7

Left-Right Orientations and Party Choice

Cees van der Eijk, Hermann Schmitt, and Tanja Binder

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The left–right continuum has traditionally been looked upon in electoral research as one of the most important dimensions to describe voters' substantive political orientations. In combination with their perceptions of where the political parties are located on the same dimension, these orientations allow an instrumental mode of electoral choice, much along Downsean lines (Downs 1957). The theoretical status of the left–right concept in electoral studies is therefore inherently different from that of the notion of party identification. The vocabulary of left and right emphasizes, at least implicitly, cognitive-based instrumental modes of electoral behaviour, whereas party identification stresses affect with political parties rather than instrumentality.¹

Left-right orientations of citizens are customarily found to be one of the most important factors that determine European voters' choices at the ballot box. Their importance for electoral politics and political behaviour is found not to be limited to a direct effect on choice behaviour. Left-right orientations also structure other political orientations with respect to political issues, government performance, and leadership, and they have, via these, also indirect effects on party choice. For this reason, left-right is often referred to as a 'super issue' (the term was probably coined by Inglehart 1984) that encapsulates, impacts upon, and constrains a host of more specific political preferences and orientations. Yet, there is no reason to expect left-right to be always, and everywhere, of equal importance for party choice. Traditionally, the association between left-right and party choice is weaker in some countries—such as Ireland—than in others—such as Denmark.² Moreover, there is no reason to expect the electoral importance of left and right to be uniform over time. In Chapter 1 it was suggested that the impact of left-right on electoral choice would initially become stronger in European countries after the 1960s (after controlling relevant other factors), and then decline again in the more recent period. This expectation was based on an

analysis of long-term changes in economic, social, and political characteristics of western democracies, some of which were subsumed under the hypothesis of cognitive mobilization. This expectation is in line with the suggestion of political observers who suggested that the electoral importance of left and right declined after the fall of Communism.³ In view of such previously documented or suggested variations, this book on comparative European voter studies is an excellent venue to investigate cross-national and cross-temporal differences in the importance of voters' left–right orientations for party choice.

When investigating electoral politics, the interpretation of the strength of the association between voters' left-right orientations and their party choice is inextricably linked to the question: What position do these political orientations occupy in a network of (hypothesized) causal relations? To the extent that the left-right position of voters can be regarded as the effect of other variables, its status in a causal network is one of an intervening variable. The most popular of such perspectives in the literature is to regard the left-right position of voters as an expression of their social location. In this reasoning, the social cleavages that contributed to the formation of European party systems still provide meaning to the terms 'left' and 'right' and to voters' individual position on the left-right continuum.⁴ This perspective is not uncontested, however, and it is also argued that there is no necessary similarity between erstwhile and current meanings of the terms 'left' and 'right'.⁵ In Chapter 1, for example, it was hypothesized that processes of modernization at the social and individual level will gradually reduce the importance of social structure for political orientations, preferences, and behaviour. This hypothesis leads to the expectation that over the course of time, the relation between citizens' left-right placement and their social background becomes increasingly weaker. For obvious reasons, such differences in expectations cannot be settled on the basis of first principles or theoretical arguments only. Which of the different expectations that can be found in the literature is most relevant in which context can only be determined by empirical research. Thus, the relationship between voters' left-right orientations and their place in the structure of society will be investigated in this chapter, in a comparison between countries as well as over time.

Finally, and as already discussed in Chapter 1, we have to take into account that cross-national and cross-temporal variations in the importance of social structure for left–right, and in the importance of left–right for the vote may not only reflect long-term trends and developments, but also differences in the political–institutional context within which voters and parties find themselves. Some conditions may just be more conducive than others for generating associations between left–right orientations and other variables (such as indicators of social location, or electoral behaviour of citizens). As we will see, inter-party relationships and the structure of party competition are particularly important in this respect.

7.2 DATA AND DESIGN OF THE ANALYSES

Our analysis is partially directed to the analysis of developments over time. To obtain a reliable perspective on such developments requires that more than just a few points in time can be compared. We chose to include only those countries in our analyses for which at least five national election studies are available that contain information on voters' left-right positions in addition to information about their party choice and their social structural characteristics. This left us only five countries: Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Even for these countries not all the election studies are useful, as some do not contain the entire information that is necessary for our analyses. Moreover, for some of our analyses there is not sufficient information available for Denmark, so that one section of this chapter is based on no more than four countries. This situation reflects, unfortunately, the often idiosyncratic basis of questionnaire construction, even within a single country over time. Table 7.1 lists for each of the five countries that appear in our analyses the years for which relevant information is available. Because not all of these studies contain the necessary information, some of our analyses will be based on a subset of these studies.

7.3 MEASURING ASSOCIATIONS

The analyses in this chapter focus on the evolution over time of the associations between social structure and left-right orientations of voters on the one hand, and between these left-right orientations and party choice on the other. These associations involve variables at different levels of measurement. Left-right is measured in all studies in a semi-interval manner by self-placement scales containing seven, ten, or eleven categories. Social structure involves a number of

Denmark	Germany	Netherlands	Norway	Sweden
1979	1976	1977	1973	1968
1981	1983	1981	1977	1972
1984	1987	1982	1981	1975
1990	1990	1986	1985	1978
1994	1998	1989	1989	1982
1998		1994	1993	1985
		1998	1997	1987
				1991
				1994
				1998

TABLE 7.1. Election studies included in the analyses of this chapter

variables some of which are dichotomous, some nominal, and some ordinal in character (see next section). Party choice is always a nominal level variable.⁶ We chose to express the relationship between social structure and left-right in terms of the η^2 , that is, in terms of the capacity of the set of variables measuring aspects of social structural background of voters to predict their left-right positions. η^2 can be interpreted as a measure of explained variance, and is identical to the ordinary R^2 one would obtain when the categories of the independent variables (i.e. social structure) are represented by separate dummies. A similar logic for the other association—the one between left-right and vote would require a quite different method. The predictive power of left-right for party choice cannot be expressed as an η^2 , owing to the fact that the dependent variable (party choice) is not measured at interval level but at nominal level. As an alternative one could use a pseudo- R^2 derived from a multinomial or conditional logit analysis, or a measure of predictive power derived from a discriminant analysis. The major drawback of such alternatives is that the two associations that we want to trace over time (and compare between systems) would be assessed in such different ways that they cannot be compared to one another while, as we will see in the next sections, such a comparison is in some instances quite useful.⁷ Therefore, we chose to express this second association also in terms of η^2 , with left-right as dependent and party choice as independent variable.⁸

7.4 IS OUR WINDOW OF OBSERVATIONS APPROPRIATE?

Some of the expectations about the evolution of the two associations that are at the core of our analyses are derived from a time perspective that is much wider than that covered by our observations. The expectations formulated in Chapter 1 are based on long-term changes in economic, social, and political characteristics of western democracies. It must be kept in mind, however, that the historical 'window' offered to us by our data, is considerably shorter than the duration of this postulated long-term process, and skewed towards the current situation. Even in the five countries that offer the longest period of overtime comparisons for the variables of interest to us, our first observations are for the mid-1970s, or even later, with the exception of Sweden where the first study we can use dates from 1968. The late 1960s and early 1970s are often regarded as a turning point of electoral politics in European countries. During earlier times, cleavage politics allegedly was dominant, while at later times the importance of cleavages for electoral behaviour has greatly diminished.⁹ It is thus perfectly possible that the expectations developed in Chapter 1 are entirely correct for a time frame that is not adequately covered by our data. This makes our analyses only partially capable of substantiating, or conversely repudiating, these expectations. We can mitigate this problem, however, by assuming that the character of earlier periods 'lives on' to some extent in the orientations and behaviours of those who

were psychologically and politically 'formed' in earlier periods. This reasoning leads us to distinguish in our data between cohorts: groups born and socialized in different historical periods.

Distinguishing between cohorts is also necessary on other grounds. When analysing changes over time, we must acknowledge that a country's population changes in terms of the individuals comprised in it. New voters enter the electorate, old ones die off. The effects of this 'demographic metabolism' are usually relatively limited for a single pair of consecutive elections, but they cumulate with the passage of time. When comparing an electorate in the mid-1970s with that at the end of the 1990s, we usually find that the surviving members of the former comprise no more than 50 per cent of the latter. To the extent that the voters who enter the electorate differ systematically from those who fall away, we obfuscate our view of developments by only analysing entire electorates. We 'control' the changes in the composition of the electorates by performing our analyses for separate cohorts. In the analyses in this chapter we limit ourselves to a fourfold cohort categorization in order to prevent too much clutter, and to avoid severe loss of statistical power owing to small group sizes. We distinguish the following cohorts: born in 1924 or earlier, born in the period 1925–44 (inclusive), born in the period 1945-60 (inclusive), and born in 1961 or later. It is obvious that control of this categorization cannot ensure total comparability between our samples. The continuous process of generational throughput causes the composition of these broad cohorts themselves also to change over the course of time. The post-1960 cohort changes every year by the continuous influx of voters coming of age, while the composition of particularly the pre-1925 cohort changes because of attrition, which will be higher in the older segments of this cohort than in the younger ones. Thus, our cohorts are over time not fully comparable qua composition. In spite of these problems, this differentiation according to cohorts ameliorates considerably the problem of incomparabilities that would exist otherwise.

7.5 SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND LEFT-RIGHT

When assessing changes in the relationship between voters' location in the social structure, and their left–right self-placement, our data pose considerable limitations.

First, our data do not allow us to measure social background in the same manner (let alone in the same detail) as is customary in many sociological theories of societal changes that are cast in terms of class, religion, occupation, region, language, and ethnicity. Therefore, we use background variables that can reasonably be regarded as proxies for the two most potent social cleavages discussed by these theories: class and religion. For this purpose we use as many as possible¹⁰ of the following variables:¹¹

- Income of household
- Socio-economic status (sometimes also referred to as subjective social class)
- Presence of one or more union members in the household
- Frequency of church attendance

A second problem we encounter is that the social structural characteristics that are available in our data have been measured differently between countries. This prevents us from pooling our data, and thus forces us to conduct our analyses for each of the countries separately. Even within a single country the set of social structural characteristics that have been measured, and the manner in which this is done is not identical over time, necessitating a kind of 'lowest common denominator' approach in which we focus on those characteristics that have been observed in more or less the same form over time.

As indicated earlier, we not only look at the relationship between social structural characteristics and left–right for the entire electorate at any given moment in time, but we distinguish between cohorts. This yields various statistics for each of the countries in our analyses (e.g. Table 7.2.).

Table 7.2 shows (in its last column) that the association between social structure and left-right is at all times very weak. Clearly, there is some variation in the strength of this association, but the changes do not fit a monotonic pattern, as hypothesized by the modernization thesis advanced in Chapter 1.¹² As our series of German data starts only in 1976, it is entirely possible that this association was stronger at earlier times and that it has declined to the levels displayed here before our data started tracking it. But if that were the case, we would expect to find cohort differences, with older cohorts consistently displaying stronger associations between left-right and social structure than younger ones. A comparison of the cohort columns in Table 7.2 reveals the absence of any distinct cohort effects in Germany.¹³ If anything, the differences in associations reported in Table 7.2 appear to be of a non-patterned kind, a kind of trendless fluctuation.¹⁴

Tables similar to Table 7.2 can also be made for the other countries that we analyse: Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the Netherlands. We report them in an

Election study	Born before 1925	Born 1925–44	Born 1945–60	Born 1961 and later	Entire electorate
1976	0.10	0.12	0.10	_	0.09
1983	0.03	0.05	0.08	0.10	0.05
1987	0.02	0.07	0.05	0.03	0.05
1990	0.10	0.02	0.03	0.07	0.01
1994	0.13	0.06	0.03	0.04	0.06
1998	0.05	0.06	0.03	0.02	0.02

TABLE 7.2. Explained variation (η^2) in L/R self-placement with social structure (union membership and church attendance) by cohort—Germany

appendix with this chapter and confine ourselves here to summarizing the main findings:

- The overall level of association between social structure and left-right varies between countries, but to a considerable extent these differences seem to be related to differences in the amount of available indicators for social structural characteristics. Nowhere, however, is this association consistently high. All in all, we find that this association exceeds 0.2 in only 3 (scattered) cases out of a total of 30.
- Which of the social structural variables effectuates most of the overall association differs between countries. In the Netherlands church attendance is comparatively important, in the Scandinavian countries subjective class is of greater importance.
- Over time changes in the overall level of association between social structure and left-right hardly fit any pattern of more or less monotonic decline.¹⁵
- In none of the countries we find any convincing evidence of systematic cohort effects. The strength of the association we investigate varies between cohorts and years, sometimes even considerably. Yet nowhere do we find that a pattern of intercohort differences repeats itself in even half of the years under observation.
- In some of the countries we find non-negligible period effects: over time differences in the strength of the association between social structure and left–right that affect all cohorts at the same time in the same direction. Later in this chapter we will analyse these differences in more detail.
- In all countries the association between social structure and left-right not only varies in strength between cohorts (albeit in non-systematic ways), but also the character (or 'direction') of the relationship that underlies the η^2 statistic that we use. Indirect evidence hereof can be gained from the tables, when the association is stronger for each of the cohorts separately than for them pooled (i.e. the entire electorate).

Combining all the evidence presented in our tables (and including some additional analyses not reported here) we find in none of the five countries that we analyse convincing evidence of the decline in the relationship between social structure and left–right that was hypothesized in Chapter 1 of this book. Obviously, the refutation of this hypothesis is not entirely definitive. Our window of observations is limited, and it is possible that the hypothesized change materialized itself before the first observations at our disposal. That would in all likelihood have left traces in the form of systematic cohort differences, of which we do not find clear evidence. Also, breaking down our samples by cohort diminishes the *n*'s upon which our statistics are based. The consequence is an increase in sampling variance (or, stated differently, of the standard errors of the η^2), which may conceivably overwhelm a pattern of systematic decline in association, or a

pattern of systematic cohort differences. But such an argument cannot really save the hypothesis, as it would imply that the hypothesized decline is too small to make much of a real world difference amidst other factors that effectuate change (such as period effects). For all practical purposes, then, we have refuted the hypothesis of a declining relationship between voters' social structural characteristics and their left–right orientations.

One interesting implication of our findings so far, which holds for all five countries analysed, is that voters' left–right orientations cannot sensibly be regarded as a reflection of their social position. Sociological reductionism does not help us in understanding where citizens locate themselves on a left–right dimension. The most obvious alternative interpretation of the meaning of people's left–right positions is an autonomous political one. The meaning of left and right is construed in the political domain, which is obviously quite independent from the social structural domain. To the extent that this is true, we would expect variations in the political context to be related to the way in which left–right orientations are associated with other characteristics, including those investigated earlier. We will present analyses along these lines later in this chapter. Before doing so, however, we turn to questions concerning the association between left–right and party choice.

7.6 LEFT/RIGHT AND PARTY CHOICE

As discussed earlier, the relationship between voters' left-right orientations and their party choice, and possible changes in this relationship, has been a topic of frequent speculation, political commentary, and occasionally of empirical investigation in European countries. We investigate this relation for Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. As we did previously for the relation between social structure and left-right, we distinguish between cohorts, in order to trace effects of a past that is unobserved by the available survey information, but that is likely to have left its imprint in systematic differences between cohorts. As discussed earlier, here too we use as a measure of association η^2 (see also endnote 7). For each country our analysis yields a table such as the one for Germany (see Table 7.3). The comparable tables for the other four countries are presented in the appendix to this chapter.

Inspection of Table 7.3 reveals first of all that the association between left–right and party choice is considerably stronger than the one between left–right and social structure. For the entire electorate, this relationship seems to be weaker in the 1990s than in the 1970s and 1980s, but the decline is not monotonous at all. The irregularity of the ups and downs suggests the existence of period effects, but these are weak at best in view of the fact that the rank ordering of the coefficients in the column for the entire electorate is only weakly traceable in the columns for the separate cohorts. Systematic cohort effects are difficult to find, as the pattern

Election study	Born before 1925	Born 1925–44	Born 1945–60	Born 1961 and later	Entire electorate
1976	0.28	0.37	0.29	_	0.32
1983	0.28	0.26	0.37	0.23	0.30
1987	0.30	0.35	0.39	0.32	0.36
1990	0.21	0.28	0.24	0.22	0.23
1994	0.49	0.28	0.24	0.36	0.29
1998	0.29	0.25	0.22	0.25	0.24

TABLE 7.3. Explained variation (η^2) in L/R self placement with party choice by cohort—Germany

of differences between the coefficients is different in each row. In short, we do observe differences, but most of the variation seems to be unpatterned. When inspecting these tables for all countries (compare Table 7.3 with the tables for the other countries in the appendix) we come to the following observations.

In all countries the association between left-right and party choice for the entire electorate is much stronger than the one between left-right and social structure. This association is weakest in Germany, and strongest in Denmark and Sweden.

In some countries, we find noteworthy over-time changes in this association for the entire electorate. In Norway the coefficients vary between a low of 0.31 and a high of 0.62, and in the Netherlands between 0.37 and 0.57. In the other countries the differences over time are more muted. Nowhere, however, do we see a monotonous increase or decline, but rather curvilinear changes, with the highest values in the 1980s. This is the kind of pattern predicted in Chapter 1. Such a pattern is most distinctively found in Norway and the Netherlands, it is more muted in Denmark and Sweden, whereas it is not clearly discernible in Germany. No strong and systematic cohort effects are found to exist. In Norway and Sweden the association is somewhat stronger for the two youngest cohorts compared to the other ones, but we find no such intercohort differences in Denmark, the Netherlands, or Germany.¹⁶

We find some indications of period effects. These are clearest in the Netherlands and Norway, weaker in Denmark and Sweden, and not clear at all in Germany.

In conclusion, then, one finding stands out across all countries and cohorts: We find no evidence for monotonic changes over time in the association between left–right and party choice. Much of the theorizing that would lead to the expectation of such monotonic changes is, evidently, mistaken empirically. As we remarked in the previous section of this chapter, such expectations are characteristic for some kind of reductionism, the phenomena in which the political domain are seen as derivative of something else: social structure, modernization, or other factors. So far, we see no evidence of the veracity of such expectations. Therefore, changes

over time in associations of left-right with other variables that we observed, have to be explained on a different basis, that also finds its locus in the political domain.

7.7 INTERMEZZO: WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED SO FAR, AND WHAT NOT YET

Our analyses so far focused on the relationship between left-right self-placements of citizens on the one hand and their location in the social structure (as an antecedent) and vote choice (as a consequence) on the other hand. By and large, the results from these analyses can be summarized and interpreted as follows.

The relationship between social background and left-right self-placements is weak, in some countries so weak that there is no room any more for the expectation to be born out that this relationship will weaken over time. In other countries, where the series starts out with a non-negligible relationship between background and self-placement, we indeed do find indications of such a decline. In view of the general weakness of this relationship it is not surprising to find small cohort differences at best. Substantively, these findings seem to imply that left-right identifications of citizens develop quite autonomously. For all kinds of reasons people may consider themselves as located on the left or on the right, and more or less outspokenly so. But they do not do so predominantly because they have a low income, or because they frequently go to church, or reasons like these. Political sociologists might be tempted to conclude from the absence of such social structural rooting that these self-placements are merely ephemeral and of no real political significance. But that would ignore their strong relation with party choice, or other political orientations in terms of issues and candidate evaluations (cf. Kroh 2003). At least we can conclude that those aspects of social structure that are related to the traditional cleavages do not exert much impact on where people locate themselves ideologically between left and right.¹⁷ The political conflicts that gave rise to these cleavages have been 'solved' or at least accommodated long ago, thereby removing conflict as a reinforcing factor in the development of self-identifications. Under such 'pacified' circumstances, socialization by parents and other authorities cannot but imperfectly transmit identification with cleavage groups, an imperfection that is cumulative across successive generations and that results in these old cleavages virtually having lost their political 'steam' after some four generations,¹⁸ that is, somewhere in the 1970s or 1980s. In some of our countries we can still observe the lingering shadows of these cleavages in the data of the oldest cohorts, in other countries we hardly see such a historical footprint. But where we observe that the importance of cleavage factors declines, we also observe for all cohorts that the strength of the association between left-right self-placement and social structural

factors varies. It would thus be a mistake to assume that political factors are only responsible for self-placements of younger generations; they evidently impact those of older cohorts as well.¹⁹

Obviously, our analyses do not totally rule out that people's left–right positions are anchored in their location in the social structure. But then we should consider other aspects of the social structure than the cleavages that originated more than a century ago. Which aspects should these be is not quite clear. The literature in the field points to many social factors that are somewhat correlated with left–right positions, but none of them very strongly so, and none of them yet having been demonstrated to be of real relevance for either left–right positions or voting itself. Any claim for regarding social background as the origin of ideological self-placements thus either becomes quite tenuous, or it has to yield to the idea that the manner in which one's social position influences self-placement is particularistic in nature (cf. Tuckel and Tejera 1983), which actually is a different way to say that social position has lost its structuring power for political orientations and behaviour.

7.8 THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

One of our findings in the previous sections was quite unambiguous: leftright self-placements of voters are strongly related to the choices they make at elections. The strength of this relationship, however, varies considerably over time. This can be observed from the coefficients in the 'entire electorate' column in Table 7.3 and the comparable tables in the appendix. Figure 7.1 presents the changes in this association graphically for the five countries that we analyse.

Although the more or less curvilinear pattern of these associations is in line with the expectation formulated in Chapter 1, it is questionable whether the argument leading to this expectation is correct. The expectation of an initial increase of the *independent* impact of left–right orientations on party choice was based on the supposition that the relationship between social background and left–right orientations would gradually decline. However, since we found that even in the early years of our time series this relationship was already weak, and hardly declined afterwards, this explanation is not very convincing.

One potential alternative explanation of these variations has been ruled out in the previous section: changes in the generational composition of the electorate. Had the throughput of generations been the culprit, we should have observed clear cohort effects in Table 7.3 (and the comparable tables in the Appendix for the other countries), while in fact we did not.

If societal changes cannot explain the variations in Fig. 7.1, an obvious alternative interpretation can, in one form or another, be phrased as 'it's politics, stupid', as discussed in Chapter 1.



FIG 7.1. Association between voters' left-right position and their party choice

When considering political interpretations, it is tempting to try and interpret the changes in Fig. 7.1 on the basis of whatever specific knowledge one may have about political events and circumstances in each of the countries. Undoubtedly we would then focus on all kinds of country-specific particulars such as changes in the composition of the governing coalition, changes in the 'tone' and content of the public debate on social and political affairs, changes in who contributes to that debate, changes in who occupies top positions in parties and influential interest and pressure groups, and so on. Useful as this may be, it is bound to end up in 'explanations' that are plausible, yet untestable because they are cast in terms of phenomena that are inextricably bound to the same times and places that generated them. Propositions that are testable require, at least in principle, that they be cast in terms that can be applied to characterise a wide variety of contexts. When confronted with variability in the strength of the association between left-right and party choice, we therefore stand to gain from looking at aspects of the political context that relate to left and right. When the terms left and right are powerful heuristics for voters to decide which party to vote for, then the association between their own positions on this continuum and their vote will, ceteris *paribus*, be strong. This will more often be the case when political conflicts are cast in left-right terms, and when the contesting parties in those conflicts are starkly differentiated. In short, we hypothesize that left-right polarization is the phenomenon to look at when trying to explain the over-time differences displayed in Fig. 7.1.²⁰

Figure 7.2 displays the relationship between left–right polarization on the one hand, and the association between voters' left–right positions and their party choice on the other.²¹

Figure 7.2 supports our expectation to a reasonable extent: for each of the countries we see that the stronger the polarization between the parties in left–right terms, the stronger the effect of left–right voter positions on their choice. The relationships are not perfectly monotonous, but the occasional dips and bumps cannot hide the generally upward sloping character of the graphs.²² The differences between the lines for the different countries are caused by factors that affect the overall magnitude of the association between voters' left–right positions and their choices, for example the number of parties, their sizes, internal homogeneity, and so on.

This finding nicely complements other findings in the literature. Heath et al. (1991: 220), for example, find that amongst the most important factors effectuating electoral change in Britain in the period 1964–87 are over time variations in perceived distances between parties and variations in ideological polarization. Oppenhuis (1995) and van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) found in a comparative analysis of voting in European countries that the impact of voters' left–right considerations on their vote is stronger when there is more agreement in the electorate as to where the parties are located between left and right.²³ Both



FIG 7.2. Left-right polarization and association between left-right voter positions and their party choice

findings emphasize the instrumental character of party choice. The more parties differentiate themselves in terms of left and right, the more useful this dimension is as a decision-making heuristic. And the more people agree on parties' positions on this dimension, the greater the likelihood that others will correctly interpret the ideological motivation of the vote.

However, ideological voting is not only instrumental. Left–right polarization indicates, over and above, the mere ideological spread of electoral choice options, the passions involved in party competition, and the heat of the election campaigns. This is why polarization also strengthens party identification (Schmitt and Holmberg 1995) and increases the impact of partisanship on the voting decision (Schmitt 2002). This is also born out by Chapter 6 on partisanship. Much along those lines, we can conceive polarization as a mechanism that strengthens left–right identifications²⁴ and thereby increases their impact on the voting decision.

7.9 CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The main findings from our analyses can be easily summarized in a few points:

- 1. Voters' left-right position is weakly associated with their location in the social structure.
 - (a) The strength of this association varies between countries; it is very weak in Germany, somewhat stronger in Sweden, and of intermediate strength in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway. Incomparabilities of available indicators of social structure between the countries undermine substantive interpretations of these inter-country differences.
 - (b) The strength of this association varies between cohorts, but not in a systematic fashion that warrants them to be interpreted as 'gener-ational' effects.
 - (c) The strength of this association varies over time without a clear trend to be discerned in this variation.
- 2. Voters' left-right positions are strongly related to party choice.
 - (a) The strength of this association varies between countries. Here, too, it is weakest in Germany, but considerably stronger in Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Norway. These differences reflect differences in party systems (number of parties, size of parties, etc.) which affect the possibilities for left-right orientations to express themselves in party choice.
 - (b) The strength of this association varies between cohorts, but not in a systematic fashion that warrants them to be interpreted as 'gener-ational' effects.

- (c) The strength of this association varies over time, without any particular kind of trend to be clearly discernable.
- (d) In all systems, the overtime variation in this association is strongly correlated with the degree of party polarization on the left–right continuum.

The first set of findings, concerning the association between left-right and people's location in the social structure, clearly underline the relative autonomy of the political domain (and most particularly the electoral subdomain) from the social domain of human action and interaction. This means that little mileage can be expected from all kinds of efforts that regard the politics of voters, parties, and elections as reflecting social conditions, social conflicts, and social inequalities. The democratization and electoralization of the pursuit of political power, which is characteristic of western liberal democracies, should indeed imply that the political domain has become quite autonomous from other domains. This should particularly be the case for the processes of electoral politics that are studied in this book. So, whereas the empirical failure of sociological reductionism should not surprise us, the tenacity of the kind of theorizing that leads to it should.

The findings with respect to the association between left–right and party choice are clearly in line with an abundance of results in the literature about the behavioural relevance of these substantive political orientations. The failure of a simple kind of secular change in the strength of this association again points to the autonomous dynamics in the political–electoral domain. This interpretation is forcefully supported by the strong effect of party polarization on this association. Clearly, it is the political context that either promotes or dampens ideological reasoning and thereby affects the possibilities for left–right orientations to express themselves in choice. Some aspects of this context, explaining differences between countries are country-specific, and relate to the long-term traits of the party system and the institutions that define the rules of electoral contests. Over time, differences within countries are, as demonstrated, explicable from variations in the domestic political context.

The findings with respect to the absence of cohort effects are somewhat surprising in view of the fact that various aspects of electoral behaviour are ubiquitously found to be structured by cohort differences. Party choice and electoral participation are frequently found to be systematically different between cohorts (cf. for instance, Schmitt 1987 for the generational basis of electoral support for the Greens in Germany; Franklin 2004 for the generational structure in electoral participation). On the basis of such findings we decided to compare cohorts in the analyses for this chapter. That we did not find any cohort effects may be related to a number of factors. One of the most important is probably that the great majority of our observations are located in a period after the precipitous decline of cleavage politics that was documented for western democracies by Franklin (1992). This decline implied that more room became available for

political circumstances to play a role in structuring electoral behaviour, and that the role of social structure declined. The fact that we did not observe much of the latter in our analyses is probably largely due to the differences between Franklin's and our databases. By restricting ourselves to national election studies, our data provide a smaller window of observation for tracing the changes that Franklin found.²⁵ But what our analyses also point out is that the mere fact that there is more room for political factors to play a role in electoral choice does not imply that this room will be invariably be used to its full extent. It is up to the political parties to make use of it, or not. The differences between parties in terms of ideological polarization are apparently of major importance in this respect. This conclusion leads to other questions: what are the factors that promote polarization or depolarization between parties? This chapter is obviously not the place to address these questions in greater detail.

In view of our emphasis on the relative autonomy of the political realm from other domains of human life it behoves us to dwell a bit upon how we see the nature of the left-right continuum itself. Often the terms left and right are regarded as inextricably linked with specific social and political conflicts (e.g. class conflict), or with specific modes of problem-solving (e.g. state intervention versus markets) or with particular moral values (equality versus freedom). Indeed, at various times and places the left-right dimension has been strongly linked to such conflicts, modes of operation, and values. Yet, there is nothing inextricable about this. Without specification of time and location, the terms left and right have little common meaning, if any at all. The meaning they acquire is the collective outcome of the ways in which numerous individuals interact politically. Most particularly, it is their verbal and symbolic interactions that matter in this context: the way in which people frame conflicts, the way in which they justify their own behaviour, and denounce that of others. Obviously, not everyone counts equally in this respect, as there is no such thing as a power-free dialogue at the level of a society. The collective result of all these framings and interpretations is a set of 'meanings' that is shared to a considerable extent amongst the members of a community, but that is also continuously redefined as a consequence of newly emerging problems, conflicts, and strategies of political actors. So, there is nothing inherently constant about the meaning of left and right.²⁶ On the short run, and in stable political contexts the question as to which points of view and which preferences go with being left or right seems obvious enough, but in a longer-time perspective these meanings evolve considerably.²⁷ In short, the 'meaning' of left and right is politically constructed, not by a single individual of group, but through the everyday processes of political cooperation and conflict. Over brief intervals of time, these meanings are usually quite stable, and function as constraints on political thinking and imagination. Yet, over longer periods of time, the ongoing processes of dayto-day politics and, occasionally, the creativity of individuals effectuate changes in these meanings. This process is one of the manifestations of the relative autonomy of the political realm that we emphasized earlier.

Notes

- This is not to say that no affect is involved in left and right. Left-right self-placements
 of voters cannot be explicable other than themselves deriving from affect, be it that this
 does not involve parties but more abstract matters such as ideals, values, and visions of
 the good society. As a result, it is more than plausible that left-right perceptions are
 coloured by affect (cf. Inglehart and Kingemann 1976; Granberg and Holmberg 1988).
- 2. For a comparative analysis of party choice in European countries see Van der Eijk and Franklin (1996: 332–65) and van der Eijk et al. (1999: 174–6). The analyses reported there demonstrate that the differences in raw association between left–right and party choice do not only reflect differences in causal effects, but also distributional differences in voters' and parties' positions on the left–right continuum.
- 3. This is particularly so in the new post-communist democracies (cf. among others Rose and Munro 2003; Tworzecki 2002).
- 4. Schmitt (1987) for example determines the left-right positioning of the traditional German parties on the basis of their location in the cleavage structure of the German party system.
- 5. cf. Silverman (1985), Fuchs and Klingemann (1990).
- 6. Obviously, the nature of our research question does not allow the transformation of party choice to an interval-level variable by extracting only the left-right position of the party voted for. Therefore, it cannot but be represented in our analyses as a nominal level variable. In principle, one can analyse choice by using electoral utilities (adequately measured) for each of the parties on choice as the phenomenon to be analysed (see van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; van der Eijk et al. forthcoming). Such an approach, however, would preclude any comparison across political systems, because such information has—as far as national election studies are concerned—only been collected in the Netherlands. To employ this approach in cross-national comparative analyses is only possible when using the data from the European Elections Studies (1989, 1994, 1999 and 2004). As these studies were conducted at the occasion of the elections to the European Parliament, they do not fit in the design of this volume that focuses on *national* election studies that were conducted at the occasion of elections for *national* parliaments.
- 7. Moreover, there are other drawbacks associated with those alternatives. van der Eijk and Kroh (2002) demonstrated that multinomial and conditional logit analyses yield often biased results. The disadvantage of discriminant analysis is that measures of success (i.e. of predictive power) are heavily influenced by the distribution of the dependent variable, rendering their comparison over time problematic.
- 8. Most of our data derive from post-election surveys. In those instances, endogeneity concerns make it almost impossible to give an unequivocal answer to the question whether party choice or, alternatively, left–right orientation should be considered as the dependent variable (and the other as the independent). This may make our choice for η^2 as the measure of association less problematic than it otherwise would be.

Moreover, we assessed this association also in terms of both Nagelkerke's and Cox and Snell's pseudo- R^2 coefficients derived from a conditional logit analysis. Although the numerical values of these coefficients are obviously different from the η^2 reported in the main text, their patterns of overtime shifts for each of the countries are very

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similar to those presented in this chapter. Although each of these possibilities has its own drawbacks, they yield substantively similar results.

- 9. See Chapter 4. Also, cf. Dalton et al. (1984), Crewe and Denver (1985), Franklin et al. (1992).
- 10. Differences in the content of questionnaires (within countries over time, as well as between countries) necessitate adapting the specification of these analyses to the available data. Wherever possible, we attempted first to maximize comparability over time within each separate country. Where it was impossible to utilize a sufficiently encompassing set of over time comparable background variables within a single country, we ran as many overtime comparisons as possible and report the procedures used and the over all findings in the text.
- 11. Of these four variables, two derive from questions that were asked for the respondent individually (socioeconomic status and church attendance), whereas the other two relate explicitly to the household to which the respondent belongs. The logic of the latter is that social background is believed to be a household characteristic. One could argue, of course, that this makes the strong and not self-evident assumption that households are homogeneous in these respects, and, moreover, that individuals' political orientations and behaviour are strongly determined by this micro-level context. As an alternative, we also investigated the relation between left/right self-placement and background when using for the latter only individual-level data (i.e. individual level income and individual union membership in addition to the two other items that were already individualized). Generally, both approaches yield the same pattern of differences between cohorts and periods. Only when these two approaches result in substantively different findings do we mention and discuss this in the text.
- 12. One could, of course, be tempted to see a general decline and consider the year 1994 as a single aberrant observation. We feel, however, that the number of time points is too small to warrant such an interpretation. If 1994 is to be considered as an aberrant case, why not consider 1976 so too? Particularly in the case of short time series, one must take care not to fall prey to the so-called 'end-point fallacy' that reifies the beginning and the end of a series of observations, while allowing disturbances from the thus established 'trend' to be explained away on ad hoc grounds.
- 13. Cohort differences would reveal themselves in a particular pattern of differences between the columns of this table, that is, a particular column (cohort) always exhibiting the strongest (or the weakest) association of all cohorts. Clearly, Table 7.2 does not contain such a pattern. It should be noted in Table 7.2 that the differences in the coefficients between cohorts reveal not only (non-systematic) variations in the strength of the association, but also in the kind ('direction') of relationship. This can be deduced from, for example, the 1990 row of Table 7.2. In this row, each cohort shows an association that is stronger than that for the entire electorate, a result that is caused by the 'direction' of the relationship to be different between the various cohorts, so that combining cohorts necessarily leads to a dampening of the relationship between background and left–right. Because of the weakness of all associations involved it makes no sense to elaborate this in more detail.
- 14. Obviously, distinguishing between cohorts leads to comparatively small *ns* upon which the associations in the various cells are based. This leads unavoidably to considerable sampling variation, which by itself would generate the pattern-less

differences between the various cohorts even if the population values of these associations were identical.

- 15. One might be most tempted to read such a pattern in the table of results for the Netherlands (see Appendix), but even then it hinges particularly on the comparison of the endpoints of our series of election studies. For the risks of such reliance on the end points, see note 11.
- 16. Again, we want to warn against overinterpretation of the differences between the strengths of these associations between cohorts and over time. Distinguishing between cohorts has its cost in terms of the *n*s, and consequently the standard errors of these coefficients are often non-negligible. Explicit testing for significance would reveal that many pairs of coefficients do not differ significantly. Such binary comparisons are little satisfactory, however, as cohort and period effects would manifest themselves in patterns of differences between columns or rows. Explicit testing for such patterns requires *portmanteau* tests, which are not well developed. We therefore rely in our presentation largely on an informal and *ad oculos* inspection of differences, while keeping in mind the *n*s of the groups involved.
- 17. One could object to this conclusion on the grounds of our rather 'meagre' possibilities to operationalize these traditional cleavages. These possibilities were indeed poor, as indicated above. But our findings are so strongly in line with those of many other analysts that we feel that our interpretative inference is justified nevertheless.
- 18. A more extensive argument along these lines can be found in van der Eijk et al. (1992).
- 19. Moreover, we must be weary of over-stylicization of the past. Certainly, all kinds of information lend plausibility to the notion that cleavages were more important in the past than in recent decades. Yet, historical research in each of these countries tells us also that these cleavages never came close to completely structuring electoral politics, let alone the wider political process.
- 20. Left–right polarization is a contextual variable that we construct in order to quantify the ideological distance of relevant parties from an ideological centre while taking into account their electoral weight. The measure of polarization that we use is different from the ones used in other chapters of this volume. Our measure is based on voters' perceptions of party locations on the left–right scale. When party positions are defined on the basis of their manifestoes, we find no systematic relationship between polarization on the one hand and the association between left–right and the vote on the other hand. This discrepancy in results points to a less-than-perfect linkage between these two operationalizations of polarization. When investigating the association between voters' behaviour and ideological orientations, however, it seems plausible that polarization as perceived by voters is more consequential than polarization as derived from information that is not directly available to most voters.

The actual measure we use is defined by the following formula:

$$IP = \Sigma |LRm - LR_{px}| * EPpx$$

Where:

LRm = the numerical centre of left-right scale;

LRpx = the position of party x on the left-right scale as perceived by the voters; and EPpx = the proportion of party x of the valid vote in the election under study.

The (spread of the) positions of the various parties on the left-right continuum and their respective sizes determine the value of the polarization coefficient. Parties' sizes are those that result from the election in question. One might object that these sizes are only known after the election; we feel that this is not very problematic in the period under observation, when widely available results from opinion polling provide reasonably accurate predictions of parties' performance in the upcoming elections. The positions of parties on the left-right scale that are used in the coefficient of polarization are based on voters' perceptions of where parties stand in this respect; the interpolated median of these perceptions is used here as the position of a party.

- 21. For the sake of brevity we do not report here the overtime development of our measure of polarization. It is graphically presented in Appendix 2 to this chapter. It is noteworthy that the evolution of this measure for the Netherlands resembles a different operationalization of the concept, as was used by Thomassen et al. (2000: 170).
- 22. These analyses can again only be of an *ad oculos* nature. Ideally, one would run a multivariate analysis with the η^2 as the dependent variable and as independents leftright polarization. In such an analysis each survey would constitute a data point. As the number of usable surveys ranges from five till nine per country, a multivariate analysis would become extremely tenuous. Pooling across countries is not an option as differences in party systems affect the overall magnitude of the η^2 . A fixed effects multivariate model cannot solve this, as this would lose the advantage of pooling, namely alleviating low df.

Deviations from a perfectly monotonous relationship are to be expected for a variety of reasons. First, sampling variation will have the effect of disturbing monotonicity; second, variations in the supply-side of electoral politics (which parties are on offer, and what are their characteristics?) will affect the relationship. Finally, other contextual factors may also influence the association between voters' left-right positions and their choice.

- 23. These findings developed in the context of studies about elections to the European Parliament, and are based on the data of the European Election Studies in 1989, 1994 and 1999, which were conducted in all member states of the EC/EU. See Oppenhuis (1995) and van der Eijk et al. (1996: 355-61) about these effects of perceptual agreement.
- 24. Knight (1985) discusses these same phenomena and finds it useful to distinguish between 'ideological sophistication' which lends itself to instrumental voting and 'ideological identification' which rather points to the expressive or affective nature of the voting decision. Our data do not enable us to distinguish between these two aspects of ideological voting.
- 25. Our analyses differ from those by Franklin (1992) not only in terms of which surveys were used, but also the handling of party choice. Franklin dichotomised party choice in left versus right choices. We used the full gamut of choice options in each of the countries, and used therefore also a different measure of association (η^2 versuo R^2).
- 26. See also Silverman (1985).
- 27. cf. Van der Brug (1996, 1998).

APPENDIX 1

Tables Concerning the Relationship between Social Structure and Left-Right

TABLE 7.A.1.1. Explained variation (η^2) in L/R self-placement with social structural characteristics (union membership, home ownership, and subjective social class) by cohort—Denmark

Election study	Born before 1925	Born 1925-44	Born 1945–60	Born 1961 and later	Entire electorate
1979	0.17 [0.09]	0.16 [0.12]	0.16 [0.08]	*	0.13 [0.08]
1981					0.15 [0.08]
1984	0.20 [0.03]	0.13 [0.10]	0.16 [0.13]	0.06 [0.03]	0.13 [0.08]
1990					0.09 [0.07]
1998	*	— [0.04]	— [0.03]	— [0.00]	- [0.02]

*Less than 30 cases. Note that coefficients in parentheses are for the restricted set of predictors union membership and home ownership. For 1981 and 1990, the data file does not contain a suitable age variable to construct cohorts.

	cohort—Netherlands						
Election study	Born before 1925	Born 1925-44	Born 1945–60	Born 1961 and later	Entire electorate		
1977	0.25	0.28	0.08	*	0.20 [0.18]		
1981	0.19	0.15	0.14	*	0.14 [0.13]		
1982	0.22	0.18	0.08	0.13	0.14 [0.13]		
1986	0.36	0.08	0.09	0.21	0.13 [0.11]		
1989	0.21	0.20	0.13	0.24	0.17 [0.15]		
1994	0.09	0.08	0.09	0.06	0.06 [0.05]		

TABLE 7.A.1.2. Explained variation (η^2) in L/R self-placement with social structural characteristics (union membership, church attendance, and subjective social class) by cohort—Netherlands

*Less than 30 cases. Coefficients in parentheses are calculated for a restricted set of predictors including union membership and union membership only.

0.06

0.06

0.10

0.07 [0.06]

186

1998

0.33

Election study	Born before 1925	Born 1925–44	Born 1945–60	Born 1961 and later	Entire electorate
1973	0.19	0.20	0.09	0.17	0.16 [0.07]
1977	0.12	0.13	0.13	*	0.11 [0.02]
1981	0.19	0.10	0.14	0.15	0.14 [0.03]
1985	0.28	0.23	0.23	0.13	0.20 [0.03]
1989	0.25	0.17	0.14	0.08	0.14 [0.02]
1993	0.19	0.11	0.07	0.07	0.08 [0.02]
1997	_	_	_	_	- [0.02]

 TABLE 7.A.1.3. Explained variation (η^2) in L/R self-placement with social structural characteristics (union membership, church attendance, and subjective social class) by cohort—Norway

*Less than 30 cases. Coefficients in parentheses are calculated for a restricted set of predictors including union membership and union membership only. In 1997, subjective social class was not asked.

TABLE 7.A.1.4. Explained variation (η^2) in L/R self-placement with social
structural characteristics (union membership, church attendance, income,
and subjective social class) by cohort—Sweden

Election study	Born before 1925	Born 1925-44	Born 1945–60	Born 1961 and later	Entire electorate
1968	0.14	0.11	0.12	*	0.11 [0.23]
1988	0.10	0.10	0.15	0.16	0.08 [0.17]
1991	0.08	0.10	0.11	0.11	0.07 [—]
1994	0.23	0.11	0.13	0.06	0.09 [0.18]
1998	0.27	0.09	0.14	0.06	0.08 [—]

*Less than 30 cases. Coefficients in parentheses are calculated for the expanded set of predictors including also subjective social class.

Tables Concerning the Relationship between Left-Right and Party Choice

	Born before	D 1005 44	D 1045 (0	Born 1961	
Election study	1925	Born 1925–44	Born 1945–60	and later	Entire electorate
1979	0.53	0.41	0.53	*	0.51
1981					0.50
1984	0.51	0.54	0.62	*	0.59
1990					0.55
1994	0.45	0.50	0.52	0.45	0.48
1998	0.47	0.47	0.50	0.39	0.45

TABLE 7.A.1.5. Explained variation (η^2) in L/R self-placement with vote choice by cohort—Denmark

*Less than 30 cases. For 1981 and 1990, the data file did not contain a suitable age variable to construct cohorts.

Election study	Born before 1925	Born 1925–44	Born 1945–60	Born 1961 and later	Entire electorate
1977	0.59	0.46	0.42	*	0.48
1981	0.51	0.43	0.44	0.42	0.45
1982	0.58	0.57	0.56	0.61	0.57
1986	0.58	0.46	0.59	0.64	0.55
1989	0.61	0.55	0.54	0.52	0.54
1994	0.34	0.26	0.43	0.46	0.38
1998	0.36	0.36	0.37	0.38	0.37

TABLE 7.A.1.6. Explained variation (η^2) in L/R self-placement with vote choice by cohort—Netherlands

*Less than 30 cases.

TABLE 7.A.1.7. Explained variation (η^2) in L/R self-placement with vote choice by cohort—Norway

Election study	Born before 1925	Born 1925–44	Born 1945–60	Born 1961 and later	Entire electorate
1973	0.27	0.41	0.44	*	0.31
1977	0.31	0.35	0.52	*	0.37
1981	0.27	0.31	0.46	0.58	0.34
1985	0.60	0.59	0.66	0.64	0.62
1989	0.57	0.52	0.62	0.59	0.58
1993	0.36	0.41	0.44	0.48	0.42
1997	0.36	0.43	0.46	0.48	0.44

*Less than 30 cases.

 TABLE 7.A.1.8. Explained variation (η^2) in L/R self-placement with vote choice by cohort—Sweden

Election study	Born before 1925	Born 1925–44	Born 1945–60	Born 1961 and later	Entire electorate
1968	0.50	0.46	0.44	*	0.47
1973	0.44	0.40	0.40	*	0.42
1976	0.44	0.39	0.51	*	0.44
1979	0.55	0.54	0.63	*	0.56
1982	0.59	0.60	0.59	0.64	0.59
1985	0.61	0.55	0.54	0.56	0.55
1988	0.53	0.53	0.56	0.56	0.53
1991	0.48	0.48	0.54	0.51	0.50
1994	0.60	0.48	0.54	0.53	0.52
1998	0.52	0.53	0.57	0.57	0.55

*Less than 30 cases.



APPENDIX 2

The Development of Left-Right Polarization as Perceived by the Voters

FIG. 7.A.2.1. Left-right polarization in Germany: 1976-98



FIG. 7.A.2.2. Left-right polarization in the Netherlands: 1971-98





FIG. 7.A.2.4. Left-right polarization in Sweden: 1968-98

Author Query

[AQ1] Klingemann in the ref. list. Pl. provide correct spelling