

**The impact of voters' preferences on party evaluations:
Country and party differences**
(very preliminary draft)

Romain Lachat, Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona

romain.lachat@upf.edu

Aiko Wagner, Social Science Research Centre, Berlin

aiko.wagner@wzb.eu

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Abstract:

This paper focuses on the nature of the mandate conferred to parties, as expressed in voting choices. It analyzes the relation between voters' preferences on several issues and party choice. We suggest that the issues that play a (larger) role in shaping party preferences vary between parties and countries. In particular, we expect the impact of these issues to vary between different types of parties (moderate or extreme, government or opposition, etc.) and between different party system characteristics (fragmentation, polarization, etc.). These hypotheses are based on an innovative model of the voting decision process, which allows for a party specific impact of issue considerations on party utilities. Our analysis combines data from recent European Election Studies with data on party positions and party characteristics, from the *EU Profiler* and *EUandI* Voting Advice Applications.

Introduction

A number of recent studies have emphasized that the relative importance of various determinants of voting choices vary between electoral contexts (e.g., Kroh 2009; Singh 2010; Lachat 2011). Issue or ideological preferences, party identification, retrospective evaluations of parties' performance, are more strongly related to the voting decision in some elections than in others. This variation has been illustrated with respect to several aspects of the electoral context, including characteristics of the electoral system, the party system, or the structure of the political space of electoral competition. In recent years, a second strand of literature has emerged, that focuses on how party-specific factors may influence the voting decision process. This line of research suggests that some characteristics of parties should also lead to systematic variation in the way in which they are being evaluated by voters (Lachat 2014; Mauerer et al. 2015). In this paper, we aim to integrate both macro level and party level heterogeneity in the calculus of voting. To that end, we will focus on one particular type of voting choice determinants, namely issue preferences. We consider the variation in the role of issue preferences in the voting decision process to be of particular importance. First, a large number of studies have emphasized the central role played by issues and policy preferences. Second, from a democratic theory point of view, issue voting corresponds to one of the central dimensions of political representation (Powell 2000). Substantive notion of political representation emphasize the importance of the congruence between the policy preferences of voters and those of elected representatives. Understanding the conditions under which citizens attach more importance to such considerations is thus central to explaining which contextual factors are more likely to result into a higher degree of citizens-representatives congruence.

From the existing literature, we know that issue voting varies in strength between both citizens and contexts. At the individual-level, for instance, citizens with a higher level of

political sophistication tend to rely more strongly on issues. At the contextual level, issue voting has been shown to be more prevalent in more polarized party systems (e.g., Alvarez and Nagler 2004), and in elections for which the political space is structured by a smaller number of issue dimensions (e.g., Singh 2010). As our review of this literature in the next section explains in more detail, most of these effects can be interpreted in terms of the informational costs associated with issue voting. Evaluating parties on the basis of their issue positions is relatively demanding. Yet, in some contexts, issue voting may be easier, because the choice to be made is less complex, or because voters are provided with more information about parties' positions.

With this paper, we extend this line of argumentation to the level of party characteristics. Over the course of the last years, the literature challenging the view of “evaluation homogeneity” has been growing. Although the idea “that the political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties” (Schattschneider 1942: 1) is widely accepted, the characteristics of the parties only recently come into view when studying voting behavior (e.g., Lachat 2014; Lefevere et al. 2015; Maurerer et al. 2015). The main thrust of this new approach is that the criteria used to evaluate parties may not only vary between citizens and contexts, but also between parties. Building on this recent scholarship, we expect that some party characteristics should make it easier or harder to evaluate the corresponding party on the basis of issue considerations. To take a simple example, we expect a party that takes an extreme position on a given issue to be evaluated more strongly on the basis of this issue than in the case of a more moderate party. An extreme party should be more strongly associated to the corresponding dimension in voters' minds. This should make this issue dimension more salient for voters when they evaluate the electoral attractiveness of this party.

By suggesting that party characteristics, such as their size, extremity, or government participation, and party system characteristics, such as fragmentation or polarization, moderate the impact of issues, this paper reassess a central assumption of spatial models of voting choice. The voting decision process is usually conceived as a comparative process, in which citizens evaluate parties based on a fixed set of criteria. The impact of policy preferences is allowed to vary between respondents and elections. But their importance is usually not expected to vary *between* parties for the same voter in the same election. Yet, this paper suggests that the importance of specific issues may vary differently when evaluating different parties in different contexts. That is, we offer a different conception of the voting decision process, in which the criteria with which voters evaluate the various parties in competition may be party and party system specific.

Our hypotheses about the moderating role of party characteristics will be tested with data from the 2014 European Election Study, combined with information about parties' positions from the EUandI Voting Advice Application and data on party size and government participation from the election result data base of the research unit "democracy & democratization" of the Berlin Social Science Research Center (WZB). The following section discusses the theoretical expectation and introduces our hypotheses. Next, we present empirical results based on data from the 2014 European Election. The conclusion discusses the implication of these findings for the analysis of voting choices and political representation.

Sources of variation in issue voting

Literature on issue voting shows unstable effects. Whereas in some cases issue proximity does affect party choice – similarity between preferences of voters and parties lead to a higher

probability of voting for the respective party – there are electoral contexts in which issue voting appears to be rather weak. A number of recent studies have investigated further the sources of this variation in the strength of issue voting or ideological voting and have suggested that it may be linked in systematic ways to the characteristics of the electoral context (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Lachat 2008; Kroh 2009; Singh 2010). One of the main general hypotheses underlying this stream of literature is that contextual factors influence the availability of information about parties' positions, as well as citizens' motivation to invest more cognitive resources in their voting decision. Evaluating parties based on the basis of issue positions is relatively demanding. It not only requires that citizens have an opinion on their own on the various issues that may be debated during an electoral campaign, but also that they are able to identify parties' positions on these issues. Yet, this task may be easier in some electoral contexts than in others (Kroh 2009). Information on parties' positions may be more easily available, for instance because issues are more strongly emphasized in the campaign, which is expected to be the case in polarized party systems (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Lachat 2011). Or, parties can adopt clearer issue positions in some elections than in others, which should again facilitate voters' task of identifying these positions (Kroh 2009; Singh 2010). Differences in issue voting strength may also result from a variation in voters' motivation. If citizens consider a decision they have to make as being more important, they are less likely to rely on heuristics, and will be incited to gather more information (Fiske and Neuberg 1990). The perceived importance or decisiveness of the election is for example likely to be associated with the ideological differences between the parties in competition (Lachat 2011).

More recently, some authors have suggested that such variation in the accessibility of issue considerations may not only be present between different electoral contexts, but also between parties running in the same election (Turner et al. 2011; Lachat 2014; Wagner 2014;

Mauerer et al. 2015). One of the central ideas behind this new approach is that parties may be associated with specific issues in voters' minds. As a consequence, the issue considerations which are more easily activated in the process of evaluating parties may vary from one party to the other. The role of party-issue associations plays a key role in the saliency theory of electoral competition and in the issue ownership theory (Stokes 1963; Budge & Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). These approaches argue that parties may enjoy a reputation of competence on certain issues, and that they emphasize these issues in their campaign, in order to reinforce their perceived importance among the electorate. This variation in parties' issue emphases is one reason that may lead citizens to associate certain issues and parties. The underlying argument is similar to the one that led scholars to expect issue voting strength to vary between elections. Information on parties' issue positions should be more easily available or more strongly activated in some cases than in others. Though in the case of party-level variation, the relevant characteristics are those of parties, rather than of electoral contexts.

In this paper's empirical analysis, we will consider several sources of variation in the strength of issue voting. At the contextual level, we expect issue voting to be influenced by both the fragmentation and polarization of the party system. Regarding first *fragmentation*, different hypotheses have been suggested in the literature. Kroh (2009: 223) notes that "the ease of discriminating between parties in terms of ideological positions may first of all be a function of sheer quantity: the more parties compete on an ideological dimension, the more difficult it is for voters to be informed and/or process the information about each party's position" (Kroh 2009: 223). If there are more (more or less equally big) parties, it gets harder to estimate all the positions and, therefore, issue voting is less likely. According to this argument, we would expect a weaker impact of issues in contexts with a higher effective number of parties (Hypothesis 1a). However, it has also been suggested that a higher degree of fragmentation may lead parties to follow a different mobilization strategy. When many parties are in

competition, their electoral segment will be smaller on average, and more homogeneous (Lachat 2011). The issue preferences of a party's target electorate will thus be more coherent. This may incite parties to emphasize these common interests and preferences. In a more concentrated party system, in contrast, parties may have to mobilize more diverse electoral segments, and could thus avoid focusing too much on potentially divisive issues. As a consequence, it is also possible that fragmentation strengthens the role of issues in the voting decision process (Hypothesis 1b).

As already mentioned above, a higher degree of party system *polarization* is expected to strengthen issue voting. Parties should give more emphasis to issue positions during the campaign when differences between parties are larger. It may also increase the perceived importance of the election, with citizens considering that there is more at stake when they have to choose between alternative parties or coalitions with strongly different policy preferences. Both of these reasons lead us to expect a stronger impact of issues on the vote, when parties' positions on the corresponding dimension are characterized by a higher degree of polarization (Hypothesis 2).

At the level of parties, we identify three sources of variation: extremity, party size, and the distinction between government and opposition parties. The role of *extremity* was already emphasized by earlier work on spatial models of electoral choice. Building on the work of Stokes (1963), Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989) stressed the role of extremity of the parties' political positions. Only if the intensity of issue stands is sufficiently high do they translate into vote choices. Otherwise, "when parties occupy a centrist position on an issue they are not evaluated on the basis of that issue" (Macdonald, Listhaug, and Rabinowitz 1991: 1107). Also, as emphasized above, we expect that an extreme party position should the perceived association between the party and the corresponding issue. Thus, a further hypothesis is that the effect of voter-party distances on party utilities should be stronger for

the issues on which a party takes a more extreme position (Hypothesis 3). This may also help explaining some of the recent arguments made about niche parties, that is, parties that emphasize a (often noneconomic) policy neglected by other parties (Miller and Meyer 2011; Wagner 2012; Mauerer et al. 2015). Niche parties are found to have a better chance of success if they stick to their more extreme positions and, hence, do not respond to shifts in public opinion in the same way as mainstream parties (Adams et al. 2006; Ezrow et al. 2011). Because they tend not to be in the center of the political spectrum, this refers likewise to the expectation that the more extreme the party's issue or ideological position is the larger its effects on voting should be. The position of an extreme party will be more distinct and thus easier for voters to receive.

Concerning *party size*, two different hypotheses are more or less equally possible. The perspective of information accessibility suggests that bigger parties the information transmission through media actors, etc., will allow for a higher probability of a voter being able to perceive the party's position. As it is potentially easier for voters to identify the positions of large parties, about which they have more information, issue voting may be stronger due to this informational advantage (Hypothesis 4a). Small parties, on the other hand, are more likely to have a more homogeneous constituency, and are thus more likely to take clear positions on issues, which should reinforce issue voting (Wagner 2011). Large parties, in contrast, and especially catch-all parties are more likely to rely on a bridging strategy, which could weaken issue voting (Hypothesis 4b).

Finally, we expect that the role played by issues in the voting decision process may also depend on whether a party is part of a government. Government participation "forces parties to compromise and to accept ideologically unappealing choices as the best among available alternatives" (Bawn and Somer-Topcu 2012: 433), whereas opposition parties should raise issues for discussion challenging the government (Benoit 2007). Additionally, opposition

parties have, by definition, no chance to prove their abilities in government. This is why they, firstly, stress issue and ideological positions more strongly while governments tend to “‘celebrate’ their successes” (Thurner, Maurerer, and Debus 2011: 2). Issue considerations should thus play a larger role on utilities for opposition parties than for government parties (Hypothesis 5).

Statistical model and data

In order to estimate how the strength of issue voting is influenced by party characteristics, the standard proximity model of voting choice needs to be adapted on one central aspect. With K issue dimensions, the utility of citizen i ($i = 1, \dots, n$) for party j ($j = 1, \dots, J$) is defined as:

$$y_{ij} = \alpha_j + \sum_k \beta_{jkz} \cdot (x_{ik} - p_{jk})^2 + \varepsilon_{ij}. \quad (1)$$

In equation 1, x_{ik} is the position of citizen i on issue dimension k , p_{jk} is the position of party j on that issue dimension, α_j is a party-specific constant, β_{jkz} captures the strength of the impact of issue dimension k on the voter’s party utility, and ε_{ij} is a random error term.

Contrary to the standard specification of a proximity model (e.g., Adams et al. 2005: 17), the impact of voter-party issue distances is allowed to vary across parties and districts (that is, the beta parameters are indexed by party j and district z). This is a necessary change in order to test the hypotheses presented above.

The impact of these voter-party issue distances is expected to be a function of party characteristics, such as their size or degree of extremity on the corresponding issue, and of country-level characteristics (such as the level of polarization). With j denoting parties, k

denoting issues, and z denoting countries, the corresponding context-level model can be specified as

$$\beta_{jkz} = \delta_0 + \delta_1 Size_{jz} + \delta_2 Extremity_{jkz} + \delta_3 Polarization_{kz} + \dots + u_{jk} \quad (2)$$

Note that the hierarchical structure of the data is relatively complex. Party size and government vs. opposition vary across parties and countries; extremity varies across parties, countries, and issues; fragmentation varies across countries; and polarization varies across countries and issues. As a simplification, all of these characteristics will be assumed to be measured at the same level, that is, to be characteristics of party-by-issue-by-country combinations. This means that the model to be estimated is considered to be only a two-level model, with individuals at the lower level and all contextual characteristics in a single upper level. This model is estimated with a two-step strategy (Achen 2005, Lewis and Linzer 2005): First, the individual-level model is estimated separately for each party and electoral district with ordinary least-squares regressions. Then the resulting beta coefficients for all issues, parties, and countries are pooled and used as the dependent variables of a feasible generalized least squares (FGLS) regression, following the procedure suggested by Lewis and Linzer (2005: 351f.).

Our individual-level data come from the *2014 European Election Study* (EES). The dependent variable is a measure of party utility. We rely on a battery of questions asking respondents about their “probabilities of future vote” for various parties in competition. Citizens were invited to rate the chances that they will ever vote for various parties (up to 8 parties by country), on an 11-point scale (coded in the 0-1 range for our analyses). This dataset also allows us measuring citizens’ positions on a range of issues. The choice of issues to include in the individual-level model was constrained by the availability of data on parties’ positions, for

which we rely on the data collected in the framework of the *EUandI* voting advice application. Our models include up to five issues, for which we have data on both voters' and parties' positions. These issues capture preferences regarding redistribution of wealth, taxes and public services, immigration policy, environmental protection vs. economic growth, and European unification. We are thus able to cover all of the main dimensions that may structure electoral competition. The voter-party distances are computed by taking the squared distance between both positions on five-point scales.¹

The country-level and party-level variables were computed by combining information from the *EUandI* dataset and additional information from a database on party size and government participation compiled by the WZB. Polarization is measured as a weighted standard deviation of parties' positions on a given issue, weighting by party size (Taylor and Herman 1971). Fragmentation can be captured by the Effective Number of Parliamentary Parties (ENPP), a count of the number of parties, weighting them by their vote share at the last national election (Laakso and Taagepera 1979). At the level of parties, we include a measure of party size, which indicates the share of votes received by a party at the last national parliamentary election. The extremity of a party's position on a given issue is equal to the squared distance between that position and the weighted average position of the country's party system on that same issue. The distinction between government and opposition parties, finally, is coded with a dummy variable that takes the value 1 for parties that were in the national government at the moment of the 2014 European elections.

¹ Voters' positions in the EES data were measured on 11-point scale. However, as the party-level position from the *EUandI* dataset were coded with 5-point scale, we also recoded the individual-level data within the same range of values before computing the distances.

Results

The most important results for this paper’s hypotheses are about the impact of parties’ and contexts’ characteristics on the strength of issue voting. As a preliminary step, however, it is important to show that the impact of issue preferences on party utilities does indeed vary between parties and issues. Following the two-step procedure mentioned in the previous section, we estimated the Equation 1 model separately for each party. Figure 1 shows how the corresponding β parameters, that capture the strength of the relation between voter-party issue distances and party utilities, vary among these various individual-level models.

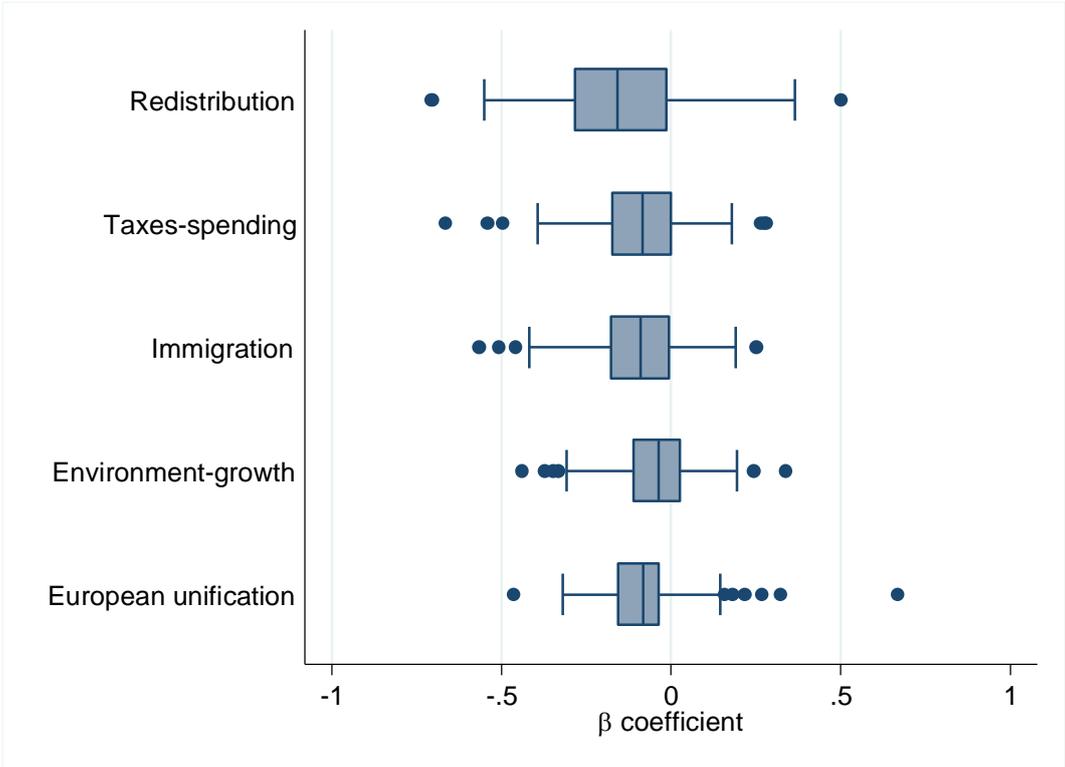


Figure 1. Distribution of the estimated β coefficients from the individual-level models, by issue

These results reveal a substantial degree of variation in the strength of issue voting. Some issues exert larger impact on party utilities than others. We find the largest (absolute) median effect for the redistribution issue (-0.16), and the smallest one for the environment vs. growth

issue (-0.04). But on all issues, there is also a large degree of variation between parties and contexts. Our expectation is that part of this variation is systematically related to the characteristics of parties and electoral contexts.

The impact of these context-level (or party-level) characteristics is estimated in the second step of our analysis. As parties' positions are not available on all issues, we face a trade-off between including more issues in the individual-level model and maximizing the number of observations for the context-level model. Table 1 presents the results about the impact of context-level and party-level characteristics, for two different model specifications. The first one is based on the estimated coefficients of an individual-level model including voter-party distances on five issues. This allows considering 119 parties (and 595 party-by-issue combinations). The estimated individual-level parameters of this series of models are those that are summarized in Figure 1. In contrast, the second model in Table 1 includes only three issue dimensions in the first stage of the model evaluation: redistribution, environment vs. growth, and European unification. This means that we excluded the issues dimensions of immigration and taxes/spending. This allows increasing the number of parties to 137 for the context-level model (which corresponds to 411 party-by-issue combinations).

Table 1. Impact of party-level and context-level characteristics on the strength of issue voting

	5 issues	3 issues
Polarization	-0.07**	-0.14***
ENPP	-0.01**	-0.02**
Extremity	-0.01	-0.01
Party size	-0.01	-0.04
Government party	-0.02*	-0.01
Constant	-0.01	-0.00
R ²	0.04	0.06
N parties	119	137
N parties x issues	595	411

* p<0.10, ** p<0.05, *** p<0.01

While the impact of issue preferences on party utilities varies a lot between parties and contexts, the contextual characteristics we have considered are only able to explain a small part of this variation. The results of Table 1 reveal some impact of polarization and fragmentation. As already emphasized by previous studies, the level of party system polarization is an important determinant of the strength of issue voting. In contexts in which parties present more strongly diverging policy preferences, citizens are incited to attach more importance to issue positions in the evaluation of the parties in competition. The range of the polarization variable is about 1 (with a standard deviation of 0.20)², meaning that the maximum observed effect of polarization is to increase the absolute value of the beta coefficient by 0.07 (in model 1), or 0.14 (in model 2). This is not a huge effect, given the variation observed in Figure 1, but it is still noticeable.

A higher level of party system fragmentation also strengthens the role of issues. As noted above, the direction of this relation is disputed in the literature. Our results support Hypothesis 1b, but not Hypothesis 1a. However, the magnitude of this effect is somewhat smaller than that of polarization. In the countries included in this analysis, the ENPP ranges from 1.2 to 5.8, with a standard deviation of 1.2. The maximum effect of fragmentation lies between -0.06 and -0.08 (depending on the model).³

As far as party-level characteristics, however, we find no systematic results. The first model shows that the impact of issues is more pronounced for governmental parties, but this effect is quite small in magnitude, and it is not confirmed by the analysis based on a smaller number of issue dimensions. Extremity and party size, finally, do not appear to influence issue voting strength, contrary to our hypotheses.

² Descriptive statistics for all independent variables can be found in Table A1 in the appendix.

³ These values were computed using the exact coefficients, not the rounded values presented in Table 1.

Conclusion

Our study started from the observation that although issue similarities between voters and parties are at the core of all models of representative democracy, studies investigating the variation in the impact of issue-based evaluations of parties are scarce. Two strands of research could be differentiated: firstly, analyses of proximity voting in different contexts (countries, elections, etc.) and secondly research on the party specificity of issue voting. In this (first draft of our) paper, we combined both strands and asked for the variation in the impact of issue proximity on party utility. To test the macro and party level hypotheses, individual level data on the 2014 European parliamentary election was merged with estimates on party positions from the EUandI study and information on party size and government participation. Applying a two-step approach proposed by Lewis and Linzer (2005), we first estimated an issue model (OLS) for each party regressing party utility on squared issue voter-party distances for five issues: redistribution, taxes-spending, immigration, environment-growth and European integration. In the second step, we used the coefficients from the first step regressions as the dependent variable (taking the variation in the uncertainty of the estimates into account). This party-specific importance of issue-proximity was explained by macro level factors (issue polarization and fragmentation of the party system) and party characteristics (party size, extremity of position, government participation). Up to now, the results point to the relevance of country-specific factors: a higher number of parties increases the impact of issues as does polarization on the respective issue. Party characteristics, on the other hands, do not show clear, stable and substantive effects.

The modest explanatory power of the models points to explanatory factors missing in our models. Up to now, we did not yet include plausible cross-level interactions of, e.g. polarization and extremity. One might, for instance, assume that polar or extreme positions of a single party on a specific issue play an even larger role if the party system as a whole is

rather concentrated. Additional to implementing such moderation effects, we plan to integrate the Chapel Hill Expert Survey data on party positions, saliency and clarity. Thereby, we hope to be able to shed more light on the specifics of issue voting in Europe.

Appendix

Table A1. Descriptive statistics, level-1 β coefficients and context-level variables

	Mean	Std. dev.	Min.	Max.	N
β	-0.09	0.16	-0.71	0.67	595
Polarization	0.24	0.20	0.00	0.97	595
ENPP	3.64	1.23	1.21	5.82	595
Extremity	0.39	0.58	0.00	4.00	595
Party size	0.14	0.10	0.01	0.45	595
Government party	0.41	0.49	0.00	1.00	595

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