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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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Publication date
2012

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Walczak, A. (2012). *Is left/right still the 'super glue'? The role of left/right ideology and issues in electoral politics in Western and East Central Europe*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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Conclusion:

The Changing Role of Left/Right and Issues in Electoral Process

In this dissertation I studied the role of left/right ideology and issues in contemporary electoral process. I focused on two aspects of the electoral process: party support and political representation. Although numerous studies exist which look into the role of left/right ideology for party competition and voting behaviour, little is known about the inter-relationship between left/right and issues in electoral politics in contemporary Europe. This concluding chapter presents the main findings of this dissertation, discusses their implications and proposes directions for further research.

SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Chapter 1 has set out a general model to explain cross-country differences in the effects of left/right and issues on party preferences. Scholars of electoral behaviour have observed that significant differences exist between established democracies of Western Europe and post-communist countries of East Central Europe in the extent to which left-right and issues affect parties' electoral support. Not only has this chapter offered an explanation for this puzzle but also it has gone beyond the crude West-East distinction by pointing to significant differences across countries in these effects on party support. It has shown that differences in the effects of issues and left/right on party support can be largely explained with the extent to which left/right structures issues. Based on a two-stage analysis, this chapter has shown that in countries where issue attitudes of voters are structured by left/right, such issue attitudes have a weak effect on party support. In turn, in countries where left/right structures issue attitudes to a much lesser extent, stronger effects of issues on party preferences can be observed. The effects of issues are inversely related to the effect of left/right. Subsequently, the more left/right structures issues, the stronger is its effect on party preferences. This inter-relationship of the effects of left/right ideology and issues on party support can be observed for voters both with a high and low level of sophistication, although the pattern is slightly weaker for the latter group. The findings of this chapter point to the fact that the weaker effect of left/right on party preferences in East Central European countries can be largely attributed to left/right being less strongly related to issues in these countries than in Western European countries.

Chapter 2 examined how generational replacement explains the extent to which left/right ideology and issues affect party support in established democracies of Western Europe and in consolidating democracies of East Central Europe. It speaks to the literature showing that long-term factors such as social class, religion, the urban-rural divide and left/right ideology have lost their importance in structuring party preferences, while short-term factors such as issues and performance evaluations have allegedly become more important for structuring party preferences. In this chapter, a systematic comparison is presented of differences between generations of voters which have undergone utterly different socialization processes across established democracies of Western Europe and consolidating democracies of East Central Europe. It showed that in established democracies left/right, alongside structural factors, exerts weaker effects on party preferences for cohorts born after 1959 when compared to older cohorts. At the same time, stronger effects for younger generations can be observed for the immigration issue. In turn, in consolidating democracies of East Central Europe there are minimal differences across generations with regard to how left/right and issues structure

party preferences, with the notable exception of the issue of EU integration. This issue plays a much stronger role for generations born between 1979 and 1989. This chapter does not find evidence for an increased importance of performance-based factors in structuring party support for younger cohorts either in the West or in the East. The general picture emerging from this chapter is the one of de-alignment along structural factors and left/right ideology and re-alignment on the issue of immigration in Western Europe, with no particular trends in East Central Europe.

Chapter 3 assessed the extent to which a common belief system exists that structures political opinions of political elites and citizens in established democracies of Western Europe and consolidating democracies of East Central Europe. A common attitude structure and common location in this structure shared by citizens and political elites has been considered a precondition for effective representation. The chapter distinguishes between three groups of citizens with different levels of political sophistication. A common belief system is assumed to exist if a set of opinions are constrained, i.e., if they are so strongly correlated, that they form a scale. This is studied by means of a series of Mokken scaling analyses. These analyses demonstrated that only highly sophisticated citizens share a common belief system with political representatives in Western Europe. The other two groups of citizens do not share a belief system with their representatives. In East Central Europe, citizens do not share a belief system with the political elites. In Western Europe, a two-dimensional structure of attitudes emerges among political candidates and highly sophisticated voters, with the first dimension encompassing libertarian-authoritarian issues and the second structuring socio-economic issues. In East Central Europe, attitudes of political elites are two-dimensional, while at the level of citizens only attitudes towards libertarian-authoritarian issues form a scale. Among citizens, attitudes towards socio-economic issues are not structured at all. With regard to the location of political parties and highly sophisticated voters in a two-dimensional space, this chapter has revealed a significant representation gap. The numerous voters in Western Europe that hold economically left-wing and culturally authoritarian attitudes have very few parties to turn to which offer this combination of attitudes. A similar gap, although not so prevalent, exists in East Central Europe.

Chapter 4 has analysed which voters are best represented in the European Parliament and which party- and system-level characteristics account for the congruence between positions of voters and political candidates on basic packages of policy opinions in the socio-economic and libertarian-authoritarian issue domains as well as on issues of immigration and EU integration. The analyses were based on (three-level) hierarchical modelling. These revealed that for more educated, middle class and politically knowledgeable voters a better congruence can be observed between their issue positions and those of political candidates from the party they voted for. Moreover, a clearer ideological stance of a party leads to more ideological congruence between attitudes of parties and their voters. In addition, radical right parties represent their voters better on issues of immigration and EU integration than other parties. With regard to system-level factors, this chapter provides some tentative evidence that in open and ordered ballot systems voters are better represented by parties they vote for in the European Parliament than voters in closed ballot systems.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

This dissertation contributes to various debates that have been waged in the literature on electoral behaviour over the last two decades. In this section I discuss how the main findings of my dissertation contribute to such academic debates.

Is left/right still the ‘super glue’?

Research in many West European countries has shown that left/right has been seen as a prevalent ideology, which structures party politics and which guides considerations of voters at the ballot box. Left/right is considered to be a ‘super issue’ because it structures, or ‘glues together’, attitudes towards a number of issues (e.g. Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990; Pierce, 1999). In the post-war period until the 1980s, left/right was associated mostly with socio-economic issues such as, for instance, redistribution of welfare or involvement of the state in the economy. In the course of time and with the emergence of new issues, left/right has incorporated these new issues, such as environmentalism, so that its meaning has been extended beyond the traditional economic understanding of political conflict along the economic lines (e.g. Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990; Knutsen, 1995; Kitschelt and McGann, 1997).

This dissertation points to an evolution of left/right in Europe. The findings show that most citizens in Western European countries and all citizens in East Central Europe display idiosyncratic, or unstructured, attitudes towards economic issues. Only among the highly politically sophisticated citizens in Western Europe a weak structure of attitudes towards economic issues could be found. Even at the level of political elites, attitudes towards socio-economic issues are only rather weakly correlated, even though a socio-economic dimension emerges among them in the established as well as in the consolidating democracies. These results show that the structure of attitudes which has been assumed to form the traditional left/right division is barely present among mass publics in Western Europe and not present at all among citizens in East Central Europe. Instead, attitudes towards immigration, authority, law and order and individual freedoms are more clearly correlated and form a scale for political elites and citizens in the West and East. These findings offer some evidence that immigration and libertarian-authoritarian issues have increased in importance. At the same time, the importance of socio-economic attitudes for defining left/right may have diminished as there is barely any structure of socio-economic attitudes among mass publics. If left/right is the predominant dimension structuring attitudes of voters, then the results of this dissertation suggest that its meaning may have become more rooted in public attitudes towards libertarian-authoritarian issues and immigration. However, the findings of this dissertation also show that the degree to which left/right structures issues varies considerably across countries. In established democracies of Western Europe left/right structures issues to a higher extent than in consolidating democracies of East Central Europe. This implies that left/right has more issue-based meaning and is thus a more important cue for voters in the West than in the East.

These findings speak to the recent literature which has painted the picture of changes in electoral politics due to the process of globalisation. In the last decades, the attitude structure of citizens has undergone a considerable change. Kriesi et al. (2008: 238-239) have observed that in Western Europe the socio-

economic and libertarian-authoritarian attitude dimension have become more independent at the level of voters. They have shown that in the 1970s the socio-economic and libertarian-authoritarian attitude dimensions were to a certain degree interrelated, while in the 1990s the distinction between the economic and libertarian-authoritarian dimension of attitudes has become more clear-cut at the level of voters. Further literature shows that, as a result of changes in party competition where parties have started to mobilize on culturally rooted issues related to traditional life-style, immigration and Islam (Kitschelt, 1994; Kitschelt and McGann, 1997; Dalton, 1996; Kriesi et al., 2008), left/right identification of voters has undergone substantive changes. Evidence from the Netherlands has shown that the left/right position of Dutch voters has become more rooted in attitudes towards immigration and, to a lesser extent, in attitudes towards redistributive issues (De Vries et al., 2011a). This dissertation ties into these latest findings by showing what may be a further step in the evolution of voter attitudes. The findings of this dissertation have shown that while the libertarian-authoritarian dimension is clearly structured among citizens both in Western and East Central European, such a clear structure is absent in the socio-economic domain among a sizeable group of the European population.

In addition to new insights on the developments in Western Europe, this dissertation extends our knowledge of the role of left/right and its issue-based component in consolidating democracies of East Central Europe. By doing so, it contributes to the extensive literature which has stressed the commonalities and differences between the electorates in post-communist democracies as compared to established democracies in Europe (e.g. Evans and Whitefield, 1995; Kitschelt et al., 1999; Tworzecki, 2002; Evans, 2006; Marks et al., 2006; Van der Brug et al., 2008). With a comparative analysis spanning the total of 27 Western and East Central European countries, this dissertation contributes to solving the puzzle why the strength of the effects of left/right and issues vary across Western and East Central European countries. It shows that left/right ideology does not ‘glue’ issue attitudes together to the same extent in all European countries. In consolidating democracies, the relationship between left/right and issues is much weaker than in Western democracies. Such a comparative exploration of the extent to which left/right ‘glues together’ issues allowed us to explore which implications the inter-relationship of left/right and issues has on electoral behaviour. Voters in East Central European countries rely on left/right ideology to a much lower extent at the ballot box than Western European voters because in the former countries left/right does not structure issue preferences as much as in the latter. This comparative analysis suggests that left/right in consolidating democracies has not (yet) developed into an overarching framework that voters use as a cue to orient themselves in the party system.

How does representation evolve beyond left/right?

The findings of this dissertation contribute to the discussion on how well voters are represented by political elites in contemporary Europe. The question on the quality of representation gains particular prominence within the context of globalisation. Recent literature has shown that the intensified economic and cultural globalisation has resulted in the formation of new structural cleavages and has transformed the main dimensions of the political space (e.g. Kriesi et al., 2006, 2008; Bronschier 2010). With the example of West European countries, Kriesi et al. (2008) show that while in the 1970s the socio-economic and libertarian-authoritarian attitude dimensions were to a certain degree interrelated, in the 1990s they have become more

clear-cut at the level of voters. This development has propelled Kriesi et al. (2008) to conclude that “*a single left/right dimension to express voters’ attitudes is an inadequate simplification*” (Kriesi et al., 2008: 243). This observation ties into substantive literature, which has shown that left/right has declined in importance for electoral politics. Given the evolution of structural cleavages and the political space, it has become imperative to raise the questions how well citizens are nowadays represented beyond the traditional left/right dimension, namely on basic policy issues, and which factors account for congruence between voters and political elites on these issues.

The findings of this dissertation contribute to the debate on electoral politics in the time of globalisation by pointing to a significant gap in representation. This dissertation shows that most citizens both in Western Europe and in East Central Europe, those with a medium and low level of political sophistication, do not share a belief system with political elites. While attitudes of political elites are structured by two dimensions — one encompassing socio-economic issues and the other libertarian-authoritarian issues —, attitudes of citizens with low and medium levels of sophistication are not structured as clearly. One dimension was observed encompassing some libertarian-authoritarian issues, but opinions towards the other issues are rather unrelated. Such a discrepancy between how attitudes of voters and political elites are structured may have considerable consequences for electoral politics. When attitudes of voters are structured in a different way than attitudes of political elites, it will be impossible for voters to find a political party which is close to their preferred position on all issues. As a result, voters will be represented on some issues, but not on others. Given that issue salience varies across elections, this may lead to increased volatility from one election to another. In addition to the discrepancy in structuration of attitudes between political elites and voters, this dissertation shows that even among the highly sophisticated voters who display the same structure of attitudes as political elites there is a substantive group of voters that does not have all their attitudes represented in the emerging dimensional space. Citizens that hold left-wing attitudes towards economic issues and authoritarian attitudes towards cultural issues have very few parties to turn to in the elections (see also Van der Brug and Van Spanje, 2009). This is the case both in Western Europe and East Central Europe.

This dissertation also contributes to the extensive literature on voter-party congruence. While most studies focus on congruence between voters and political parties on the left/right dimension (e.g. Huber and Powell, 1994; Powell, 2000, 2006; McDonald and Budge, 2005; Golder and Stramski, 2010), this dissertation joins the few studies focusing on issues (Thomassen and Schmitt, 1997, 1999; Thomassen, 1999). It draws attention to inequalities in representation of voters with regard to various issue domains. While most studies have analysed voter-party congruence from the aggregate perspective, this dissertation has employed a multi-level model to extend our understanding of which individual-, party- and system-level factors determine congruence of issue positions between mass publics and political elites. Examining how well voters are represented by elites who run for representative functions in the European Parliament, this dissertation has shown that more educated and politically knowledgeable voters and those belonging to middle class are better represented by political elites. Inequalities in representation also exist across political parties and electoral systems used for EP elections. Radical right parties represent their voters better on the issue of immigration than other parties. The clarity of party ideology also helps for representation – for parties that have a clear ideological profile a closer congruence can be observed between the position of these parties and their voters

on a range of issues. Furthermore, this dissertation has shown some evidence that in open ballot system the congruence between voter and party positions is better. This finding contributes to extensive literature on how the type of electoral system affects representation in national elections (e.g. Huber and Powell, 1994; Wessels, 1999; Mattila and Raunio, 2006) and how electoral system used in the EP elections affects behaviour of political candidates and representation (e.g. Bowler and Farrell, 2011; Farrell and Scully, 2005, 2007, 2010; Hix and Hagemann, 2009).

Does the importance of left/right for party support decline in favour of issues and other short-term factors?

Over the last thirty years scholars have provided substantial evidence showing that structural factors such as social class and religion have become less important for electoral politics (e.g. Dalton et al., 1984; Franklin et al., 1992; Dogan, 2001; Van der Brug et al., 2007; Van der Brug, 2010; Dalton and Wattenberg, 2002). Lately, a similar downward trend has been observed for the capacity of left/right ideology to structure voters' choices at the ballot box (Van der Brug et al., 2007; Van der Brug, 2010). The decline of structural and ideological factors has pointed towards the processes of modernization and individualization that have shaken European societies (Franklin et al., 1992; Klingemann and Fuchs, 1995; Thomassen, 2005). As a result of socio-economic developments, such as rising levels of education, the growing size and diversity of the mass media as well as the increasing geographical and social mobility of citizens, the traditional links between voters and political parties have weakened. Faced with processes of individualization and modernization, scholars have put forward the expectation that voters would increasingly decide from one election to another what party they will vote for, taking into account which issues are on the political agenda, how well political parties have performed while in the government or how appealing political leaders are. Such short-term evaluations were expected to become factors which would play an increasingly important role in determining party support (e.g. Thomassen, 2005). However, the results that have been delivered to date on the alleged increase in importance of short-term factors vis-à-vis the structural and ideological factors are mixed at best. Some scholars report that some issues indeed play a stronger role for voters' choices at the ballot box (e.g. Inglehart, 1997; Franklin, 1985; Franklin et al., 1992; Rose and McAllister, 1986), while others show stability or inconstancy in how issues affect party support (e.g. Knutsen and Scarbrough, 1995; Aardal and Van Wijnen, 2005; Knutsen and Kumlin, 2005). Similarly, there is little evidence to date that evaluations of government performance, retrospective judgments of economic development and evaluations of political leaders have become more powerful in explaining party support (e.g. Clarke et al., 2004; Listhaug, 2005; Aardal and Van Wijnen, 2005; Karvonen, 2010).

The findings of this dissertation contribute in three ways to this debate. Firstly, on the basis of the results presented in this dissertation, it seems very likely that the decline in importance of socio-structural factors and left/right for party support is partly driven by generational replacement. It shows that the electoral behaviour of younger cohorts is least affected by social class, religiosity, area of residence, or by left/right proximity. Moreover, the findings complement the existing literature on short-term determinants of party support by pointing out that no cross-generational differences can be observed in the extent to which evaluations of government and economic performance affect party support. This finding adds another stone to

refuting the expectations that performance evaluations would nowadays play a more important role, in particular for younger voters. Interestingly, this dissertation offers some evidence that particular issues, such as that of immigration in Western Europe or EU integration in East Central Europe, have visibly increased in importance for the party preferences of younger cohorts.

Secondly, this dissertation extends the literature on electoral trends, which is very much developed in the context of established Western democracies, by incorporating in the analysis the consolidating post-communist democracies of East Central Europe. Scholars to date have predominantly focused on exploring trends in electoral politics in established Western democracies, while much less is known about the electorates in post-communist countries of the EU. These countries are especially interesting to study as the electoral systems have been formed slightly more than 20 years ago and most of their citizens have been socialized under the communist rule. Due to these particularities of the region, the expectations with regard to electoral trends are much different than what scholars have assumed for Western Europe. This dissertation has contributed to the existing literature by systematically comparing generational trends in the electoral process across the group of consolidating and established democracies. A broad look across all EU countries, which lies at the heart of this dissertation, has revealed that left/right has indeed experienced a slight decline in its capacity to structure party support in favour of the issue of immigration, but it is only the case for Western Europe. In East Central Europe no remarkable trends have been observed, except for a slightly stronger impact of EU integration for the youngest generation of voters. Furthermore, this dissertation reveals that the differences between the Western and East Central European countries are not as big as the different historical background of these regions would have us expect. In both established and consolidating democracies, left/right ideology is the strongest predictor of party support and its impact is weaker for younger cohorts than for older ones. Issues exercise a rather weak effect both in the East and in the West. Similarly, performance-oriented factors matter less for younger generations of voters in both regions than for older cohorts.

Thirdly, the findings of this dissertation speak to the on-going debate on de-alignment and re-alignment in Europe. We find some evidence on re-alignment along the socio-cultural dimension. The results show that in Western Europe the issue of immigration has become more relevant for younger voters in their choices at the ballot box than for older generations, while in East Central Europe the issue of EU integration has been more important for the youngest generation born after 1989. Although we find some indication for re-alignment, we do not see that socio-economic issues have become less relevant for younger cohorts of voters. Furthermore, we do not observe re-alignment in terms of social class, religion or other social cleavages. Our analyses of representation across various levels of occupation do not reveal substantial differences in how voters from different occupational groups are represented in the various policy domains. What we do see, however, is that radical right parties represent their voters better on the issue of immigration, and to a certain extent on the issue of EU integration. This finding supports the expectations of Kriesi et al. (2008) that radical right parties are the first to pick up issues connected to the new integration-demarkation dimension.

AN AGENDA FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This dissertation points to four potential avenues for further research which I will briefly outline.

Firstly, the question arises whether the lack of structure of socio-economic attitudes, and thus the traditional left/right division among mass publics in Europe, just reflects a particularity of the period under study or whether it points to a more permanent development of the left/right dimension in contemporary Europe. This dissertation has just shown a snapshot of the political space in the year of 2009 when the economic crisis was well underway. Further research could take a more dynamic approach to advance our understanding of whether the meaning of left/right has indeed become more associated in the last decades with libertarian-authoritarian issues and the issue of immigration at the expense of socio-economic issues. De Vries et al. (2011a) have provided the first step in this direction by showing that due to the mobilization of culturally rooted issues in the Netherlands over the last 30 years left/right self-placement of Dutch citizens has become more strongly linked to the issue of immigration and less strongly to the issue of redistribution. Further research could build upon this single-country study by examining how the meaning of left/right has developed over the years across different contexts. This would allow us to establish whether the meaning of left/right has indeed shifted from the traditional socio-economic issues towards libertarian-authoritarian issues or whether this dissertation solely captures a temporary state of attitudes. It would be also interesting to see whether different kinds of dynamics are at play in East Central European countries as the issues dominating political discourse in that region are considerably different from Western Europe, as a result of the recent transition from socialism to democracy and market economy.

Secondly, this dissertation opens potential discussions on the importance of external stimuli in shaping the meaning of left/right. The importance of party agency in shaping voters' self-placement in left/right terms has been widely acknowledged (e.g. Huber, 1989; Kitschelt and Hellemans, 1990; Lachat, 2011; De Vries et al., 2011a). An important angle for further research would be to study whether external stimuli, such as economic crises, can affect the extent to which left/right structures issues. This dissertation has revealed that when the economic crisis was well underway in 2009, citizen attitudes towards economic issues were mostly unstructured. In the same way as party agency leads voters to perceive issues to be linked to left/right, events with protracted consequences for the economy and society, such as an economic crisis, may exert similar effects. Whether it is the case remains to be seen. The snapshot provided in this dissertation has solely shown that in the times of a severe economic crisis, citizens' attitudes towards socio-economic issues appear unstructured. It might be the case that when the economic crisis kicked in, citizens revised their attitudes towards involvement of the state in the economy. For example, economically liberal citizens who are normally sceptical towards redistribution of wealth towards the poor and towards state ownership, may have declared in the EES 2009 survey that they are proponents of state intervening in the economy. As a result, and given the fact that this survey contains only four questions tapping into socio-economic attitudes, no structure of socio-economic attitudes can be observed at the aggregate level in the year 2009. Further research, ideally using a broader number of questions tapping into socio-economic issues, should examine whether the times of economic austerity coincide with the weakening of the socio-economic dimension or whether the observed lack of structuration is a result of a longer process of stronger mobilization of

libertarian-authoritarian rather than socio-economic issues. It is also possible that the economic crisis will bring socio-economic issues back as part and parcel of the meaning of left/right. During the economic and financial crises of the last years, economic issues have become politicized and debates have been waged across all EU countries about the involvement of the state in rescuing the economy. If political parties stress their positions on socio-economic issues more fiercely, these issues may again become more closely related to left/right ideology. Whether socio-economic issues will become more strongly anchored again by left/right and whether this process will be comparable in the established and in the consolidating democracies remains to be investigated in the future.

Thirdly, an important angle for further research would be to study the electoral participation and voting behaviour of left-authoritarian voters: those with left-wing attitudes towards socio-economic issues and authoritarian attitudes towards libertarian-authoritarian issues. The combination of left-wing preferences for the economy with authoritarian views in the society was identified decades ago in the literature (e.g. Lipset, 1959). However, we do not know whether these citizens behave in any way different than other groups of voters. The fact that there are very few parties that represent their combination of positions might drive them to behave differently from other voters whose views are represented. The questions that arise here are whether voters holding this combination of attitudes abstain in elections, whether they participate in some elections and not in other elections and if this is the case then how the alternating participation in elections can be explained.

Last, but not least, it deserves further study why performance-based factors explain party preferences of young generations of voters to such a weak extent, although scholarly literature has predicted an increase in the importance of performance evaluations for structuring party choice. The question that arises here is whether the declining effect of performance evaluations across generations with the weakest effect for the cohort born after 1989 is attributable to a life-cycle effect. It can well be that younger voters may need time to develop the perceptual capacity of party promises and party performance in order to be able to use the evaluation judgments at the ballot box. With the electoral maturing of these voters we may see that performance evaluations may play a greater role for them in choosing which political party to vote for. As this dissertation has relied on cross-sectional data, it has been impossible to distinguish between generational and life-cycle effects. Further research could build upon this dissertation by dissecting the generational and life-cycle effects in the extent to which long- and short-term considerations affect party support in contemporary societies.