of sophistication. We test *Hypothesis 5* by comparing the effects of our explanatory variables across two levels of sophistication. We express *Ideological constraint* as a correlation between voters' left/right self-placement and voters' position on each issue separately. This procedure yields a single correlation for each issue per each party system. As we are interested only in the strength of the correlation, we take its absolute value as the explanatory variable. To measure *perceptual agreement*, we used a question where respondents were asked to place each political party on the left/right scale ranging from 0 to 10. Following Van der Eijk (2001), we measured for all political parties in a party system a coefficient of perceptual agreement, which is appropriate for rating scales with a fixed number of categories. It runs from -1 (maximum disagreement) to +1 (maximum agreement). The measure of system agreement for a country is a weighted average of the perceptual agreement scores for parties, where the weights are based on the proportion of valid votes that each political party obtained in the national parliamentary elections preceding the elections to the European Parliament in 2009. The third contextual variable is the voter *polarisation on issues*. For each political system we obtain the standard deviation of the positions of voters on each of the issues separately.

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<sup>9</sup> However, excluding the left/right distance as a control variable from our analysis does not lead to a substantive change in the interpretation of our results.

In order to test *Hypothesis 4*, we assess the relationship between how well left/right structures issues and the effect of left/right on party preferences. The extent to which left/right structures issues is measured by the Adjusted  $R^2$ . It is obtained in a linear regression where voters' left/right self-placement is the outcome variable and voters' attitudes towards 12 issues are the explanatory variables. Here, we use the original (un-stacked) EES 2009. The higher the value of the Adjusted  $R^2$  obtained in a linear regression, the more voters' attitudes on issues are structured by left/right. In order to obtain the effects of left/right distance between voter and party on party preferences, we use the 56 stacked data matrices and regress vote propensities on left/right distance in each political system. We use left/right distance as a predictor and control for socio-structural factors as we are interested in the effect that encompasses the effect of issues but is devoid of the effects of cleavages. As we seek to show the relationship between how well the left/right structures issues and the effect of left/right on party preferences, we need to consider the effect of left/right which includes potential issue considerations, but is controlled for socio-structural factors determining party preferences.

As the analyses employed here involve several stages, we briefly recapitulate the steps of our analysis. In order to test our *Hypotheses 1-3* and *Hypothesis 5*, we employ a two-stage procedure. In the first stage, we create 56 stacked data matrices (for each of 28 political systems and for 2 levels of sophistication of voters). The unit of analysis here is the respondent\*party combination, which amounts to 169,943 observations. We look here at the effects of 12 issues on party preferences, controlling for socio-structural characteristics of voters and left/right distance. For each party system and for each level of sophistication we obtain an issue effect. These issue effects are gathered in 2 databases, the first for voters with low levels of sophistication and the second for voters with high levels of sophistication. Each database contains 28 observations (one issue effect per party system). In the subsequent second-stage analysis, these 12 coefficients for issue effects are used as the outcome variables. Here, we explore which factors explain the variation in the issue effects for each level of sophistication. The explanatory variables are: *ideological constraint*, *perceptual agreement* and *voter polarisation*.

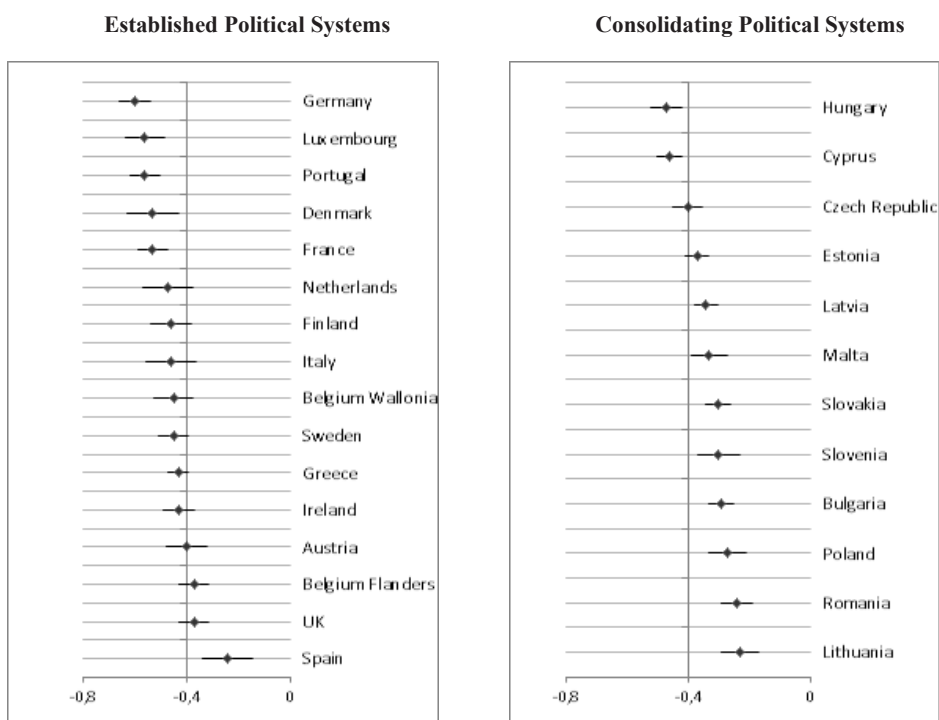
In order to test *Hypothesis 4*, we employ the original (un-stacked) EES 2009 and the 56 stacked data matrices. In the EES 2009 we have 27,369 observations with individuals as units of analysis. In order to assess to which degree left/right structures issue attitudes of voters we regress their left/right self-placement on their positions on 12 issues. We do this for 28 political systems and 2 levels of voter sophistication separately. As a result, we obtain 56 Adjusted  $R^2$ 's. With the 56 stacked data matrices, we regress vote propensities of voters on their left/right distance to parties (controlled for socio-structural factors) for each level of sophistication in each party system. The obtained effects of left/right distance (the unstandardized regression coefficients) are combined with the Adjusted  $R^2$ 's in two dataset, with 28 observations for each level of sophistication. According to *Hypothesis 4*, these two should be positively correlated.

## FINDINGS

Before we proceed with the tests of our hypotheses, we present an overview of how left/right affects party preferences in countries of the European Union and report exemplary results for the first-stage analysis for one country (full results of the first-stage analysis are presented in Appendix I). Figure 1.2 shows the

regression coefficients with 95% confidence intervals of left/right distance on party preferences which have been obtained in the first-stage analysis where we controlled for issues and socio-structural factors. The effects of left/right distances are negative because larger distances between voters and parties decrease the propensity of support for these parties. We see in Figure 1.2 that nearly all the effects of left/right in established democracies of Western Europe (with the exception of Spain) are stronger than -.4 (indicated by a vertical line), while nearly all effects of left/right in consolidating democracies of East Central Europe (with the exception of Hungary and Cyprus) are weaker than -.4.

**Figure 1.2 Regression Coefficients of the Impact of Left/Right Distance between Voters and Parties on Party Preferences within Established and Consolidating Political Systems in the EU**



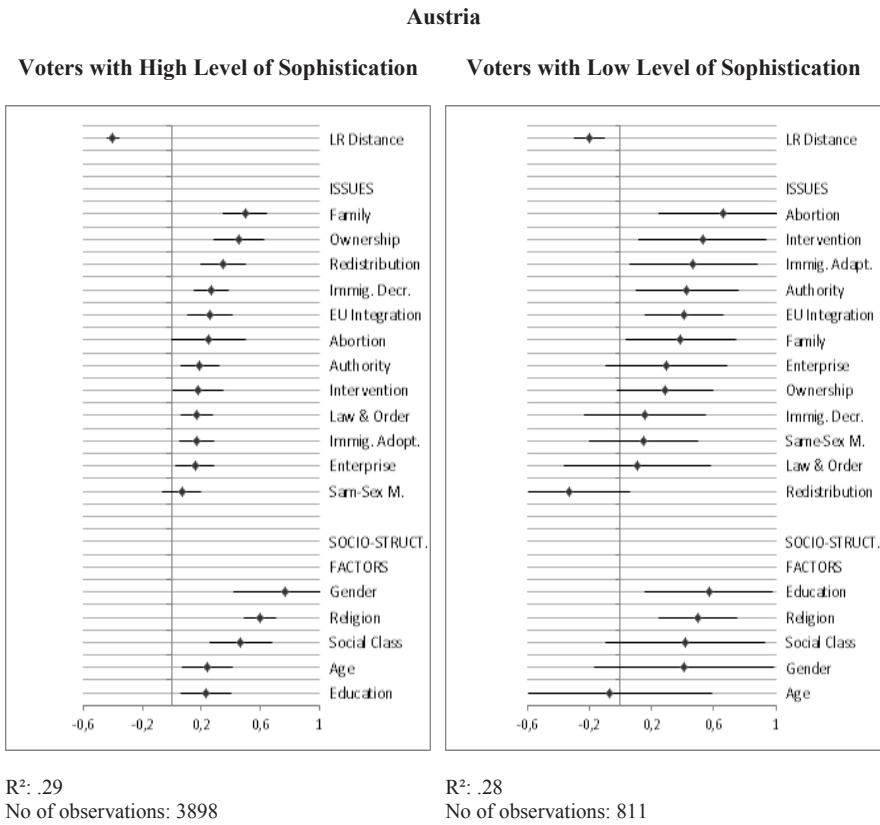
*Notes:* Figure 1.2 presents the effects (unstandardized regression coefficients with 95% confidence intervals) of left/right distance between voters and parties on party preferences in 28 political systems of the European Union. The effects of left/right are negative because larger distances between voters and parties decrease the propensity of support for these parties. Countries have been listed here by the size of the left/right coefficient.

Since we estimated 56 regressions in the first stage of our analyses, two for each of the 28 political systems, we decided to present exemplary results for one country – Austria. In this country we observe the largest difference in the effects of left/right on party preferences across voters with high and low level of political sophistication. Figure 1.3 graphs the effects of left/right, issues and socio-structural factors with 95%



confidence intervals. The effects of left/right are negative, while the effects of other explanatory variables are positive. Where confidence intervals include the value of 0 (indicated by a vertical line), the effects fail to reach statistical significance at the .05 level.

**Figure 1.3 Regression Coefficients of the Impact of Various Predictors of Party Preferences for Voters with High and Low Level of Sophistication in Austria**



*Notes:* Figure 1.3 presents the effects (unstandardized regression coefficients with 95% confidence intervals) of left/right distance between voters and parties, issue attitudes and socio-structural characteristics of voters on party preferences, obtained in the first-stage analysis, for Austria. For this country we observe the biggest difference in the effects of left/right on party preferences between citizens with the highest and lowest level of political sophistication. The explanatory variables have been listed according to the strength of their coefficients.

Table 1.1 presents the results of the second-stage analysis, in which we explain the variation in the effects of the socio-economic and libertarian-authoritarian issues, immigration and EU integration on party preferences for voters with the low and high level of political sophistication across 28 political systems. For each issue

effect (i.e. Enterprise, Ownership, Intervention, Redistribution, Same-Sex Marriage, Abortion, Law & Order, Authority, Family, Adaptation of Immigrants, Decrease of Immigration and EU Integration) we conducted a separate linear regression. In each of these regressions, the unstandardized regression coefficient of that particular issue is the outcome variable (which varies across 28 systems). The explanatory variables of these regressions are *ideological constraint*, *perceptual agreement* and *voter polarisation* on the particular issue. The upper part of Table 1.1 presents the results for voters with the high level of sophistication, while the lower part shows results for voters with the lower level of sophistication. For each sophistication group, we first present the effects of all three explanatory variables on the outcome variables. Subsequently, we show bivariate regressions of outcome variables on the ideological constraint variable.

The results of our analysis support the negative relationship scenario. For both levels of sophistication there is a negative relationship between the degree to which issue attitudes of voters are correlated with their position on left/right (*ideological constraint*) and the effect of these issues on party preferences. Since the original effect of issues is positive, the negative relationship between ideological constraint and issue effects means that in countries where left/right structures voter attitudes towards issues to a larger extent we observe lower effects of these issues on party preferences. This finding supports *Hypothesis 1b*. Among highly sophisticated voters, the relationships are in 10 out of 12 cases significant. Only two effects fail to reach statistical significance, even though the parameters have the same (negative) sign. For voters with a low level of political sophistication, the negative relationship between ideological constraint and the effects of these issues on party preferences holds as well. As the multivariate analyses for less sophisticated voters show, 11 out of 12 coefficients are negative. Of the 12 coefficients only 7 reach statistical significance, all of these being negative.

A brief look at the bivariate regressions confirms the differences between voters with a high and a low level of political sophistication. For the highly sophisticated voters all ideological constraint coefficients, except the one for *Redistribution*, are strong and significant. In turn, for less sophisticated voters less than half do not reach the level of conventional statistical significance. These findings confirm our *Hypothesis 5*, where we expected that the relationship between issue effects on party preferences and ideological constraint will be clearer for more sophisticated voters.

**Table 1.1 Relationship between Ideological Constraint, Perceptual Agreement and Voter Polarisation and the Effects of Issues on Party Preferences**

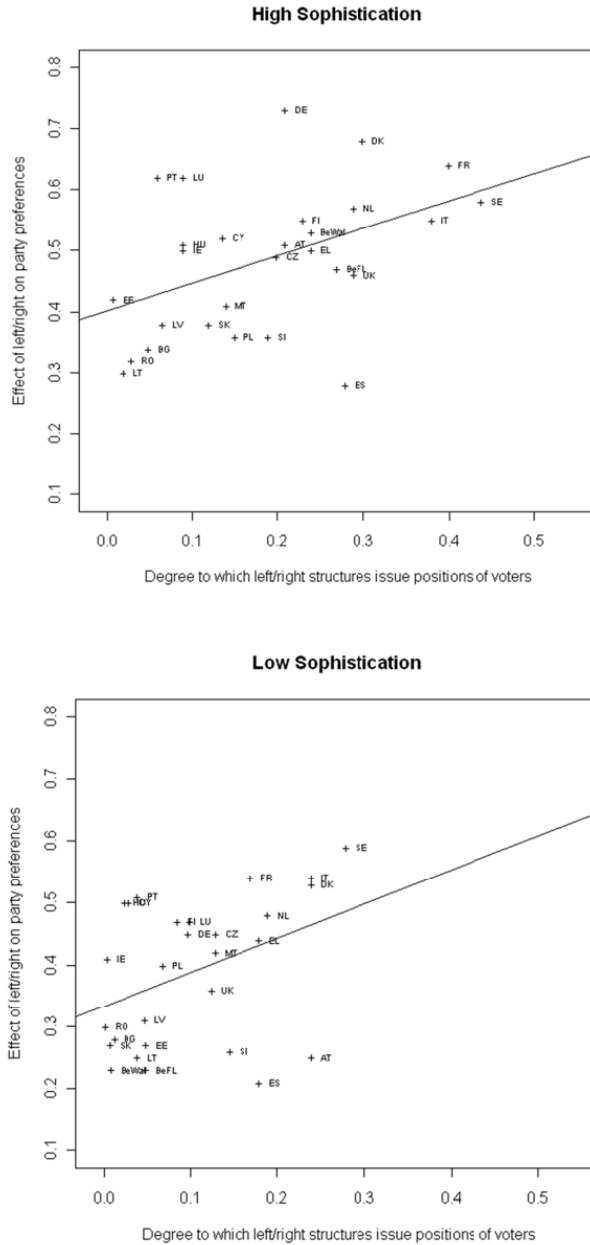
	Socio-Economic Issues				Libertarian-Authoritarian Issues				Immigration		EU Integration	
	Enterprise	Ownership	Intervention	Redistribution	Same-Sex Marriage	Abortion	Law and Order	Authority	Family	Adaptation of Immigrants		Decrease of Immigration
<b>High Sophistication</b>												
Ideological constraint	-.86*** (.25)	-.56** (.26)	-1.87** (.58)	-.15 (.31)	-.54** (.22)	-.74** (.30)	-.66 (.59)	-1.51*** (.32)	-.94* (.46)	-1.00*** (.3)	-.48** (.24)	-.79* (.44)
Perceptual agreement	.21 (.21)	.02 (.17)	.03 (.29)	-.1 (.27)	-.31 (.31)	.25 (.33)	.006 (.46)	-.41** (.19)	-.15 (.29)	-.39* (.21)	-.28 (.23)	-.38* (.25)
Voter polarisation	.33 (.27)	.19** (.08)	.47* (.27)	-.21 (.19)	.08 (.14)	.46** (.22)	-.15 (.29)	-.11 (.18)	.32 (.29)	.04 (.20)	-.2 (.21)	-.30 (.33)
	R <sup>2</sup> : .29	R <sup>2</sup> : .27	R <sup>2</sup> : .28	R <sup>2</sup> : .11	R <sup>2</sup> : .17	R <sup>2</sup> : .20	R <sup>2</sup> : .2	R <sup>2</sup> : .59	R <sup>2</sup> : .20	R <sup>2</sup> : .39	R <sup>2</sup> : .26	R <sup>2</sup> : .23
<i>Bivariate regression</i>												
Ideological constraint	-.63*** (.18)	-.40* (.22)	-1.8*** (.54)	-.29 (.17)	-.63*** (.15)	-.45* (.32)	-.96** (.45)	-1.65*** (.24)	-.9*** (.45)	-.89*** (.31)	-.51** (.25)	-.96** (.44)
	R <sup>2</sup> : .25	R <sup>2</sup> : .13	R <sup>2</sup> : .23	R <sup>2</sup> : .07	R <sup>2</sup> : .12	R <sup>2</sup> : .05	R <sup>2</sup> : .2	R <sup>2</sup> : .53	R <sup>2</sup> : .13	R <sup>2</sup> : .24	R <sup>2</sup> : .13	R <sup>2</sup> : .13
<b>Low Sophistication</b>												
Ideological constraint	-1.18*** (.26)	.31 (.93)	-.47 (.86)	-1.73** (.67)	-.79*** (.16)	-.16 (.43)	-.71 (.56)	-1.41*** (.49)	-.50 (.41)	-1.41*** (.42)	-.66* (.32)	-.81* (.41)
Perceptual agreement	-.54** (.20)	-.33 (.41)	-.11 (.43)	.74 (.51)	.28 (.20)	-.56** (.24)	.03 (.28)	-.07 (.35)	-.37 (.26)	-.29 (.33)	.23 (.24)	-.07* (.25)
Voter polarisation	.29 (.22)	-.006 (.28)	-.07 (.32)	.04 (.15)	.12 (.13)	-.08 (.16)	-.46 (.32)	.02 (.19)	.08 (.15)	-.006 (.23)	.12 (.16)	.54*** (.19)
	R <sup>2</sup> : .54	R <sup>2</sup> : .02	R <sup>2</sup> : .02	R <sup>2</sup> : .24	R <sup>2</sup> : .34	R <sup>2</sup> : .15	R <sup>2</sup> : .3	R <sup>2</sup> : .26	R <sup>2</sup> : .11	R <sup>2</sup> : .38	R <sup>2</sup> : .11	R <sup>2</sup> : .26
<i>Bivariate regression</i>												
Ideological constraint	-1.37*** (.26)	-.04 (.67)	-.54 (.70)	-1.31** (.57)	-.76*** (.17)	-.22 (.39)	-.14** (.41)	-1.4** (.51)	-.43 (.41)	-1.41*** (.36)	-.55 (.32)	-.77* (.40)
	R <sup>2</sup> : .39	R <sup>2</sup> : .0001	R <sup>2</sup> : .02	R <sup>2</sup> : .15	R <sup>2</sup> : .27	R <sup>2</sup> : .01	R <sup>2</sup> : .2	R <sup>2</sup> : .26	R <sup>2</sup> : .03	R <sup>2</sup> : .35	R <sup>2</sup> : .08	R <sup>2</sup> : .12

Notes: Table 1.1 presents the results of the second-stage analysis for voters with a high and low level of political sophistication. The outcome variable consists of the effects of each issue on party preferences obtained in the first-stage analysis for each political system in the EU separately. For the second-stage analysis, we present the multivariate results, where the effects of each issue have been regressed on ideological constraint, structural agreement and polarisation of voters on an issue, and bivariate results, where the effects of each issue have been regressed on ideological constraint variable alone. \*\*\* significant at  $p < .01$  \*\* significant at  $p < .05$  \* significant at  $p < .1$  (one-tailed).

An inspection of the effects of the *perceptual agreement* leads us to dismiss both *Hypothesis 2a* and *Hypothesis 2b*. For both levels of political sophistication we cannot conclude that perceptual agreement has the capacity to explain cross-country differences in the effects of issues on party preferences. Most of the coefficients of this explanatory variable do not reach statistical significance. Furthermore, the direction in which perceptual agreement affects our outcome variables is not clear. For some issues, we find a positive relationship between perceptual agreement and issue effects, while for others this relationship is negative. However, most of the relationships turn out not to be significant, which applies to both levels of political sophistication.

We obtain similarly mixed results for *voter polarisation*. Also for this variable the direction of the relationship between voter polarisation and our outcome variable is not clear i.e. for some issues we see a negative, while for others a positive effect. However, the only statistically significant effects of voter polarisation are positively signed. It is the case for *Ownership*, *Intervention* and *Abortion* (.19, .47, .46 respectively) for highly sophisticated voters, and for *EU Integration* (.54) for less sophisticated voters. These results suggest that stronger issue polarisation among voters in a country is related to a stronger effect of this issue on party preferences, which is in line with *Hypothesis 3*. However, since these effects were only observed for a few issues, the findings are not sufficiently robust to draw strong conclusions. Another conclusion from Table 1.1 is that these models explain a reasonable proportion of the cross-country variation as it is shown by the quite high R-Square.

**Figure 1.4 Relationship between Ideological Constraint and the Effect of Left/Right on Party Preferences for Voters with High and Low Level of Sophistication**



*Notes:* Figure 1.4 presents the relationship between ideological constraint i.e. the degree to which left/right structures issue attitudes of voters (measured by the adjusted  $R^2$  of issues) and the effect of left/right on party preferences (in absolute value) in each country. The coefficient for highly sophisticated voters is .45 (robust standard error of .15) and is significant at  $p < .001$ . For low sophistication group the coefficient is .55 (robust standard error of .27) and with  $p = .054$  barely reaches the level of conventional statistical significance.

The evidence so far clearly shows that the direct effects of issues on party preferences decrease when these issues have been strongly structured by left/right. But how does this relationship correspond to the effect of left/right on party support? Figure 1.4 shows that the more issues are structured by left/right, the stronger the effect of left/right on party preferences will be. This explains the observation from the comparative literature on the established democracies of Western Europe and consolidating democracies of East Central Europe, which shows weaker effects of left/right on party support in East Central Europe (Van der Brug et al., 2008). Our results presented in Figure 1.4 show that this low effect is related to the incompleteness of left/right in structuring the most important issues in the consolidating democracies. This finding does away with the stereotype that voters in consolidating democracies think less in left/right terms and less often take recourse to spatial considerations. In fact, such voters may be making the same calculus as voters in established democracies, but for them left/right positions do not provide as much information about parties' positions on issues, which is why it is only natural that these voters do not rely on it as much as voters in the West.

The x-axis of the graphs displays the adjusted  $R^2$  of individual level regressions within each country, where left/right positions are explained by 12 issues. This tells us to what extent the left/right dimension summarises attitudes towards substantive issues. The y-axis of the graph represents the effect of left/right on party preferences, when controlling only for socio-structural variables. In this way, we estimate the total contribution of left/right to party preferences.<sup>10</sup> Figure 1.4 presents separate boxes for citizens with a high and low level of political sophistication (full results of the regressions are presented in Appendix II). In both we have marked with country abbreviations which political system the observations stand for. Both graphs display a positive relationship between the adjusted  $R^2$  and the effect of left/right on party preferences. In other words, the more issues are structured by left/right in a political system, the stronger is the effect of left/right on party preferences. This finding thus supports *Hypothesis 4*. This relationship holds both for voters with a high and a low level of political sophistication, although for the latter group it barely reaches the conventional level of statistical significance.<sup>11</sup> For highly sophisticated voters the value of the coefficient from the bivariate regression is .45 (significant at the level of  $p < .001$ ). For less sophisticated voters, the coefficient takes the value of .55 and it is significant at the level of  $p = .054$ , which is acceptable given the small number of observations in the second-stage analysis. Although the direction of the relationship between the adjusted  $R^2$  and the effect of left/right on party preferences is no different for voters with a high and low level of political sophistication, we can clearly see in both boxes of Figure 1.4 that left/right assimilates issues to a lower extent for less sophisticated voters. Here, the spread of the political systems on the axis depicting the adjusted  $R^2$  is smaller for less sophisticated than for highly sophisticated voters.

We can also see in both boxes that in East Central European countries left/right structures voters' attitudes towards issues to a weaker extent than in Western European countries. East Central European democracies gather at the bottom-left of the regression lines. As in the consolidating political systems issue attitudes are structured by left/right to a lower extent than in established democracies, we observe

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<sup>10</sup> In these analyses we do *not* control for the effects of issues since the relationship between issues and left/right is reciprocal. In countries where the effect of left/right strongly reflects issue preferences, we would then underestimate the total contribution of left/right to party preferences.

<sup>11</sup> As we see in Figure 1.4, Spain is an outlier. When we remove it from the analysis, we obtain a significant relationship. In this case, the value of the coefficient is .64 with  $p < .05$  and  $R^2$  of .23.

weaker effects of left/right on party support in the former. This offers an explanation for the weak effects of left/right in East Central Europe found in the literature to date.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This study shows that cross-country differences in the effects of issues and left/right on party preferences are related to the extent to which left/right structures issue attitudes of voters. In countries where left/right is more encompassing, the impact of issues on party preferences is smaller. In turn, in countries where issues are weakly structured by left/right, the observed impact of issues on party support is stronger.

These findings directly relate to the so far postulated relationship of complementarity between the effects of issues and left/right on party preferences (Bellucci, 1984; Van der Eijk et al., 1996). They extend our knowledge about the role of left/right as a mediator in the formation of party preferences. Recent literature shows that left/right is an important cognitive determinant in the formation of attitudes towards immigration (Pardos-Prado, 2011) and it enhances issue voting as long as voters perceive that political parties relate these issues to the dominant dimension of competition (De Vries, 2007a, 2007b). Our study highlights another feature of how left/right affects party preferences, this time pertaining to the degree to which left/right structures issue attitudes. The more comprehensive left/right is in summarising attitudes towards specific issues, the stronger the effect of left/right will be on electoral preferences, and vice versa. These structural differences, which may result from varying degrees of stability of the party systems, provide us with an explanation why in certain countries issues exercise a stronger direct effect on party preferences than in others.

Our findings also contribute to the existing knowledge on the ways in which voters use information. In his model of rational electoral behaviour, Downs (1957) paid much attention to the notion of information costs. He conceived of left/right as a cognitive device that would enable voters to choose rationally in the absence of concrete and detailed information about specific issues. More recently, studies have demonstrated that the extent of policy voting increases when voters have more information (Alvarez, 1997; Van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Van der Brug, 1998). Our study shows that voters' use of left/right increases when attitudes towards substantive issues are more closely linked to left/right positions i.e. when left/right is more informative of actual policy positions. This is precisely what one would have expected on the basis of Downs' model.

The general pattern presented in this study holds both for voters with a high and low level of political sophistication, although it is considerably clearer for the first group of voters. It is validated in an analysis involving a wide spectrum of issues, encompassing socio-economic, libertarian-authoritarian issues as well as immigration and EU integration. Furthermore, this study explains why the effects of left/right on party preferences are weaker in consolidating democracies of East Central Europe than in established democracies Western Europe (Van der Brug et al., 2008). It points out that the effect of left/right is weaker in the former as left/right does not structure voters' issue attitudes to such an extent as it is the case in Western European countries. However, our analysis goes beyond this regional comparison by showing that countries of Western Europe or Central Eastern Europe are not monolithic and that considerable differences exist within both country groups in the extent of these effects.

Our findings have two limitations that constitute avenues for further research. Firstly, our analysis takes an aggregate-level perspective and examines how in the electorate as a whole, the issue attitudes of voters have been structured by left/right. In a further step, we could extend our findings by introducing how individual-level characteristics affect the differences in the effects of issues and left/right on party preferences. Secondly, our study necessarily focuses entirely on variables that characterise voters. The small sample size in the second-stage analysis prevents us from including a higher number of predictors. In order to fully understand the differences in the effects of issues and left/right on party preferences, however, a next step would be to develop hypotheses and measures to capture how party system characteristics determine cross-country differences in the effects of issues and left/right on party support. Notwithstanding these avenues for further research, our findings offer a theoretical and empirical contribution to our understanding of cross-country differences in the way party preferences are structured by left/right and issues.