

# Chapter 9

## From Consensus to Competition? Ideological Alternatives on the EU Dimension

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### **Abstract**

According to the literature on EP elections, parties do not offer real choices on European integration to voters. Indeed, in most EU countries there has been broad consensus between the main parties about integration. Importantly, previous research shows that this elite convergence is not replicated among voters. Using EES data from the 1999 and 2004 Euroelections, this paper analyses the ideological dispersal of parties on the EU dimension within the EU member states. This analysis is done in two stages. First we describe longitudinally the development of inter-party competition on the EU dimension between the two elections. Moving to empirical analysis, we then examine the impact of various factors, divided into public opinion, national party system and EU hypotheses, for the breadth of party positions on integration.

## **Introduction**

According to standard wisdom national parties want to stifle debate or contention over European integration. As the overwhelming majority of political parties throughout the European Union (EU) were established on the basis of domestic cleavages, the EU dimension – often referred to as the independence/integration dimension – tends to produce difficulties for them. Hence, parties have a strategic incentive to downplay European issues and to structure competition along the more familiar and thus safer domestic cleavages, primarily along the left-right dimension (Hix 1999; Marks & Steenbergen eds. 2002, 2004).

Indeed, research on elections to the European Parliament (EP) has confirmed that most national parties campaign on the basis of ‘national’ issues, with issues related to European integration very much in the background (e.g., van der Eijk & Franklin eds. 1996). Euroelections are therefore scarcely ‘European’, since national politics are reproduced in EP election campaigns, with largely the same set of actors and also the same set of issues. Arguably this situation is gradually changing. The rapid increase in the powers of the EU has resulted in higher levels of Euroscepticism, defined as opposition to further integration. While Eurosceptical parties and representatives remain very much in the minority in the Parliament, 2004 saw such parties or lists performing well in several member states, notably in Denmark, Great Britain, Poland and Sweden (Lodge ed. 2005). The good performance of these Eurosceptical forces did not come as a surprise. Notwithstanding the second-order logic of EP elections, with smaller and opposition parties gaining votes at the expense of mainstream and government parties, public opinion surveys such as Eurobarometers had indicated that people were becoming less supportive of the European project.

These developments would indicate that the days of the famous ‘permissive consensus’ are increasingly behind us. This is good news for representative

democracy. After all, in the 'responsible party model' parties should offer competing policy alternatives to the voters, with voters also being aware of these differences and choosing their party accordingly (Thomassen 1994). The more contestation there is over Europe, and the more salient integration is both for voters and for parties, the higher will be the likelihood of this basic premise of party democracy being fulfilled.

This paper analyses the range of alternatives national parties offer to the European electorate in EP elections. Using European Elections Study (EES) data from the 1999 and 2004 Euroelections, we first examine the ideological range of parties on the EU dimension in the EU member states. The next section introduces our research problem, and presents the hypotheses that guide the empirical analysis found in the following section. First we describe longitudinally the development of inter-party competition on the EU dimension between the two elections. Moving to the empirical analysis, we then examine the impact of various factors – divided into public opinion, national party system, and EU hypotheses – at the level of alternatives rather than integration. The concluding section summarizes the main findings.

## **Ideological alternatives and their sources**

Parties can present alternatives about two aspects of politics: policy and performance. The former means that parties present different policy programmes to the voters, while the latter refers to the ability of parties to achieve certain goals. We can state with certainty that the latter function is of lesser importance. After all, people and parties do disagree about societal matters (such as how far European integration should go), and hence the alternatives parties offer to the citizens refer mainly to policies.

Our dependent variable is thus the level of ideological alternatives parties offer on the EU dimension. We use three operationalizations of the dependent variable. The first is range. We define range on a policy

dimension as being the distance between the two parties that occupy the extreme positions at both ends of that dimension. The higher the range, the more alternatives citizens have. In their analysis of the left-right dimension in the Nordic party systems, Gilljam and Oscarsson (1996: 26) refer to range as 'wing party distance', meaning the difference between the most left-wing and the most right-wing party on that dimension. In order to avoid a situation where a truly minuscule party would impact on our findings, we include only parties that won at least 3 % of the votes in the respective EP elections or in the preceding national parliamentary elections in our analysis.

However, range or wing party distance is not a concept without its problems. After all, the parties holding extreme positions could well be parties that most citizens would never consider voting for, such as extreme right or left parties, and hence one could argue that one should focus instead on the differences between the ideologically moderate 'mainstream' parties. Hence we also use another measurement of alternatives offered to voters: following Mair and Castles (1997: 154) we measure the difference between the two largest parties on that same policy dimension<sup>1</sup>. As this study focusses on the EU dimension, this clarification is arguably very important. Previous literature has shown that Euroscepticism is mainly the preserve of ideologically extremist or populist parties, i.e. more or less the same group of parties that are excluded from government in their member states (Taggart 1998, Hooghe et al. 2002). As most Europeans are not prepared to vote for such parties, it is also necessary to analyse the differences between the main political parties in each member state.

In addition, we employ a third operationalization that captures the nature of party competition over integration and the existence of choices on offer more effectively. This measurement is variance of party positions on the EU dimension, which we compute without taking into account the weight of parties. We feel that this non-weighted variance is more useful for our analysis, as we are primarily interested in the range of alternatives available

to the electorate and as our second operationalization already measures the differences between the two main parties in each country (see van der Eijk & Franklin 2004: 41).

But what produces ideological differences between political parties? And more specifically, when and why do parties adopt different positions on European integration? In this paper we put forward three rival explanations. According to the first perspective, ideological range on the EU dimension is a function of *public opinion*. The idea is simple: parties' positions on European integration should reflect those of their voters. However, we know from previous research that while parties are fairly representative of their voters on the left/right dimension, the picture is much bleaker in European matters. This strand of research has produced two main findings: regardless of the data used (voter perceptions of party locations or a combination of elite and survey data), there is a gap between the political parties and the voters, with the former more supportive of integration.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, the diversity of opinion found among the electorate is not replicated at the elite level, with the Eurosceptical section of the citizens particularly poorly represented by national parties. (See van der Eijk & Franklin 1991; Thomassen & Schmitt 1997, 1999; Schmitt & Thomassen 2000.)

Two analyses that focus on the same elections that we examine in this paper are particularly interesting in this respect. Using data from the 1999 EES, van der Eijk and Franklin (2004) showed that the diversity of opinion among the electorate was not reflected at party level. There was thus, according to those authors, 'potential for contestation' on EU matters, with the EU issue being a 'sleeping giant' in European politics. The study also showed the parties to be far more supportive of integration than were the voters. Analysing issue agreement in the 2004 EP elections, Mattila and Raunio (2006) concluded that parties were closer to their voters on the left/right dimension than on the EU dimension and that they were more supportive of European integration than their voters. That study also confirmed that political parties, at least in

those member states that joined the Union before 2004, failed to offer enough competing alternatives over European integration to voters.

Research thus shows that there is a gap between the elite and the citizens, with political parties more supportive of integration than are voters. However, there is still good reason to believe that public opinion does impact on parties' locations on the EU dimension. Hence we first argue that the set of alternatives correlates with public support for the EU — the higher the level of support in the country, the smaller the range. When a large majority of voters supports integration there is less need for the parties to compete on EU matters. Using the standard Eurobarometer / EES question (“Generally speaking, do you think that (your country’s) membership of the European Union is a good thing, a bad thing or neither good nor bad?”), we measure support for the EU as being the share of citizens that holds positive views of their country’s EU membership (H1).

Support for EU membership (or the lack of it) may or may not be shared to the same extent by electorates. Hence, it is possible that it is the divisiveness of the membership issue that affects party competition. According to our second hypothesis, the more polarized public opinion is on Union membership, the greater will be the range on the EU dimension (H2). Polarization is measured as being the standard deviation of the responses to the aforementioned membership question, with higher standard deviation indicating more variability in citizens’ opinions.<sup>3</sup>

Our second set of hypotheses focuses on the properties of *national party systems*. The argument here is that the dispersion of party locations on the EU dimension is attributable to domestic party-political factors that have nothing or very little to do with European integration. We first put forward two hypotheses about the shape of the party system. According to H3 the more fragmented the party system, the greater the range of alternatives. Party system fragmentation is measured with the Laakso-Taagepera (1979) index

of effective parties, calculated from seat distribution in national parliaments at the time of the 1999 and 2004 EP elections. The rationale behind this hypothesis is simply that an increase in the number of parties should result in more ideological alternatives.

Next we hypothesize that the dispersion of parties on the left-right dimension is reflected or reproduced on the EU dimension — that is, the higher the level of choices on the left-right dimension, the greater the dispersion of parties on the EU dimension (H4). The location of parties on the left-right dimension is derived from the EES question, where the respondents were asked to place themselves and the parties on that dimension.<sup>4</sup> Our final national party system variable focuses on government composition, with the expectation being that the higher the number of government parties (at the time of the 1999 and 2004 Euroelections), the smaller will be the breadth of alternatives (H5). The logic here is that participation in government, particularly the bargaining involved in multiparty coalitions, results in ideological moderation. Additionally, government parties represent their country at the EU level in the Council and the European Council, and this may also facilitate consensus among government parties in EU matters (Mattila & Raunio 2006).

Finally, our last set of hypotheses examines whether specific *EU* factors impact on the choices parties offer over Europe. We expect to find that the timing of membership will matter (measured as the number of years elapsed since a country joined the Union), with the level of alternatives being greater in newer member countries (H6). The argument here is that in the older member countries, particularly in the six founding member states that had already joined the integration process in the 1950s, EU membership is a fact of life that is no longer contested among the political parties. In contrast, in the countries that joined the EU more recently, European integration is a new issue that produces more divisions within and between the parties. Furthermore, the membership referenda that took place in those countries

that joined the EU in 2004 (excluding Cyprus) prior to the June 2004 EP elections had forced parties to express their positions on European integration, or at least on membership, with citizens thus exposed to information about parties' European policies.

Our seventh and final hypothesis explores whether economic benefits derived from EU membership impact partisan contestation over integration. More specifically, we expect the level of alternatives to be greater in countries that are net contributors to the EU budget (H7). The example of Ireland illustrates the logic behind our hypothesis. While the Irish may not support deeper integration, there is broad consensus in Ireland – as shown by Eurobarometer studies – that EU membership has benefited the country, not least in economic terms. Hence there has traditionally been broad agreement among the Irish parties about European integration. However, if the (economic) benefits derived from membership are less visible, and if the country is a net contributor to the EU's budget, then presumably there is more contestation about integration. The three Nordic EU countries are good examples of the latter category of member states. We measure the countries' fiscal position as a net contributor or a net beneficiary to the EU budget using figures released by the European Commission (2005). These figures measure the net budget balance of each member state as a share of GDP. Negative values indicate that a member state contributes to the EU budget more than it receives EU funds and positive values indicate that a country is a net beneficiary from the budget.

The research hypotheses introduced in this section will be analysed in the empirical section. But first we present our data and compare the set of alternatives on the EU dimension in the 1999 and the 2004 elections.

## **Data and empirical analysis**

Our data are taken from the European Election Study project, which consisted (for the most part) of identical surveys carried out in the EU countries just after the EP elections held in June 1999 and 2004. The enlargement that took place in 2004 obviously means that the data sets for the two elections are not identical. Unfortunately not all countries could be included in the 2004 data set. Malta was left out of the survey altogether and in three countries — Belgium, Lithuania and Sweden — the questionnaire did not include the EU scale question necessary for our analysis. This means that we have 37 observations altogether, 16 from 1999 and 21 from 2004 EP<sup>5</sup>.

This paper's main interest is the location of parties on the EU dimension. This was operationalized in the EES questionnaire as a 1-10 scale measuring respondents' attitudes towards European unification. The exact wording of the question was: 'Some say European unification should be pushed further. Others say it already has gone too far. What is your opinion? Please indicate your views using a 10-point-scale. On this scale, 1 means unification "has already gone too far" and 10 means it "should be pushed further". What number on this scale best describes your position?' This question was followed by several questions where the respondents were asked to indicate, using the same scale, where the main parties of their respective countries were located. We measure party positions simply as a mean perception of the party location on both the EU and the left/right dimensions calculated from all respondents in a given member state.

It is of course possible that voter perceptions of party locations may not be accurate reflections of reality, with the majority of European citizens probably having quite limited information or knowledge of party policies, or at least those concerning European integration. However, it is important to

emphasize that, while voters may not be able to place parties accurately on political dimensions, they are likely to base their vote choices on their perceptions of party and/or candidate positions. Furthermore, a comparison of different measures of party positions (party manifesto data, expert evaluations and voter perceptions from the EES data) on the EU dimension showed that all measures correlate considerably with each other and, thus, measure the same thing (Marks et al. 2006).

Table 1 compares the dispersion of party locations on the EU dimension in the 1999 and 2004 EP elections, using the three operationalizations of the dependent variable introduced in the previous section. These were distance between the most pro-EU and anti-integrationist parties (range), variance of party positions and distance between the two largest parties (main parties). No clear pattern emerges from the comparison. Examining the distance between the extremist parties in those countries that joined the EU before 2004, we find that the range increased in six member states and decreased in seven. In 2004 there was no essential difference between the old and the new. This was not the case when looking at the positions of the two largest parties: these parties were further apart on the EU dimension in the new member countries. When examining the change between 1999 and 2004, we again notice the lack of a clear trend, since we found that the distance became greater in eight countries and smaller in five countries. The variance measure shows no real difference in 2004 between the old and new member countries. And, in terms of longitudinal comparison, the results are in line with our two other measurements for the level of alternatives: the variance increases in eight countries and decreases in five countries.

Turning our attention to individual member states, we notice that there were quite large differences between them. The range between extreme parties and the variance of party positions were largest in Denmark, Sweden and Greece and smallest in Finland (1999), Spain (2004), Slovenia and Belgium (1999, both Flanders and Wallonia). The wide availability of choices in Denmark

and Sweden is explained by the anti-EU parties and lists which have gained substantial support in the EP elections. The widest distances between the two main parties were found in Cyprus, Sweden and Slovakia while the distances were smallest in the Netherlands, Wallonia and Slovenia.

Our seven hypotheses are tested in Table 2. Given the small number of observations we do not perform multivariate regression analysis with our data but use simple bivariate regression analyses instead. We test the explanatory strength of the independent variables first with the whole data set and then for the 1999 and 2004 EP elections separately. We repeat this procedure for each of our three dependent variables (range between extreme parties, variance among party positions and distance between two main parties). The entries in the table are unstandardised bivariate regression coefficients.

The results in Table 2 are quite modest: most of our independent variables fail to explain the degree of party competition on the EU dimension in a statistically significant way, even if we use the liberal  $p < 0.10$  as a cut-off point for statistical significance. However, some conclusions can be made from the results. The number of government parties seems to be related to decreased party competition when we use range or variance as the dependent variable. This indicates that the 'quality' of party supply on the EU dimension is worse in countries with large multiparty coalition governments. Parties included in governments often have to revise their EU positions when entering negotiations with their coalition partners, with governments of other member states and with EU institutions. Moreover, parties that have reserved positions towards the EU may feel the need to revise their positions if they desire to be respectable candidates in post-election government formation negotiations.

**Table 1. Range, variance and the distance between the two biggest parties on the EU-dimension in 1999 and 2004.**

Country	Range			Variance			Two main parties		
	1999	2004	Change	1999	2004	Change	1999	2004	Change
Austria	2,35	3,01	0,66	0,89	1,85	0,97	0,24	0,63	0,39
Britain	2,44	2,07	-0,37	0,88	0,90	0,01	1,47	0,99	-0,48
Denmark	5,39	4,17	-1,22	4,66	3,98	-0,68	0,91	0,25	-0,66
Finland	0,80	3,00	2,20	0,10	0,97	0,87	0,18	1,08	0,90
France	2,11	2,08	-0,03	0,52	1,55	1,02	0,31	0,20	-0,11
Germany	3,03	1,99	-1,04	1,43	0,54	-0,88	0,23	0,53	0,30
Greece	3,64	4,54	0,90	2,33	3,81	1,48	0,22	0,50	0,28
Ireland	2,71	2,01	-0,70	0,88	0,53	-0,35	0,37	0,24	-0,13
Italy	1,92	2,91	0,99	0,48	0,75	0,27	0,28	0,83	0,55
Luxembourg	2,44	2,53	0,09	1,05	1,12	0,08	0,24	0,83	0,59
Netherlands	1,87	2,40	0,53	0,53	0,63	0,10	0,08	0,58	0,50
Portugal	3,06	2,56	-0,50	2,29	1,77	-0,53	0,27	0,19	-0,08
Spain	2,28	1,07	-1,21	1,04	0,24	-0,80	0,39	1,01	0,62
Belgium / Flanders	1,26	-	-	0,19	-	-	0,32	-	-
Belgium / Wallonia	1,09	-	-	0,21	-	-	0,09	-	-
Sweden	4,96	-	-	3,13	-	-	2,14	-	-
Cyprus	-	2,63	-	-	1,27	-	-	2,63	-
Czech	-	2,44	-	-	1,32	-	-	0,95	-
Estonia	-	2,03	-	-	0,52	-	-	1,64	-
Hungary	-	3,24	-	-	1,79	-	-	0,28	-
Latvia	-	1,67	-	-	0,35	-	-	1,62	-
Poland	-	4,13	-	-	2,37	-	-	0,18	-
Slovakia	-	3,68	-	-	1,98	-	-	1,83	-
Slovenia	-	1,08	-	-	0,24	-	-	0,15	-
All countries	2,58	2,63		1,29	1,36		0,48	0,82	
EU15	2,58	2,64	0,02	1,29	1,43	0,12	0,48	0,60	0,21
New member states		2,61			1,23			1,16	

The length of EU membership is clearly not connected to the level of choices offered by the parties. Some of the member states have been EU members for almost fifty years while the ten new member states entered their first EP elections right after their accession in 2004. One might assume that fifty years of EU membership would affect party competition on integration matters but this seems not to be the case. However, there is a statistically significant relationship between the length of EU membership and the distance between the two main parties: the longer a country has been an EU member, the less there is contestation between the main parties on the EU dimension.

**Table 2. Bivariate regressions between range, variance and the distance between two biggest parties and the hypothesized factors affecting them (the entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, \*p<0.10, \*\*p<0.05).**

	All cases (N=37)	EP elections 1999 (N=16)	EP elections 2004 (N=21)
<b>Range</b>			
EU support (H1)	-0.01	-0.02	-0.01
EU polarization (H2)	0.60	0.69	1.18
Number of parties (H3)	-0.05	-0.16	0.00
Left/right range (H4)	0.15	0.19	0.12
Nr. of government parties (H5)	-0.22*	-0.30	-0.01
Length of membership (H6)	-0.01	-0.02	-0.00
Fiscal balance (H7)	0.14	0.21	0.04
<b>Variance</b>			
EU support (H1)	-0.01	-0.02	0.00
EU polarization (H2)	0.70	1.15	0.68
Number of parties (H3)	-0.07	-0.03	-0.09
Left/right variance (H4)	0.12	0.14	0.11
Nr. of government parties (H5)	-0.30**	-0.29	-0.33
Length of membership (H6)	-0.01	-0.03	-0.00
Fiscal balance (H7)	0.21	0.24	0.16
<b>Two main parties</b>			
EU support (H1)	-0.02**	-0.03**	-0.01
EU polarization (H2)	1.54**	1.77*	1.03
Number of parties (H3)	0.14	-0.01	0.23*
Left/right distance between main parties (H4)	0.18	0.14	0.17
Nr. of government parties (H5)	-0.02	-0.10	0.23
Length of membership (H6)	-0.01**	-0.01	-0.01
Fiscal balance (H7)	-0.01	-0.09	0.07

We should also ask why the ‘quality’ of party competition on the left/right dimension is not reflected on the EU dimension. The range and variance of party positions on these two dimensions appear to be quite uncorrelated. The extent of public support for EU membership and the polarization of this issue are not related to the range or the variance of party positions. However, they

do seem to be related to the competition between the two main contestants in the party system. When citizens are divided on the EU membership question, the two main parties are further apart from each other than they are when a large majority of citizens agree on the 'goodness' or 'badness' of their country's EU membership. A large consensus on the benefits of EU membership has an opposite. When support for membership is high, there is less need for the main parties to compete on the EU dimension. Finally, we notice that the number of parties in the party system and the fiscal benefits of the EU budget have little impact on the variability of parties' EU positions.

## **Conclusions**

The results of our empirical analysis are quite interesting and even surprising. The strongest link was found to exist between government size and ideological alternatives, with large coalition governments hindering party competition on the EU dimension. Public opinion did have an effect on party positions, with the level of support for membership and polarization on this question impacting on competition between two main parties. The higher the polarization of support for membership, the greater is the difference between the two main competitors. The level of support for membership operates in the opposite direction: when EU membership is very popular there is less need for the two main parties to compete with each other on the EU dimension. However, overall our hypothesized factors explained only a small portion of between-country differences.

Perhaps more interesting are the findings of the longitudinal comparison between the 1999 and 2004 elections. The results show no clear trend, with the parties offering more alternatives to the citizens on EU issues in some member states and less in others. This is quite surprising, as one might have expected the breadth of positions to have increased. After all, European integration became arguably more 'politicized' than before during this five-year period. The Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) held in 2000 produced

the Treaty of Nice, which only entered into force in 2003 after the Irish had first voted against it in a referendum. Then the Convention and the following IGC resulted in the Draft Constitution for Europe, the fate of which remains unknown. Moreover, the enlargement which took place in 2004 brought to the fore questions about the EU's budget and borders, including that of Turkey's membership. That these 'EU level' major constitutional events did not result in more divergence among national parties is quite worrying from the point of view of representative democracy and responsible models of party government. When these findings are analysed together with public opinion research on European integration, we note that parties still fail to offer the citizens alternatives on the EU dimension.

## **Afterword**

We received highly useful comments on our paper in the Lisbon meeting. Below are our reflections on the comments, together with our own ideas on how to revise the paper for future publication.

Most of the comments focused on our hypotheses. Gábor Tóka suggested that we should spell out the logic behind the hypotheses better. He recommended merging hypotheses 1 (the higher the level of support for EU membership in the country, the smaller the range on the EU dimension) and 2 (the more polarized public opinion is on Union membership, the greater the range on the EU dimension), and clarifying the relationship between H3 (the more fragmented the party system, the greater the range of alternatives on the EU dimension) and H5 (the higher the number of government parties, the smaller the breadth of alternatives). He also suggested that we should turn our expectation that range on the EU dimension would increase from 1999 to 2004 into a hypothesis. Finally, he asked why – according to the responsible model of party government – it is a disaster if parties converge ideologically.

Hermann Schmitt recommended that we should have a measure for the saliency of the EU, with the idea being that higher salience would produce more ideological alternatives around integration. Mark Franklin was critical of our operationalization of the economic benefits hypothesis, and suggested that we should look for better indicators than whether countries are net contributors to the EU budget (H7).

Gábor Tóka also commented on the methodological side of our paper. In particular, he pointed out that, in addition to our measures of subjective views of party positions, we could use expert survey data to cross-validate our party position measures. Furthermore, he recommended that we could use factor analysis or structural equation models to reduce the ‘noise’ in our dependent variable.

We feel that these points, and particularly those raised by Gábor Tóka and Hermann Schmitt, must be taken into account when revising the piece. We need to rethink some of the logic behind the hypotheses and to explain in more detail the expected direction of causality. We also agree that we should turn the longitudinal comparison between the 1999 and 2004 EP elections into a proper hypothesis. The point about salience is something we thought about when writing the paper, but we could not come up with a good measurement of salience. This is clearly something we need to address in the future.

In general, the paper is somewhat short. It clearly needs a better theory section, where we should elaborate in more detail on what factors could produce more ideological divergence between political parties. In this theory section we also need to reflect upon why it is important that parties offer rival choices on European integration to the electorate.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mair and Castles (1997: 154) refer to this measure as 'degree of core divergence'.

<sup>2</sup> However, some of these studies paint a more positive picture. Comparing voters' perceptions of where parties stand with voters' own preferences from a survey carried out right after the 1989 EP elections, van der Eijk and Franklin (1991: 124) showed that most parties were representative of their voters in integration matters, with 'only a few parties' taking positions that were clearly out of line with the position of their voters. And, based on elite and citizen survey data from 1979 and 1994, Schmitt and Thomassen (2000) showed that while the policy preferences of the voters and the parties did diverge, issue agreement between voters and party elites about the general development of integration ('are you for or against efforts being made to unify Europe?') was as high as on the left-right dimension. Thus they argued that while policy representation may be failing in specific EU policy issues, it did seem to work fairly well as far as the overall development of integration is concerned.

<sup>3</sup> Measuring opinion consensus or the lack of it is not a simple matter and opinions of what constitutes an appropriate measure diverge. For example, in their review of different measures for consensus Conway & Schaller (1998) came to the conclusion that standard deviation is a measure that is intuitively easy to understand and simple to calculate and, hence, a good measure of consensus. On the other hand, according to van der Eijk (2001) standard deviation can be a misleading indicator of the degree of agreement.

<sup>4</sup> 'In political matters people talk of "the left" and "the right". What is your position? Please indicate your views using any number on a 10-point scale. On this scale, where 1 means "left" and 10 means "right", which number best describes your position?'. This question was followed by a set of questions in which respondents were asked to indicate the positions of the main parties in their country on the left/right scale according to their perception.

<sup>5</sup> We treat the Belgian case as consisting of two different political systems with their own party systems (Flanders and Wallonia). Thus, we have 16 cases from the 1999 EP elections. Although Flanders and Wallonia are not EU member states, for the sake of simplicity, we will refer to our 37 cases as "member states" or as "member countries" in the text.

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