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A. Abstract

This study is concerned with the effects of party system polarization on citizens' voting behavior. Following a top-down perspective, polarization is understood here as a feature of the style of the political competition. In this framework, the main focus of my research is on its implications on the democratic connection, i.e. the link between the societal demands on the one hand, and the legislative and governmental action on the other. This work is structured as a collection of studies that tackle three different but interrelated effects. The first study is interested in the mechanical effects of a polarized political supply has on voters' propensity to support more than one party over time. The second study follows the same rationale, but is rather interested in whether polarization prevents voters to withdraw their support from the party they voted for in the past, even if they evaluate negatively its past performance. Finally, the third study is focused on what effects polarization have on voters' evaluation criteria, i.e. if it decreases or increases the extent to which voters consider ideology, competence and partisan attachment as they evaluate political objects. Findings show that polarization reduces electoral competitiveness by making voters less willing to change their party support over time, even when they evaluate negatively the party they voted for previously. Moreover, higher party polarization is positively related to citizens' propensity to have a partisan attachment, and the way in which partisanship frames their evaluation of party ideology and competence.
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C. Executive Summary

Introduction
The main objective of the ELECDEM Work Package 6 – *European Electoral Democracy Under Stress* is to identify threats in contemporary Europe to the electoral connection, i.e. the link between the citizens' demands on the one hand, and the policy-making and the governmental action on the other. The main assumption on which this study is based is that the way in which political systems reflect the societal conflict that comes as a consequence of external or internal threats (e.g. immigration, economic crisis) is through an increased ideological polarization between the parties. Given this assumption, the main scope of my research is to define what effects party polarization has on the voters, i.e. to what extent voters are open to party competition, and to what extent the way in which they evaluate parties is influenced. Thus, this report is organized as a collection of papers, each of them tackling a particular consequence of party system polarization on the voters. In this section I will provide a quick overview of the rationale, the contribution and the findings of each of the three studies conducted in the framework of the Work Package 6. All the studies share the same view, that is, polarization can have negative consequences for party competition (studies 1 and 2) and for our interpretation of the way in which voters evaluate parties. The findings described here are based on high-quality cross-context data sets, and are obtained through the use of sophisticated statistical techniques, such as multilevel modeling.

Study 1 – More polarized, less competitive. The effect of party system polarization on the certainty and the strength of the electorate's preferences

Rationale
Does party polarization influence electoral competitiveness? If it does, in which way? Previous research has been pointing out that party polarization has a strong saliency effect, i.e. the more the parties in a given political system are polarized over a certain policy domain, the more such a policy will be relevant for the voters as they evaluate the available options to make a party choice. This effect has been considered positive for a system's electoral competitiveness, for it motivates citizens to
evaluate parties more in terms of substantive policy content, and less in terms of partisan identities. However, this claim is mainly based on the assumption that the only effect that polarization has on voters' perception of the political space is through issue salience. What I argue here is that, as polarization implies bigger distance between the party issue or ideological positions, it may also decrease the extent to which different parties compete for the same voters. The general hypothesis that I test on this paper is that as polarization increases, the main focus of the competition is between left and right parties, thus on the center of the ideological space. As a consequence, the degree of certainty of the preferences of left and right voters should increase, making them less likely to change their party support over time. Moreover, given the lack of relevant options in the center, preferences of moderate voters in polarized systems should be weaker, decreasing the propensity to turn out for this portion of the electorate.

Contributions

• Establish a link between party system polarization and electoral competitiveness.
• Provide a theoretical framework for understanding individual choice mechanisms that defines party preferences as the construct to be studied.
• Provide a definition of two new concepts, i.e. preference strength and preference certainty, and link them to patterns of voting behavior.
• Provide a validation of these two constructs as antecedents of different types of voting behavior using panel data.
• Test the effect of polarization on voters' certainty and strength of party preferences in a cross-country context.

Findings

• Preference certainty is made of a stable and a varying component, and both of them influence the probability to change voting behavior between to election, switching to another party or to abstention.
• Increasing levels of ideological polarization correspond to higher preference certainty for more extreme voters.
• Preference strength is also bound to vary over time, and it influences the individual propensity
to turn out.

- In more polarized party systems, moderate citizens, i.e. those positioned around the ideological center, are characterized by weaker preferences.

**Study 2: When it's hard to change. Party system polarization as a constraint for the voters' choice**

**Rationale**

This study still pick up on the intuition that party polarization decreases the extent to which voters are willing to change their party support over time, but this time the aim is to test whether this effect holds for voters who evaluate the performance of the government in a negative way. In other words, the idea here is to see whether a person who evaluates negatively the party she voted for in the past would still keep on voting for it just because the alternatives are too much (ideologically) different from what she wants. Rather than testing for the systemic effect, i.e. the effect of the overall party system polarization, this study is interested in the party effect. Thus, individuals are nested in groups of party supporters according to which party they voted for at the previous election. The empirical test for this study is conducted in the Netherlands, but the findings are meant to be generalizable to other political systems.

**Contributions**

- Introduce a party-level measure of polarization, called *Party Polarity*, largely based on econometric literature.
- Test whether party polarity moderates the effect of performance evaluation on the probability to change party support over time.
- Provide a validation of the *Vote Recall* variable using panel data from the same elections.

**Findings**

- High party polarity decreases a voter's probability to change her support from an incumbent party to an opposition party, even if she evaluates negatively the policy performance of the government.
• Methodological note: Vote recalls are indeed valid substitutes of panel data.

**Study 3: Proximity, Valence, or just Partisanship? On the effects of ideological polarization on voters' evaluation of parties**

**Rationale**

The aim of this study is to assess the effect of party polarization on the way in which voters evaluate parties. This question is relevant as it deals with two different aspects of political representation: to what extent citizens vote for the party that better represents them ideologically, and to what extent they vote for the party that to which they attribute the greatest competence. Past research interested in ideological voting and competence voting has been conceptualizing these two types of determinant withing two different theoretical models of political behavior: the spatial model for ideological voting, the valence model for competence voting. This led to the expectation that these two types of evaluations should exclude each other, i.e. the more people emphasize ideology in their voting calculus, the less they emphasize competence, and the other way round. However, empirical results did not confirm these expectations. Rather, they found that ideological voting and competence voting are both positively correlated to party polarization. In this study I propose an explanation for these puzzling results that takes into account the strong relation between party polarization and partisanship. Building on past research, I argue that polarization is positively associated with the probability that citizens have a partisan attachment, and with the extent to which their partisanship is associated with ideological proximity and competence assessments.

**Contributions**

- Bring partisanship back in the theoretical explanations of the effects of polarization on the determinants of party choice.
- Describe a theoretical mechanism through which partisanship should be a more heavily used cue in more polarized systems.
- Offer a theoretical solution for the (apparent) riddle of party polarization and valence voting.
Findings

- Higher ideological polarization is positively associated with the probability that the party a person feels attached to is also the ideologically closest.
- Higher ideological polarization is positively associated with the probability that a person attributes highest competence to the party she feels attached to.
- The more ideological polarization increases, the more the probability that competence perception is consistent with ideological proximity increases for partisanship, but not for those voters who do not feel any partisan attachment.
D. Full Report
D.1 Objectives and Aims of the Work Package

D.1.1 Objectives

- Identify and examine threats in contemporary Europe to the “electoral connection” (link between societal interests and demands on the one hand, and governmental action on the other).
- Examine the impact of diversities in the institutional make-up, socio-political development and recent history, on electoral democracy in Europe.
- Generate database of European Voter Surveys with which to examine.

D.1.2 Conceptual linkages: What is ideological polarization, and why it is a symptom of democratic stress

On the morning of June 7th, 2012, the Greek private TV station ANTENA was live broadcasting a talk show hosting a group of people discussing around a table, including two women and a man. During the show, in a scene doomed to get widely-reported by media from all Europe, the man stands up and throws a glass of water over the woman sitting across him. Then, as the second woman sitting next to him gets out of her chair yelling and trying to hit him with a newspaper, the man slaps her three times in the face. With desperate cries, the show host tries to stop him, and the inevitable commercial break comes.

Although this type of interaction may be not uncommon in morning TV shows, that particular episode became famous because the three people involved in the altercation were all members of the newly-elected Greek National Parliament. The woman who got thrown the water is Rena Dourou, from the leftist coalition SYRIZA. The other woman, who got slapped by the man, is Liana Kanelli, member of the Greek Communist party KKE. Finally, the bellicose man is Ilias Kasidiaris, spokesman of Golden Dawn, a radical right-wing party whose symbol and dialectics resemble the style of the Twentieth-century's fascist and Nazi parties (Jones 2012). The fight came in the middle of a discussion about Greece's military regime, which lasted from 1967 to 1974. Things escalated quickly as Kanelli and Kasidiaris started calling each other, respectively, “fascist” and “old commie”. However, it was Dourou's accusation of “bringing the country back 500 years” that triggered Kasidiaris' reaction, leading to the consequent attack¹.

¹ A video of the scene can be easily found on the internet, e.g. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3Qj8BzsxwU (26/09/2012)
There are two elements in this episode that can be considered symptomatic of a high degree of ideological polarization in the Greek political system. The first is the intensity of the ideological conflict between the parts involved. Golden Dawn on the one side, and SYRIZA and the Communist party on the other side, stand at the opposite extremes of the Greek ideological spectrum, which in 2012 is wider than in many other European countries, such as Germany, the Netherlands or France. The distance separating those parties indicates that their policy preferences, values, ideas and historical identities are incompatible, and the mediation between them very unlikely. The second element is that in polarized political systems, the extreme positions are actually relevant. At the national election held one month before the incident on ANTENA TV happened, Golden Dawn obtained about the 7% of the vote share, the Communist party the 8.5%, and SYRIZA the 16.8%, becoming the second most important party of the Greek political system\(^2\). In other words, almost one third of the Greek voters chose one of these three extreme parties. While the mere presence of extreme parties is fairly common among European multiparty systems, it is when the extreme parties are relevant, i.e. when they play a significant role in the legislative process and are likely to access the executive, that we talk about polarization. The incompatibility of such parties' positions matched with their great popular support, which in Greece translated into a third of parliamentary seats shared among them, made it impossible for the leaders of each of the three biggest parties (including SYRIZA) to find an agreement for a majority government, and led to a second election in mid June, a little more than a month after the first.

The 2012 Greek elections came in a period of big social stress for the country. The incumbent Prime Minister, George Papandreou, leader of the socialist party PASOK, had stepped down in late 2011, after agreeing with the leader of the opposition and the president about the formation of a national unity government that would aim to steer the country clear from the imminent danger of bankruptcy. Conflicts within the PASOK and against the opposition parties mainly came as a consequence of a series of austerity packages adopted by the Greek government in return for loans from other members of the eurozone, oriented to avoid the country's bankruptcy. The two Greek elections of 2012 were held in a context of deep and continued social unrest, with the population being asked to choose whether to accept even harsher austerity measures or being ready to drop out of the eurozone.

To be sure, the Greek case is just an example of how economic and social difficulties can be related to political polarization. Extensive research in the US has pointed out how close is the connection between economic inequalities and ideological distance between the Republican and Democrat elites.

\(^2\)At the previous national election, held in 2009, the three parties got respectively the 0.29%, the 7.5%, and the 4.6% of the total vote share.
(McCarthy et al. 2006). Moreover, historical research on past political systems that are often used as examples for high polarization (Sartori 1976), such as the Weimar Republic in Germany or the Italian First Republic, showed that the electoral fortunes of ideological extreme parties can be strongly correlated to macro-economic indicators, such as unemployment or industrial production (Pelizzo and Babones 2007).

Given the strong relation between party system polarization and several indicators of societal conflict, my research within the framework of the Work Package 6 has mainly focused on the implications of ideological polarization for the quality of the electoral democracy. In this perspective, polarization is mainly understood as a political reflection of the level of conflict taking place within a society, coming from sharp social divisions, economic crisis, globalization, and so on. In other words, party systems are assumed to be able to *absorb* conflict and to *politicize* it, i.e. to convert it into a particular party configuration that has some implications for the functioning of the political machinery, whether it is observed at the institutional level or at the level of the connection between voters and representatives. At the institutional level, several pieces of research show how polarization can carry negative consequences for the overall stability of the system (Valenzuela 1978), its institutional effectiveness (Tsebelis 2002), its economic efficiency (Alt and Lassen 2006; Frye 2002), and the government survival (Warwick 1992). At the level of the electoral connection, the situation is much more fragmented, and findings are sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, a big body of research coming from the US assumes a top-down relationship between party elites and citizens. In this framework, parties are expected to position themselves following strategic incentives, and the main focus of the research is on the consequences of their arrangement on citizens' attitudes and behavior. On the other hand, European research has been for long considering party polarization as a direct expression of societal divisions, and only in more recent years a top-down mechanism analogue to the one assumed in the US perspective has been taken into consideration (a milestone in this sense is the “politics matters” perspective, as opposed to the classic “social change”, that underlies the *European Voter* study edited by Thomassen, 2005).

The contribution of my research work in the ELECDEM Work Package 6 is therefore to provide theoretical and empirical foundations for a general understanding of what effects party ideological polarization has on voters' behavior, and to evaluate whether they have a positive impact on the effectiveness of the electoral connection. This may help understanding to what extent the way in which political systems absorb potential factors of conflict affects electoral competitiveness, accountability...
D.1.3 Key Methodologies and Data: Comparative Survey Research and Multilevel Modeling

The main focus of my research for the Work Package 6 is on citizens' behavior. However, given the contextual nature of the phenomenon under study, it is necessary that citizens' behavior is observed across different contexts. As it was discussed above, polarization is considered here as a characteristic of the party system. To test its effect on citizens, it is necessary to account for macro-micro relationships. Thus, the data needed to accomplish my research tasks should offer enough contextual variation, and the statistical models employed to analyze them should be appropriate.

The focus on the individuals, and the necessity to incorporate information about the context in the analyses, significantly narrows down the number and type of research tools that can be used. To answer the different research questions on which this project is focused, I use three different data sources, each of them consisting in electoral surveys (a good source of training that allowed me to evaluate the quality of the survey data available and to choose which ones to use for my project was the Electoral Survey Design workshop provided by the ELECDEM network in April 2010).

The data set that I used most often comes from a highly-standardized cross-national comparative survey conducted in EU countries in occasion of the European Parliament elections, i.e. the European Election Surveys (EES). The other two are national-level election surveys conducted in the Netherlands. The first is a time series of pooled cross-sectional Dutch National Election Surveys (DNES), spanning from 1981 to 2006. The second is the panel component of the same study, the Dutch Panel National Election Study (DPNES), made of three panels covering two elections each, in the years 1982-1986, 1986-1989, and 1989-1994. While the EES study allows to have a great cross-country variability, as it includes all the countries being part of the European Union at the moment in which the elections are held, the DNES offers the possibility to have a great over-time variation in the level of polarization while holding constant several other contextual factors (e.g. electoral system). Moreover, the DPNES is a very precious resource used here to validate other types of variables (i.e. vote switching and preference stability) that are meant to measure individual dynamics over time. Because a cross-country panel study is still non-existent, I find this solution optimal for fully exploiting the impressive spread of cross-sectional survey tools while being at the same time confident of the validity of the measurement.
The European Election Study data are rather easy to access and offer several data types next to the mass surveys. For my research work I make use mainly of survey data, although some country-level (e.g. the effective number of parties) or party-specific (e.g. the vote share) indicators can be easily accessed through several other sources on the net. There are several positive aspects related to the use of the European Election Study. The first is the high standardization of the measurement, which makes the data matching between several waves rather straightforward and intuitive. The second is the amount of national contexts covered: at each wave, all the members of the EU participate to the study. This also implies several Central-Eastern European and South European countries which are generally excluded from other cross-country data sets. Finally, an important aspect is the presence of some variables that can not be found in other cross-country comparative data sets (e.g. CSES), such as the Propensity to Vote (PTV) scores, or the party-specific issue-competence assessments (although these are introduced in the third wave of the CSES). Given the level of standardization of the measurement in the EES data, for the parts of my study requiring cross-national evidence I pool four waves of European elections, i.e. 1994, 1999, 2004 and 2009. The pooled file including the 2009 study is not available online, but it was rather easy to generate following a standard recoding for each of the four waves. The final data set includes 82 electoral contexts spanning across 27 countries.

The great amount of country-level observations makes this type of data particularly fit for multilevel modeling. Such a technique, developed as a tool to model and analyze data that are organized in a hierarchical structure, was one of the main focuses of the ELECDEM network, and has also been subject of a workshop (Comparative Methods and Cross-national Survey Research: Multi-level Approaches) in January 2012. As the focus of my research question is on the effect of some contextual factors on individual behavior, the relationships hypothesized are mainly of the macro-micro type. More specifically, in this study I am interested in, first, the effect of the context on individual outcomes (e.g. whether the fact of living in a country characterized by a highly-polarized political system increases the probability of a citizen to have a partisan attachment for a certain party) and, second, the effect of the context on the strength of individual-level relationships (e.g. whether the relationship between individual ideological extremity and preference certainty is conditional on certain degrees of party system polarization). Both these types of relationships are allowed in a multilevel context, and

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3 While a new version of the EES website is currently under construction at the Mannheimer Zentrum Für Europäische Sozialforschung, by the University of Mannheim, the data can be found at the moment on the old website http://www.ees-homepage.net/. For the 2009 study only, which was conducted in the framework of the PIREDEU project, the following website is also available: http://www.piredeu.eu/.

4 A good quality, academically valued source that I use in my research work is the PARLGOV database, accessible through the following url: http://www.parlgov.org/
made easy by their integration in the most widely-used statistical software packages.

To sum up, while the theoretical contribution of my research work within the ELECDEM Work Package 6 is elaborated in the next sections, what is important to underline here is the relevance of the methodological training provided in the network's framework, and the usefulness of the workshops and of the networking possibilities given by ELECDEM. The next sections consist in three independent studies, all related to the research question outlined in the Work Package. They papers the order in which the studies were conducted, and touch three different aspects of electoral democracy: competitiveness, accountability, and representativeness. In all three cases the role of party system polarization is studied in a multilevel context (cross-national in the first and the third study, over-time and across partisan groups in the second study) employing high-quality data.
D.2 Study 1

More polarized, less competitive. The effect of party system polarization on the certainty and the strength of the electorate's preferences
D.2.1 Polarization and electoral competitiveness

After the last decade of political research, we learned that party polarization can help voters linking their preferences to party stands on issues or more encompassing ideological positions. This finding applies regularly to both two-party systems and multiparty systems, as in the case of many European democracies (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Ensley 2007; Hellwig 2011; Kroh 2009; Lachat 2008). The phenomenon, which was first theorized by Carmines and Stimson (1986) as a consequence of the politicization of some relevant, but latent issue conflicts, has been pointed out as a desirable effect for the quality of electoral democracy. The more the voters rely on substantive policy criteria, and the less they rely on long-term determinants, such as partisanship or cleavage-based identifications, the more the political elites should be ready to respond to the electorate's policy demands, increasing the level of competitiveness of the elections (Lachat 2011, Schmitt and Wessels 2005). However, other voices have raised during the last decades to underline some negative effects of polarization on electoral competitiveness. While the positive influence of party diversification in helping voters understand what is at the stake is hardly questioned, polarization could also imply an intensification of the political conflict (Esteban and Ray 1994). Extreme distance between political groups implies bigger difference between their preferred policy outcomes which can, in turn, favor the identification among supporters of similar positions and increase the importance of the characteristics that make them different from the other groups. This point may seem to be in contrast with the conclusions reached by some of the studies cited above. However, the implications that such studies propose are mainly based on the assumption that the importance of party loyalties and policy or ideological preferences are somehow a zero-sum game. In fact, several studies conducted in the US show that increased policy conflict among party elites goes together with an increased level of mass partisanship (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Hetherington 2001). This is due to a similar mechanism: the more the parties' policy positions are differentiated, the more their identity should be clear to the citizens, making it more easy for them to develop partisan attachments (see also Schmitt and Holmberg 1995). Moreover, as parties move towards the opposite extremes, conflict can expand to new issues without getting to a consensual resolution among the old issues (Layman and Carsey 2002). This may indicate a form of disagreement that goes beyond the single issue domains, dragging the contrast towards more general ideological arguments (Sartori 1976, p. 137). Whether or not parties and voters in polarized systems disagree on worldviews, rather than on political matters, is not a concern of this study. However, it has been theorized and shown empirically that such an extreme ideological emphasis can lead to centrifugal
electoral dynamics (Pardos-Prado and Dinas 2010; Sartori 1976). While the two views of polarization presented here share the same starting point, as they both have the origin in a definite differentiation among parties' ideologies, they leave us with a puzzle when it comes to the expected consequences on electoral competitiveness. Does polarization increase the substantive content of the elections by emphasizing the issues on which parties actually compete for the votes, or does it increase the level of party identification and ideological conflict, reducing each election to a confirmation of partisan or ideological divisions?

This study tries to contribute to this discussion by arguing that the level of competitiveness of a political system is related to the extent to which voters are prepared to change their party support over time. If voters are willing to support only one party, then parties will be competing mainly by trying to maximize votes among their own group of potential supporters, and convincing other parties' supporters not to vote. On the contrary, when voters are open to support more than one party, then the same parties will be competing for the same electorate, following a centripetal logic. In this framework, two types of voting behavior can unveil the level of competitiveness of a system: vote-switching and abstention. The first refers to the individual changing of party support between two different elections, while the second refers to the choice to turnout.

In this paper I hypothesize two different mechanisms through which high party polarization can contribute to the factors that reduce the competitiveness of a political system by the means of the aforementioned behaviors. Both expectations are based on the insight that the choice to switch party and to turnout can be influenced by the options that voters are offered given their preferences. In highly-polarized systems, where the conflict is between parties standing on opposite ideological sides, voters taking non-moderate policy positions are confronted to alternatives that are either very attractive or very unattractive to them. As the conflict shifts from being within-side to being between-side, they should feel more certain about their party preferences than in systems characterized by low polarization. This, in turn, should increase the probability that they stick with the same party they previously voted for. On the other hand, moderate voters in polarized systems face a situation where the options are both distant from their ideal position and very different from each other. This should weaken their overall party preferences, undermining their willingness to make a choice at all.

The combination of these two mechanisms can lead to a situation where non-moderate or extreme voters are more likely to keep on supporting the same party while moderate voters, who are cross-pressured by alternatives from both sides, are less likely to participate. On the aggregate level, this
effect may produce more stable electorates for the extreme parties and harder-to-mobilize voters in the center, eventually inciting parties to further compete for the sides. In the long run, such a system would lead to more discrepancy between policy winners and policy losers and larger shifts in policy between government changes. This expectation adds on what Schmitt and Freire (2011) describe as a curvilinear effect of polarization on the quality of democracy: on the one hand, under conditions of low polarization, voters will not be able to detect meaningful differences between parties' policy offers, therefore responding with meaningless choices (see Wessels and Schmitt 2008). On the other hand, very high polarization may also carry negative consequences for a system, this time related to its overall stability (Sartori 1976; Schmitt and Freire 2011; Valenzuela 1978) and economic efficiency (Alt and Lassen 2006; Frye 2002). This study aims to contribute to the literature about party polarization in three ways. First, it describes an individual level mechanism by which different portions of the electorate are exposed to higher or lower incentives to switch and to abstain, depending on how parties are polarized along the ideological space. Second, it provides a novel empirical test of whether these incentives influence the actual behavior in the long and the short term. Third, it provides a discussion of the possible consequences of the findings, and their implications for the quality of electoral democracy.

To do so, this paper proceeds in two steps. First, I propose a model of individual behavior where vote intention comes after a person's assessment of her party preferences, which in turn are a consequence of independent party evaluations. In this framework, vote-switching and abstention are expected to be influenced by the certainty and the strength of a person's party preferences. In a second step, I propose a mechanism where the inter-individual variation in these two constructs is put a function of individual ideological positions across different levels of party polarization.

To provide empirical support for the validity of certainty and strength as factors influencing voting behavior, I directly test their effect on vote switching and turnout using panel data from three waves of the Dutch Parliament Election Study. Moreover, for each of the two factors, I run a series of multilevel models where the effect of polarization in interaction with ideological extremity is tested in a wider range of political contexts, using three waves of the European Election Study from 1994 to 2009. Put together, the results show that polarized party systems provide negative incentives to vote for moderate citizens by reducing the strength of their preferences, whilst they decrease the propensity to change party support over time for extreme citizens by increasing their certainty. The observed effects for preference certainty hold when country fixed effects are added to the model, indicating that changes in
polarization within the same country can lead to change in certainty for more extreme voters. On the other hand, the effect of polarization on preference strength of moderate voters disappears when the model is controlled with country fixed effects, indicating that the propensity to turnout of moderate citizens is not influenced by changes in degrees of polarization within the same political system. Although the effects are not particularly strong, the results show that individuals' propensity to switch party and turnout can be influenced by how parties are distributed along the policy space. This has potential implications for our understanding of electoral results in a European context, where tremendously different systems are facing common challenges to the democratic connection.

**D.2.2 Party preferences and party choice: a model of voting behavior**

In political research, voting behavior has been for long conceptualized as the final step of a more or less complex chain of causality, where considerations made at different steps converge to a final, observable outcome. Probably the most famous and often employed example is the Michigan school's “funnel of causality”. Here, long-term loyalties, learned in the early stages of an individual's political socialization, work as underlying structuring tools for the subsequent evaluation of shorter-term stimuli provided by the electoral campaigns, such as candidate's characteristics or positions over salient policy domains (see Campbell et al. 1960). However other models conceive vote choice as a process involving several steps without necessarily taking into account the distinction between long-term and short-term determinants. An example is the Downsian economic model of choice (Downs 1957a). Here, independent party or candidate evaluations lead voters to assign to each party a certain amount of utility, indicating how much a voter thinks she can profit from a party being in government. After assessing the party utilities, the assumption is that voters choose deterministically for the party that scores highest.

This model, which is generally defined as “sincere voting” (see Rosema 2004), has driven the interests of scholars towards the idea of distinguishing empirically between the explanation of party choice and the explanation of party preferences (Tillie 1995). In this framework, the concept of party preference has to be seen as something that comes before the final party choice, and represents the most direct consequence of a person's evaluation of a political object. Moreover, in this view the direct measure of party preferences provides the student of voting with a considerably bigger amount of information respect to the single party choice, while maintaining its validity (see van der Eijk et al. 2006 for an extended discussion). In this paper I conceptualize the individual process that leads to the vote choice
in a similar way. As Figure 1.1 shows, I refer to three relevant steps: the party evaluations, the assessment of party preferences, and the party choice. Although the full chain of psychological determinants may be in fact more complex (see Rosema 2006), the focus of this paper will be exclusively on the second step, i.e. the assessment and subsequent distribution of preferences. A party preference is defined here as the individual motivation to vote for a certain party (Tillie 1995). The idea is that the information accumulated during the first step, i.e. the independent evaluation of each party, generates for each individual a distribution of preferences. Such distribution is like a snapshot of the political arena as it is pictured in each voter's mind, and can give us a hint about how citizens perceive the political supply.

All in all, the direct observation of party preferences should reveal how individuals respond to party competition in a more accurate way than the single party choice. While the vote-choice step normally requires citizens to choose for one party or candidate over all the others, an individual can have different degrees of preferences for each one of them. The way in which a voter's preferences are distributed across parties can vary tremendously between individuals. A person can be equally motivated to vote for two or three parties, and at the end pick one up because it is the biggest one. Similarly, a person can have a very weak preference for all parties and still go for the "lesser evil", i.e. vote for the one she likes slightly better than the others. In general, the sincere voting assumption implies that one will vote for the party for which she has the highest preference. However, if we are interested in other types of behavior, such as vote-switching or abstention, information about the full distribution of each voter's preferences becomes necessary.

In this framework, the first question to be asked is: how do the sets of preferences of stable voters (or, by extension, of switchers) and non-voters look like? This question is relevant insofar as our aim is to explain these two types of behavior as a consequence of voters' evaluation of the options they are offered. To be sure, a stable pattern of voting behavior can be also a consequence of pure habit. In a similar way, a person can abstain because not physically able to go to vote, or because particularly

Figure 1.1: Three-step Model of Vote Choice
unfavorable weather (Eisinga et al. 2012). Although these circumstances could have some considerable effects at the aggregate level, this study is focused on the conditions that lead people to stick on the same party and to abstain as a consequence of their preferences. To provide an answer to the question above, I propose two parameters that can effectively describe the distribution of a citizen's party preferences and are supposed to be connected to the two types of behavior under study: the certainty and the strength of individual party preferences. In the next two sections I will describe these two constructs separately, test their influence on actual behavior and test my theoretical expectations about the effects that party polarization has on them given voters' preferences.

D.2.3 The certainty of party preferences

D.2.3.1 Definition, causes and consequences

Certainty is defined here as the “definitiveness” of a person's vote intention. In general, the concept can be defined as the recognition of something as well-established, not subject of further discussion or rethink. A researcher is certain about her findings when the margin of error of the results is small enough to exclude the possibility that they are due to chance. A voter is certain about her party preference when she is confident that additional thought or information about parties will not change her mind. In abstract terms, certainty has something to do with the reduction of the alternatives. Thus, the highest certainty about party preferences can be observed when voting for any other party but one is out of question.

In fact, certainty of preferences can be seen as something more nuanced than the general definition proposed above. If we assume preferences to be a function of independent party evaluations (i.e. if we allow them to be non-ipsative, as pointed out by van der Eijk et al. 2006), it follows that the level of certainty is equivalent to the difference in magnitude between the highest and second highest preference. In this sense, an individual can be more or less certain depending on how “outstanding” her first preference is. If a voter is torn between two parties, this should come as a consequence of an equally-good evaluation of both of them, and thus as a small difference in motivation between voting for one or another. In this case her vote choice should be less stable, that is to say, more sensitive to new events or new pieces of information that can lead to a change. Kroh et al. refer to this point as potential for vote switching:

“When the most preferred parties differ only little in the electoral utility they would yield, small changes in preferences can lead to vote switching. If, on the other hand, there is a wide gap between the preferences for the highest and the second highest ranked parties, it requires
very large change in preference to make a voter alter his or her choice.” (2007, p. 212)

According to this definition, a party whose electors are very certain will have big room to behave irresponsibly or disappointing, i.e. in a way that is supposed to reduce its attractiveness, without running the risk that they will switch to another party.

However, while the link between the electorate's aggregate certainty and the country's level of electoral volatility seems to be straightforward, the degree of stability of such a link, as well as of certainty itself, is not at all clear. In general, there are reasons to expect certainty of preferences to be fairly stable over time, and reasons to expect it to be relatively volatile. The first set of reasons refers to individual processes or traits that contribute in maintaining a person's beliefs or attitudes consistent, while the second refers to external, possibly election-specific stimuli that concur in changing them. Before being able to attribute the credit to influence citizens' certainty to contextual characteristics, it is therefore necessary to disentangle these two aspects.

First of all, although the concept of preference has been defined broadly here as the extent to which someone is motivated to vote for a certain party, such a construct is necessarily related to a person's attitude towards it, i.e. “a general and enduring positive or negative feeling” about a party (Petty and Cacioppo 1996, p. 7). Given the nature of certainty as a compounded measure, obtained by observing the independent assessment of preference for each party, it can be expected that more certain voters are also those who are more extreme in their positive or negative attitudes towards parties. Social psychology has been pointing out for long a relationship between attitude extremity and resistance to change, due to a selective process in acquiring new information (Krosnick et al. 1993, Krosnick and Petty 1995). Thus, to the extent that party evaluations are influenced by people's attitudes towards them, preference certainty should be a fairly stable trait. Secondly, for many voters party preferences are influenced to a big extent by their party loyalty. In the original conception of the Michigan school party identification has been portrayed as a form of group identification (Campbell et al. 1960, 1966, Greene 1999) somehow paralleling the direct connection between social group membership and party preference made in the European context within the framework of the cleavage theory (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). According to this conception, party loyalty is seen as a strong and stable factor.

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5 Rosema employs a concept similar to the one of certainty proposed here, calling it “strength of the party preference” (2006, p. 473). While the definition and the operationalization of the two are fairly close, such a concept is used by Rosema to pinpoint those voters for whom the congruence between preferences and vote intention or choice is closer. In that framework, the word “strength” seems to convey the most accurate definition. However, given the interest of this study for vote-switching and abstention, a differentiation between certainty and strength is necessary, with the former definition being more closely related to a reduced set of attractive options than the latter.
organizing the stimuli provided at each election. Although over the years the group-oriented nature of party identification has been questioned, together with its stability (Fiorina 1981, Franklin and Jackson 1983, Johnston 2006), it is reasonable to expect voters who feel loyal to a party to keep some degree of certainty about their preferences over time.

On the other side of the coin, external stimuli that occur at the moment of an election could also contribute to voters' level of certainty, increasing or decreasing the attractiveness of some alternative options, and therefore making their vote intention more or less likely to change. For instance, a party which has been considered unattractive to some voters for long can suddenly become attractive due to a charismatic leader, reducing the certainty to some people who did not consider it as an option at previous elections. Moreover, and more interesting for this study, individual level of certainty can change from election to election according to the options that voters are offered given their policy preferences. Rational models of vote choice describe party preferences as a function of the utility that a person can expect from having a certain party occupying a position of policy-making. According to such models, individual party preferences are a function of the proximity between a person's own ideological preferences and the ideological positions taken by the parties running for an election (Downs 1957a; Enelow and Hinich 1984). While the assumption of a deterministic effect of party utilities on voters' preferences is not necessary here (i.e. preferences are not assumed to be so much embedded into a set of complex rational calculi as in the case of other studies), it is nevertheless reasonable to expect that people tend to have higher preferences for parties that are more ideologically similar, and lower preferences for parties that are less. In this framework, individual preference certainty can change if the number of attractive options increases or decreases, i.e. if the number of parties which offer congruent policy positions vary. Literature shows that parties place themselves strategically according to how voters are distributed and how public opinion changes (see Adams et al. 2005). This follows more or less explicitly the assumption that the position that a party adopts influences the way in which voters evaluate it and, by doing so, inevitably changes the distribution of their preferences.

However, the argument made here does not necessarily refer to purely spatial considerations. If we think realistically about the possible factors influencing party preferences, we would admit that not all the parties positioned in a certain portion of the ideological space are equally attractive for such a segment of the electorate. As van der Brug et al. (2000) point out, a rational vote follows the wish to influence public policy-making. Given this aim, ideological vote can be seen as a choice focused on the
“indication” that one wishes to give to public policy. However, parties start with different probabilities to impact on public policy, depending on their political power or, to put it more simply, their size. Thus, voting for a very proximate party that is virtually insignificant can be seen as a less rational move than choosing a slightly more distant one that is very likely to play a role. However, the importance of party strength for voters' evaluations is not necessarily limited to strategic considerations. A very small party can also generate low attractiveness simply because citizens do not have much information about it. Especially in cases where the political debate is led by a few big parties, people may not consider to vote for the smaller ones simply because they know a little about their policy position and their competence, or because there is no way to assess the quality of their past performance in government. Apart from single-issue parties, which compete for specific subsets of the electorate, issue ownership may be also less effective if a party's credibility is eclipsed by its weakness compared to other competitors. Tillie (1995) defines two ideal-types of voters, based on the role played by parties' relative power in influencing their preferences: the “idealistic” voters, who are moved only by ideological (or spatial) considerations, and the “pragmatic” voters, who are attracted entirely by political power. While the most of the people actually fall in a middle, mixed category, Tillie admits that the relevance of these two aspects can be also influenced by parties' characteristics: “if size is relatively constant, that is, in the comparison of two large or two small parties, party utility is predominantly determined by the perceived ideological distance between voter and party” (1995, p. 115).

Given the role played by party proximities and power in generating preferences, the next step is to assess how party arrangement can systematically influence voters' certainty. A pure spatial approach would suggest that maximum certainty will be reached by a voter who is close to one party and far from all the others. However, if political power has a role in party evaluations, this condition would be necessary only when all the parties have the same size. In fact, being ideologically close to a large party should correspond to higher certainty, on condition that it is well differentiated from the other main parties. In this framework, polarization simply accentuates the difference between the main left and right parties. A system is normally defined polarized when the larger parties' ideological stands are radically different from each other. This often refers to a condition where the parties occupying the center are fairly small, and the pivotal ones are positioned around the left and right poles. This expectation is implicitly captured by the most of the indexes of party polarization employed by researchers. While in the most of the cases the theoretical emphasis is put on the degree of differentiation, polarization in fact is often measured taking into account both parties' distance from the
center and their size (see e.g. Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Dalton 2008; Hazan 1995; Taylor and Herman 1971; van der Eijk et al 2005).

Thus, as polarization grows larger, voters' certainty should gradually move towards a U-shaped distribution along the left-right dimension. Moderate voters, i.e. those who are placed in the center, will be cross-pressured by considering options from both the left and the right. For assessing their level of certainty, the degree of distance from these options should not make a difference (although it should do for the strength of their preferences, as we will see in the next section). However, the more the voters move towards the ideological poles, the more the viable options will be reduced, making their choice easier. Thus, in more polarized party systems, voters' level of certainty will grow positive as a function of their distance from the center.

Before turning to the empirical test of the causes and behavioral effects of the level of preference certainty, one remark is necessary. If this expectation holds true, that is, if higher party polarization corresponds to more certain preferences for the more extreme voters, a possible way to interpret it would be that main parties are better able to hold their electorate the more their positions diverge from each other. However, the opposite claim could also be made, i.e. that parties whose electorate is more stable are more free to take extreme positions. While this study does not take a dynamic approach, making it impossible to determine the direction of the causality, it is possible to control whether this effect is robust to party influence, by controlling for the strength of individuals' party identification. If parties are “bringing their electorate with them” towards the poles, this positional effect should be there only for people who have some sense of party loyalty. However, the effect described here is intended to be a pure systemic effect of the way in which choice options are arranged. The empirical tests in the following section will make sure that such an effect is clear from any possible confounding factors.

**D.2.3.2 Long and short-term effect on voting behavior, and systemic factors of influence**

The first empirical test presented regards the effect of preference strength on vote switching. The aim of this test is to see whether higher certainty influences the actual behavior by increasing the individual probability to stick to the same party against the probability to change to another party. Moreover, we want to know if certainty is a stable trait that has a constant effect on an individual's lifetime vote choices, or if its further updates can influence behavior as well. This point is not trivial, given the interest of the present study. If adding a measure of past certainty in the model cleared out the effect of certainty at the present time, then we would conclude that what we are observing is not different from a
Michigan-style partisanship. However, the argument of this paper is that certainty depends on evaluations of parties made at the moment of the election, and as such it changes according to how parties are distributed. Thus, for the means of validation of this concept and its measurement, certainty should have an effect on voting behavior even when controlled for its lagged version. However, this requires to employ data with repeated observations of the same voters over time.

The Dutch Parliament Election Study (DPES) has been conducting over the years a number of panel investigations where the same respondents were interviewed at two consecutive elections. Three of these studies contain all the necessary variables. The dataset for the test was compiled keeping only the observations present in the second wave of each panel, and pooling them together. The three present election years in the dataset are 1986, 1989 and 1994, with the lagged observations going back respectively to 1982, 1986 and 1989. The reason why only these three studies were chosen, limiting the cross-context variation, is that they all contain the same type of measure of party preferences, the so-called “propensity to vote” (PTV) scores. Such scales, together with the “feeling thermometers”, made popular by the American National Election Studies, and the “like-dislike” scales measured in the CSES study, are amongst the most commonly employed variables in studies of voting behavior (see for instance Pardos-Prado and Dinas 2010; van der Brug et al. 2000; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996).

Although the PTVs may seem to measure the same construct as other scales, the type of question by which they are measured links the present evaluation to a possible future vote, putting the respondent in front of the concrete possibility to support a party at some certain point in time (see Tillie 1995; van der Eijk et al 2006). According to van der Eijk and Marsh (2007), this property is what allows PTVs to perform better in predicting the first and the second vote choice in a country (Ireland) where voters are allowed to express ordered preferences. Given such a desirable property, PTVs can be used as a fairly effective tool to observe individual distributions of preferences.

As it was mentioned earlier, the operationalization of preference certainty employed here is similar to Kroh et al.’s (2007) “potential switching” and Rosema’s (2006) “preference strength”: an individual is

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7 It is important to underline that the three panels were conducted independently from one other, thus the cases are different in every panel. To give an examples, none of the observations from the wave 1986-1989 are also present in the wave 1982-1986.

8 Although during the year the question format for the PTVs has passed through some slight changes, the original wording shows rather clearly the intent to grab some characteristics of the individual distributions of preferences: “Some people are quite certain that they will always vote for the same party. Others reconsider in each case to which party they will give their vote. I shall mention a number of parties. Would you indicate for each party how probable it is that you will ever vote for that party?” (from van der Eijk et al. 2006, p. 432)
more certain the bigger is the difference between the highest and the second-highest among her expressed party preferences. In this model, certainty is included in the lagged version and as a difference from the previous observation. The dependent variable is computed using the actual past and present vote choice of the respondents who are present in both waves of each panel. Given the past vote for a certain party, citizens are basically given three alternatives at every election: to stay on the same party, to vote for another party, or to abstain. Although the main interest here refers to the effect that certainty has on only two of the three alternatives (switch versus stay) a more accurate model of choice implies the inclusion among the logical possibilities of the third type as well. Moreover, the inclusion of the option to abstain at the following election allows to see whether the choice of more certain individuals is constrained to the point to prefer abstention over switching. Thus, the dependent is coded as a categorical variable with three categories. Other independent control variables include age (measured in class only in the first of the two observations, due to the harmonization between the three studies), level of education, a dummy indicating whether the respondent defines herself as a member of the working class (to control for potential social-structural effects), the strength of party attachment as a measure of party loyalty, and the ideological extremity, also lagged and differentiated. The latter variable is included in the model to make sure that ideological extremity does not have any independent effect on vote switching that is not mediated by certainty. Of course, given that the pooled dataset covers only three elections, it would not make sense to calculate the level of polarization for this test. However, given the availability of data, these two variables were included to get rid of as many sources of concern as possible. The dependent variable was modeled with a multinomial logit function, with vote-switching as baseline outcome. Given that the data pool is a combination of three different studies, robust standard errors are computed to control for possible heteroskedasticity. The coefficients of the model confirm the expectations. In general, preference certainty seems to have a significant and fairly strong effect on the actual behavior, both in the long and in the short term. Moreover, more certain individuals are more likely both to vote for the same party and to abstain, rather than switching. The relative risk of sticking on the same party associated with a point increase in lagged certainty is 155% (± 8%) that of switching, while the one to abstain is of 157% (± 14%). When it gets to the difference between present and past certainty, the relative risk of staying is 131% (± 6%) and the one of abstaining is the 127% (± 9%) that of switching for one point increase. Among the

9 The operationalization in fact is similar, but not identical. Kroh et al. (2007) create a dichotomous measure which indicates whether the different between the first and the second PTV is equal or smaller than 1, while Rosema (2006) uses another type of evaluation scales.
control variables, only two of them have an independent effect on switching.

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Outcome 0: Stay</th>
<th>Outcome 2: Switch to abstention</th>
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<td>Robust SE</td>
<td>Coefficient</td>
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*** = P < 0.01; ** = P < 0.05; * = P < 0.1

Table 1.1: Preference Certainty on Vote Switching in the Dutch NES Panel Study

One is the fact of being a member of the working class, which decreases the risk of staying to 65% (± 10%) that of switching but has no effect on differential abstention, and the strength of party attachment, which for one point increases the risk to stay to 147% (± 10%) and decreases the risk to abstain to 73% (± 12%) that to switch. All in all the results show that certainty of party preferences is strongly associated with actual behavior in two ways: more certain people are more likely to stick on the same party at two different elections and to abstain at the second election rather than switch to another party. Thus, the conclusion of this first empirical check is that the level of certainty of an individual is a good proxy to predict her voting pattern.

The aim of the second test proposed in this section is to show what effect polarization has on the level of certainty of extreme and moderate voters in a cross-country context. As it was discussed earlier, the expectation is that in more polarized political systems extreme voters are offered an easier set of options to evaluate, with some very ideologically similar parties and some others that are very distant from their preferences. Thus, as the level of polarization of a party system increases, extreme voters should be more certainty about their preferences in respect to moderate voters.

The level of ideological polarization of a party system is a function of two factors: the dispersion of the party stands on the left-right dimension, and their relative size, used as a proxy of their importance at the systemic level. The choice of a single ideological space where to measure the party positions is due
to some theoretical reasons and some practical issues. Theoretically, the use of the left-right dimension as a general, underlying ideological space is fairly common when the interest of the study is a set of European democracies. The flexibility of the “left” and “right” categories (due to their effective semantic emptiness) has rendered the ideological left-right a sort of super-issue, able to absorb the most relevant policy conflicts taking place in a certain context at a certain point in time (Inglehart 1990). In fact, the left-right space has been shown to be the principal defining dimension of policy conflicts in Western Democracies (Benoit and Laver 2006). Moreover, given the central role of this dimension in the political discourse of many countries, the left-right is also the most widely-spread measurement of ideological positioning of parties and voters across electoral surveys. Thus, it is possible today to compare the voters' perceptions of parties' ideological stands among a big number of studies.

The party positions used in the analyses conducted in this study are derived computing the mean placement as it is perceived by the survey respondents in each study. To be sure, there are several other ways to assess parties positions, including experts assessments and different forms of content analysis of party manifestos. However, given the interest of this study in voters' evaluation of parties, the type of measurement used here seems to be the closest one to the overall electorate's perception. The formula used to calculate the level of polarization resembles the one used in other studies (see e.g. van der Eijk et al. 2005), and consists in a sum of the weighted distances of the parties from a given policy center.

$$Pol = \sum |\bar{x} - x_i| * w_i$$

Where $\bar{x}$ is the weighted mean of all the parties' positions on the left-right scale, $x_i$ is the position of the party $i$ on the left-right scale and $w_i$ is the size weight attached to party $i$, given by its vote share at the time of the election observed relative to the other parties present in the data.

The index has been computed on a dataset that combines four waves of European Election Studies, from 1994 to 2009, for a total number of 82 different electoral contexts. Although the European Parliament elections are generally considered to be second-order (see Reif and Schmitt 1980), this should not represent a problem for this study, due to the “timeless” nature of the PTV variables. As we said above, the formulation of the “propensity to vote” questions does not refer to the vote at the election when the study is conducted, but rather to a generic probability to ever vote for a given party. In the mind of the proponents and promoters of these scales, such a formulation should make us sure

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10 Two elections has been excluded from the analysis due to the lack of all the necessary variables. For a complete list of the countries and years see the table in Appendix 1.
that what is measured by the PTVs is as close as possible to the actual party preferences (van der Eijk et al. 2006). This also has the side effect of untying the respondent's evaluation from any election-specific consideration. In general, these studies can be considered simply as a snapshot of the state of the party supply and the voters' preference distributions in a large number of contexts. However, given the risk of some possible distortion of voters' certainty due to the distance from the national election (after all, second order elections are characterized by lower intensity of the campaign and lower coverage by parties and medias), a control indicating the distance in days of the European election from the closest national election will be included in the model specification. A general expectation is that, the closest a European Election to a first order one, the higher will be the certainty of the voters, due to more intensive media coverage and higher accessibility of party-related information.

Before describing the modeling strategy, some examples will help understanding how the index works and how certainty can vary across voters depending on their ideological position in more and less polarized party systems. Figure 1.2 shows the distribution, with relative size, of the parties included in the twenty-seven studies of the EES 2009.

Figure 1.2: Party positions and sizes in the 2009 EES countries

The party systems are ordered going from the less polarized (0.48, Belgium-Flanders) to the most

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11 The only European Election study where the formulation of the PTV questions specifies the type of election, and repeats them separately for National and European election, is the one conducted in 1989. For this reason, the entire wave has been excluded from the analyses.
polarized (3.02, Cyprus). The size weights are given by the vote shares obtained by the parties at European election, weighted taking as total only the parties for which questions about the left-right placement and the PTV were asked. The figure shows how the index works: while in Austria or Finland parties occupy a relatively wide ideological range, their polarization scores are much lower than in Spain or Malta, where two very large parties are positioned quite far from each other and the remaining ones can be hardly considered as relevant.

For the policy center $\bar{x}$ is calculated taking into account the size weights, some systems that look rather polarized due to the relatively extreme position of the main left or right parties do not score particularly high in the index. This is the case for instance of Greece or Poland, where the policy center is leaning toward the right. In both of these countries the two main competitors are placed on the right of the metric center on the scale, with the space on the left occupied by only relatively small parties. This makes the system unbalanced, rather than polarized, and the index behaves accordingly, putting both countries in the first half of the distribution. On the other hand, in all the countries scoring high (say more than two) the center is either empty or occupied by very small parties, and in most of the cases the biggest portion of the weight is shared between two very large parties (with some exceptions, such as the Czech Republic, where the left pole is kept by the post-communist KSCM and the more moderate social democrats of the CSSD).

Although such a few cases can not provide any solid ground for generalization, it seems that more polarized systems in 2009 Europe, according to the index, are rather bipolarized. This should not come as a surprise, given that the maximum theoretical value of the index should be reached in case two parties sharing the 50% each are placed on the opposite extremes of the left-right scale. However, this should also confirm the validity of the index for the purpose of this paper, i.e. to measure the magnitude of the ideological difference between the main parties.

As we said above, a polarized party supply should correspond to a U-shaped distribution of voters' certainty along the left-right. In fact, as the main parties' positions diverge ideologically, left and right voters should be more and more confident about the fact that the most ideologically similar main option they are offered is the way to go. Figure 1.3 shows how preference certainty is distributed across voters placed over the ideological space. The country plots are still ordered by levels of polarization, but this time they show the certainty scores (gray dots) and the mean certainty (black line) for the voters placed

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12 The left-right party positions, together with the self-placement, the PTVs and all the other scalar variables in the EES 2009 are measured on a 11-point scale going from 0 to 10. While the graphs in the figures 1.2 and 1.3 employ the original metrics, these variables have been rescaled from 1 to 10 in the integrated file to fit with the previous studies.
on each point of the left-right scale.

Figure 1.3: Preference Certainty on the left-right in the 2009 EES countries

As the plots show, preference certainty is, on average, higher for more extreme left and right voters. This pattern appears systematically in the most of the countries in the EES 2009, although in the most of the cases the increase is only slight. However, the more the level of polarization increases, the mean line tends to approximate more closely a U-shaped curve. This is particularly true for the countries where the level of polarization is influenced by the presence of two big parties diverging towards the ideological extremes, such as Malta or Cyprus. However, the level of certainty can also grow asymmetrically on one of the two sides. This is particularly evident in Spain, Hungary and France. Interestingly enough, in all three of these cases the ideological side where certainty increases more sharply is the one where the main party faces no or little competition from other parties. In Spain, the main undisputed right-wing option is the Popular Party, positioned three points away from the metric center, while the most important left-wing one, the PSOE, is surrounded by a number of tiny but somewhat significant parties, such as the leftist coalition Izquierda Unida and the federalist UPD. In Hungary the situation is reversed: here the main left-wing option, the socialist MSZP, faces the competition mainly with the Communists on the left, but the relevance of the latter is so weak that it probably does not even represent an option for the most of the left-wing voters. The two closest parties are the centrist MDF and the liberal SZDSZ, which in Figure 1.2 result in fact positioned on the left of
the center, but are ideologically rather different from the socialists. On the other side of the continuum
the main party, the right-wing Fidesz, is positioned very close to the radical nationalist Jobbik which, at
the moment of the European election in 2009 was gaining more and more importance to the point of
becoming the third largest Hungarian party. Although the Fidesz and the Jobbik can be appealing to
different types of electorate, their co-presence in such a small, extreme portion of the ideological
continuum may be the reason for the lower average certainty of the right-wing Hungarian electorate.
One indicator for the relevance, or the perceived relevance, of the Jobbik as a competitor of the Fidesz
can be the opposite outcome to a similar situation happening in France. Here, the main right-wing party
is the UMP and the far-right competitor is the Front National. However, the right-wing French
electorate shows a high level of certainty, especially compared to the left side, where the relative
atomization of the party supply (mainly between the Socialist and the Green party) goes together with a
lower average certainty.
To sum up what the 2009 study shows, certainty grows on the extremes in the context where the main
parties are distant from each other on the left-right ideology, and this happens more effectively when
they do not have to face any “internal competition” with ideologically similar parties. This implies that
either the main left and right parties are the only options on their respective ideological sides, or the
most similar alternatives are not relevant. To be sure the concept of relevance, which has been
simplified here using party size as a proxy of its political power, can imply different characteristics, not
least the “blackmailing power” hypothesized by Sartori (1976). However, as long as the size and
position of a party convey information that voters can use to evaluate it as a policy option, the index of
polarization employed here seems to be a valid indicator of the alternatives that voters see from their
ideological position as they look at the policy supply.
To test whether the association between individual extremity and certainty holds in a regression model,
I use a pooled dataset of eighty European Election studies from 1994 to 2009. The dependent variable,
the degree of preference certainty measured on a nine-point harmonized scale, is modeled with a
multilevel specification using an election ID as grouping factor. Because of the unavoidable correlation
between certainty and strength, due to the fact that the difference between the highest and the second-
highest PTVs necessarily depends on the size of the highest PTV score, the measure of strength is
added as a predictor in each model. This should also clean the effect from the individual tendency to
give extreme responses, which may influence also the self-positioning on the left-right. The test implies
four different specifications, differing from each other for what concerns the structure of interactions,
or the presence of country fixed effects. The baseline model includes at the individual level gender and age, social class and frequency of church attendance as controls for social-structural effects. To clear the effect from pure spatial influences, which can occur at any point of the left-right scale depending on the position of the parties, I put three variables: the distance from the closest party, the distance from the second-closest party, and an interaction between the two. The logic here is that when the difference between the two most appealing options increases, certainty should also increase, other things being equal. On the other hand, the distance from the best option should influence certainty negatively, unless it corresponds to a further distancing with the second best one. The latter point is captured by the interaction effect. Other individual level predictors are the degree of interest for politics, the strength of party identification (both harmonized and rescaled from 0 to 1) and the individual ideological extremity, computed as the absolute distance from the center of the nine-point left-right scale. At the country level three variables are included: the number of electoral parties, the distance in weeks from the closest first-order election and the index of polarization.

The other three models include the same variables as the baseline model, but have slightly different specifications. Model 2 includes the interaction between polarization and left-right extremity that according to the expected effect should be positive, plus an interaction between polarization and preference strength. Model 3 keeps the interaction between extremity and polarization and adds country fixed-effects to control for possible within-country correlations. Finally, Model 4 includes, next to the interaction between polarization and extremity, a further interaction of polarization with the strength of party identification. This control is necessary to make sure that the effect of polarization on the way in which certainty is distributed along the left-right is not mediated by an increased level of partisanship, as discussed above. The results of the four models are presented in Table 1.2.

The baseline specification in Model 1 shows that preference certainty is influenced by both individual level and country level factors. Among the social-structural determinants, the fact of being a female reduces significantly the level of certainty, age has a positive effect, indicating that older people tend to have more certain preferences, while class membership influences preferences in different directions. To be a member of the working class makes voters in general more certain than being a member of the middle class, while moving to the lower-middle and upper-middle has a weak, negative effect. Not surprisingly, party identification is associated to a strong positive coefficient, while the negative effect of interest in politics is somehow less intuitive. A possible explanation is that people who are more interested are also more open to consider several options, although this implies for them to be less
certain about which one to choose.

All the predictors related to spatial distances go in the expected directions. The opposite coefficients of the distances from the two closest parties, together with the positive sign of their interaction, can be interpreted as following: as the distance from the first option increases, and the distance from the second option is held constant, the voter will have to choose between two increasingly similar alternatives. This situation corresponds to lower certainty. On the other hand, as the distance from the second option increases, and the distance from the first option is held constant, the difference between the two gets larger. Thus, a voter in such a position will be more certainly going for the first option. The interaction indicates a scenario where a voter gets further from both the first and the second option. Here the positive coefficient indicates that, in spite of a bigger distance from both the two most

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Gender (1 = female)</td>
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<td>-0.09</td>
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<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
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<tr>
<td>Upper class</td>
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<td>0.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distance 2nd Closest Party</td>
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<td>0.26</td>
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<td>Dist Closest * Dist 2nd Closest Party</td>
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<td>0.06</td>
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<td>-0.00</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
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<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
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<td>-0.43</td>
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<td>1.16</td>
<td>1.16</td>
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<td>-0.30</td>
<td>-0.29</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
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<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>-1.78</td>
<td>-1.87</td>
<td>-2.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Residual Variance       | 5.03     | 4.95     | 5.00     | 4.95     |
| AIC                     | 237995.3 | 237280.7 | 237688.2 | 237401.6 |
| BIC                     | 238173.3 | 237520.6 | 238123.5 | 237641.5 |
| Log-Likelihood          | -118977.8| -118613.4| -118795.1| -118673.8|
| Number Of Observations  | 53350    | 53350    | 53350    | 53350    |
| Number Of Groups        | 80       | 80       | 80       | 80       |

*** = P < 0.01; ** = P < 0.05; * = P < 0.1

proximate parties, the difference between them plays a stronger role in influencing individual certainty. Among the system level variables, the distance from the closest first-order election has a negative significant effect on certainty, indicating that the more intense campaign conducted for the national elections is shapes voters preferences more effectively towards one best option. Another expected result is the negative coefficient for the effective number of electoral parties, which refers to how many alternatives voters have to evaluate. Thus, as the number of parties increases, voters need to consider more and more options, finding it harder to come out with a certain first preference.

Moving to the main protagonists of this investigation, i.e. polarization and ideological extremity, the baseline model shows a different scenario from what we see in Figure 1.3. While polarization has a positive and significant effect, implying that in more polarized countries people are, in general, more certain about their preferences, the coefficient of extremity is negative. This is probably due to the presence of the control variables\textsuperscript{13}. The best candidate is preference strength which, in all four models, has a constant and robust controlling effect on the degree of certainty. In fact, rerunning the model without including strength leads to a slightly positive non-significant coefficient for extremity and reduces the impact of polarization, next to decreasing the model fit to a great extent. This result partially disconfirms what found by Kroh et al. (2007) on a slightly smaller dataset, where both polarization and extremity show an independent effect on their “propensity to switch” variable. This may be due to a different operationalization of the dependent variable or, most likely, to the non-inclusion of strength in the model.

Moving to models 2 to 4, the interaction between ideological extremity and polarization is always positive and significant, as expected by the theory and by the inspection of Figure 1.3. The main effect of extremity remains negative and becomes stronger, while the coefficient for polarization becomes statistically insignificant, and even turns negative in the second model. However, the positive association between the interaction of extremity and polarization holds across the three different model specifications. In general, more individual extremity is associated to higher preference certainty in more polarized party systems, and to lower preference certainty in less polarized party systems. The level of polarization alone does not influence certainty, indicating that the level of polarization does not change the extent to which ideologically neutral voters are subject of competition. This confirms the general expectation that in highly polarized systems the main conflict dimension is the one that takes

\textsuperscript{13} In theory, another possible reason for the discrepancy between what is shown in Figure 1.3 and the coefficient of the model is the fact that the latter includes 52 more elections, for which the pattern observed in Figure 1.3 may not apply. However, the model has been run with the same specification only on the 2009 elections, leading to the same negative coefficient.
place between different ideological sides, rather than between different alternatives on the same ideological side. The negative main effect of extremity indicates that in less polarized systems, voters who take clear ideological stands are subject of local competition, which may be even more intense than for those who are positioned around the center. On the other hand, as polarization increases the political conflict moves towards the center, making ideologically non-neutral citizens more certain about their preferences. Before entering in a general discussion about the implications of these findings for our understanding of the role of polarization in influencing electoral competitiveness, the next section will regard the second object of interest of this study.

**D.2.4 The strength of party preferences**

**D.2.4.1 Definition, causes and consequences**

The second characteristic of an individual's distribution of preferences tackled in this study is preference strength. This concept refers to the extent to which a citizen is attracted by the options that she is offered, that is to say, the motivation to vote for a party at all. If an individual is mildly attracted by one party and completely uninterested in the others, she will in fact hold a preference with some degree of certainty, but to what extent will this preference be mobilizing? In other words, given the low attractiveness of all the options, is it worth for a citizen to make a choice? This point is relevant for this study insofar as different groups of citizens may be differently motivated to turnout depending on the arrangement of the party supply. Previous literature argues that turnout is influenced by several factors, including demographic and psychological characteristics, as well as contextual characteristics varying from election to election (for an exhaustive review see Harder and Krosnick 2008). The focus of this study is on a particular subset of reasons to abstain, namely those related to the scarce interest for the options among which a voter could choose. According to the two-step model described in Figure 1.1, party choice in voters' mind comes after the assessment of a certain degree of preferences for each party, which in turn comes after the independent evaluations of the options they are offered. In this framework, the possibility of not voting can be considered as an additional option that an individual may choose in the third step of Figure 1.1. The only difference is that we expect this option to be picked not when it corresponds to an actual preference, which would be difficult to determine both conceptually and empirically, but rather when the preferences for all the other options are not big enough to motivate a person to vote. This gives to preference strength the role of mediator between a number of factors and the effective act of going to vote. Indeed, the few attempts to explicitly account
for such a factor confirm its effect on the actual propensity to vote for a party (see Franklin et al. 1996). This premise implies that, as we look for some indirect reasons to turnout, we are again looking for direct reasons why a person should be strongly attracted by at least one of the available alternatives. In other words, our explanation of turnout will again pass by the determinants of party preferences. This approach has become increasingly common in the last decades. It has been shown that voters are more willing to turnout the more they perceive an election to be “meaningful”, with the latter concept referring to the extent to which they are offered alternative choices and the extent to which they perceive the outcome of the election to be into play, that is, the closeness of the race (see Aarts and Wessels 2005; Wessels and Schmitt 2008). While these two aspects can be considered to be pure contextual effects, as they should influence all citizens in the same way, other studies look at how the attractiveness of the options can vary across individuals within the same context, depending on their position vis-a-vis the parties. Rational voting literature has been long concerned with the concepts of “indifference” and “alienation” (see Adams et al. 2006; Anderson and Gloom 1992; Plane and Gershtenson 2004; Thurner and Eymann 2000). While the first is directly related to the differentiation of the choice set, predicting a non-vote for those citizens who find the options to be too similar to each other, the second concept refers to the lack of attractiveness of all of them. According to these models, citizens positioned very far from every party should abstain simply because voting would be worthless. In this view, the strength of preferences is the middle-step between acknowledging the scarce attractiveness of the supply and deciding to desert the booth. Figure 1.4 provides a visual example of how alienation works in a two-party system.

The two top panels in the figure show the effect of increasing policy differentiation between parties on a moderate voter \( (V_1) \), while the two bottom panels show the same effect on an extreme voter \( (V_2) \). The x-axis corresponds to the ideological space, and goes from 0 (extreme left) to 10 (extreme right), while the y-axis corresponds to the utility that a citizen can expect by voting for a certain party.

This is defined following the Downsian assumption of rationality:

“Each citizen estimates the utility income from government action he expects each party would provide him if it were in power in the forthcoming election period, that is, he first estimates the utility income Party A would provide him, then the income Party B would

\[14\] In fact, the definition of indifference presented by this literature resembles a situation of high uncertainty, as it is defined above. However, in such literature turnout is conceptualized as a consequence of the difference between utilities for voting for different candidates being bigger than a given threshold that, in turn, is a function of individual's costs and benefits of voting (see Adams et al. 2006, Sanders 2001). In this paper, this calculus is assumed to take place prior to the attribution of preferences to parties, i.e. strong preferences are assumed to have already passed the “cost-benefit test”. Moreover, empirical results presented below show that the level of preference certainty does not have any effect on the probability to turnout.
provide, and so on. He votes for whatever party he believes would provide him with the highest utility income from government action.” (Downs 1957b)

According to this model, the highest utility for each citizen is generated by a party lying on her exact same position, and it decreases the more a party gets distant, that is, the more the policy option offered by a party gets different from her ideal point. In Figure 1.4, the vertical gray line represents this ideal point, which corresponds to 4 for $V_1$ and 9 for $V_2$, and the black dotted line represents the utility that a party positioned in each point of the scale can generate for the two voters respectively

To give an example, in the top-left panel, $P_1$ is positioned on 3.5, generating a utility loss of $|4 - 3.5| = 0.5$, while $P_2$ is positioned on 6, generating a utility loss of $|4 - 6| = 2$. Accordingly, the utility that $V_1$ can expect from voting for $P_1$ and $P_2$ is, respectively, 9.5 and 8 on a maximum of 10.

However, the most important piece of information in Figure 1.4 is the black horizontal line, namely the

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15 In this example, the utility loss is a function of the absolute (or city-block) distance between the voter and the party. In some other studies the utility function is calculated using the squared Euclidean distances. However, the two functions are equivalent, although the absolute distances are said to lead to slightly better model fits than the squared distances (see e.g. Lewis and King 1999 for a discussion of this point).
maximum utility that voters $V_1$ and $V_2$ can expect from the options that they are offered in the two scenarios. Moving from the two left panels to the two right panels, the distance between $P_1$ and $P_2$ changes from 2.5 points to 7.5 points. In the left panels, the two parties are positioned next to each other around the center of the ideological space, while in the right panels they are positioned near the two extreme poles. For the moderate $V_1$, in the top panels, such an increased divergence between parties implies that the maximum utility that she can expect from voting changes from 9.5 to 7. On the other hand, for the extreme $V_2$, the same process implies and increment in maximum utility of the same extent. Thus, as the differentiation between the two parties increases, $V_1$ will be increasingly alienated from the policy supply, i.e. she will be in general less attracted by the options on offer, while for $V_2$ it will be the other way round. As a consequence, the propensity to vote should decrease for the moderate $V_1$, and increase for the extreme $V_2$.

This example shows how divergence of party positions can influence the motivation to turnout for moderate and extreme voter under the assumption of rationality. Although such an assumption is not necessary for this study, the model can be used as a benchmark for derive some expectations about the effect of polarization on voters' preference strength, given their ideological position. However, there are two main points of divergence between a purely rational model and the model of choice proposed here. First, the main object of this study are party preferences, while the rational model discussed above refers to party utilities. Second, while in the Downsian proximity model utilities are assumed to be influenced by pure spatial considerations, our model of preferences, as we have seen in the previous section, allows for other factors of influence.

Regarding the first point, while party preferences do not necessarily correspond to the utilities generated by each party, we can expect them to be influenced to a certain extent by this type of calculations. If voting is seen as a wish to influence policy-making, as van der Brug et al. (2000) claim, and as it was discussed above, then party utilities become one particular strong influencing factor of party preferences, together with, for example, party identification or value orientations. This is equivalent to add an error term next to ideological distances to the equation predicting party preferences. The second point is somehow related to the first one, and regards the role played by other party characteristics in determining preferences. In section 3.1 I discussed the importance of size for the overall attractiveness of a party. This point is still valid here, and plays an important role for the expectations that we can derive given a certain party arrangement.

Thus, a general hypothesis that we can formulate at this point is that a voter should have strong
preferences when she is positioned close to a relevant party, and weak preferences when she is positioned far away from all the relevant parties in her system. Again, the definition of relevance here reflects mainly the party size. Although other reasons may sum up to make an individual consider a party as relevant, in the synthetic model presented here party positions and sizes are the main factor that individuals are expected to take into account as they evaluate the options they are offered.

In this framework, the effect of party polarization is straightforward. As the position of the larger parties diverge towards the ideological poles, the center becomes increasingly empty for what concerns the relevant options. Thus, while the probability to find an attractive option increases for the voters taking more extreme ideological stands, the opposite occurs to the voters positioned in the center. This should imply that, again, in more polarized systems preference strength follows a U-shaped distribution along the left-right. Given the definition of strength as an indicator of how “enthusiastic” a citizen gets from the options that she is offered, this effect should make moderate voters less and less likely to turnout the more a party system is polarized. On the other hand, in systems characterized by low polarization, the opposite effect should be more likely. In this case, given a concentration around the center of the largest parties, extreme voters should display weak preferences, and therefore be less likely to turnout. The next section will provide an empirical test of these two expectations, i.e. that preference strength is positively associated with the probability to turnout, and that higher polarization increases preference strength for extreme voters while decreasing it for moderate voters.

D.2.4.2 Long and short-term effect on voting behavior, and systemic factors of influence

Following the format used in the section regarding preference certainty, this section will first present a validation of preference strength as a construct that is positively associated to the probability to turnout, and then I will move to test empirically how context characteristics can influence it.

For the first test I will again take advantage of the DPES panel studies conducted with two waves each in the years 1982-1986, 1986-1989 and 1989-1994. Although the need for panel data was more salient in the validation of preference certainty, for the higher validity that this type of data have in determining vote-switching, such a structure will be useful for testing the effect of preference strength on turnout as well, at least for two reasons. First, it offers the possibility to include among the predictors a measure of past turnout, to control for possible habitual behavior. This control is tremendously important if we want to make sure that preference strength is not a consequence of a chronic lack of interest for the election, which may be in turn influenced by a habitual tendency to
abstain. Second, panel data offer the possibility to test the effect on turnout of preference strength in the present as well as in the past. The latter is again a proxy for long-term tendency to have weak preferences. Because the main hypothesis here is that preference strength is influenced by the availability of attractive alternatives at the moment of the election, we want to make sure that its effect on turnout at the present time is not due to a persistent individual tendency to be weakly engaged.

As we said, the concept of preference strength refers to the extent to which an individual is attracted by the options she is offered. This means that, in theory, it should be enough for her to find one single very attractive option to find the motivation to make a choice. Thus, the easier and most straightforward way to operationalize preference strength is by using the value of the highest PTV score given by an individual to any party. This variable is equivalent to what Franklin et al. define “appeal of best choice”, as it refers exactly to “the extent to which the choices on offer match the needs of each individual” (1996, p. 316). Although Franklin et al. in their study find a significant effect of such variable on turnout (see 1996, p. 322) their model does not tackle the question whether this effect is due to a reaction to the political supply as it is arranged at the current election, or it is due to a more stable engagement or interest by the party options. To test the latter point I will include in the model of turnout preference strength as measured at the previous election, and the change between the previous and the current election.

The choice for the variables included in the model follows what it has been done for testing the effect of certainty on vote-switching in the previous section. Thus the control variables, next to a dummy for the lagged turnout, are the certainty of the preferences at the previous and the current election, the age, the level of education (measured in class at the previous election), a dummy for the working class members, the strength of party attachment (also measured at the previous election), and the ideological extremity, both lagged and differentiated. The logic behind including the level of certainty in this model is that such a construct may have an effect on turnout independent from the one of preference strength. This expectation follows the finding by Rosenstone and Hansen (1993), later confirmed by Holbrook et al. (2001) that when a citizen strongly prefers a candidate over the others, she will be more likely to vote, because the potential loss in case of victory of another candidate should work as a push for her motivation. Of course, both studies have been conducted in the US, where the presence of only two candidates increases the likelihood that a strong preference for a candidate may correspond automatically with the refusal of the other. In a multiparty system, such as the Netherlands and many other European countries, the alternatives may be more nuanced and, therefore, a great difference in
preferences may not represent a motivational factor per se. On the other hand, such nuances should be captured by the level of certainty, rather than by its effect on turnout. Thus, the difference between the first preference and the others can still have an influence on turnout which is not necessarily due to the strength of the first preference. The results of the logit model predicting the probability to turnout are shown in Table 1.3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turnout positive</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Robust SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turnout t-1</td>
<td>2.42</td>
<td>0.28 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength t-1</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.10 **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength change</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.09 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certainty t-1</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certainty change</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age class (measured t-1)</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Class</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of Party Attachment (measured t-1)</td>
<td>0.56</td>
<td>0.14 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-Right Extremity t-1</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-Right Extremity change</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-2.72</td>
<td>0.93 ***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Pseudo R²                             | 0.20        |
| Number Of Observations                | 1738        |

*** = P < 0.01; ** = P < 0.05; * = P < 0.1

*Table 1.3: Preference Strength on Turnout in the Dutch NES Panel Study*

The results of the model show that only four of all the variables included have a significant effect on the probability to turnout. Luckily, two of them are the variables that we care about. The first thing to notice is that the habitual nature of turnout results quite evident from the strong effect of the lagged dependent variable. The odds to go to vote given the fact of having done it at the previous election are bigger than 11 to one. Yet preference strength has a long-running independent effect, in spite of controlling for lagged turnout. For each unit increase in the lagged preference strength, the odds to vote against non voting are of the 1.23 to one. The effect of the increase or decrease of preference strength is stronger, although only slightly. This indicates that the updated preferences have a bigger influence on the propensity to turnout, with the odds of 1.29 to one for each unit increase, a result that is somehow reversed from what we have seen with preference certainty, there the long-term influence was stronger than the influence of the change. The only other variable which has a significant effect on turnout
among the ones included in the model is again the strength of party attachment, which increases the odds to vote of 1.76 to one for every unit increase. In general, the effect of strength of party preferences on the probability to turnout is not particularly strong, although statistically significant. Most importantly, such an effect is robust to the inclusion in the model of the lagged turnout, as a proxy for habit, and the strength of party attachment, which should imply more engagement and, in turn, more propensity to go to vote to support the preferred party. Thus, the goal of the test to prove the association between strength of party preferences and propensity to turnout has been met.

The second goal of this section is to test the effect of party polarization on preference strength for people positioned in the center and toward the extremes of the ideological space. As we told in the previous subsection, the expectation is that higher polarization corresponds to higher preference strength for the non-moderate voters, and low preference strength for the voters positioned in the center. Moreover, following the same principle, lower polarization should go together with higher strength for moderate voters and lower strength for extreme voters.

To provide a first visual inspection of how preference strength is distributed along the left-right in different contexts, Figure 1.5 shows the two variables plotted in the twenty-eight political systems for the twenty-seven countries surveyed in the EES 2009. The x-axis represents the left-right space, while the y-axis represents preference strength. Both are measured on an eleven-point scale, although for the multilevel models on the full EES dataset they have been rescaled to ten-point scales, to fit the measurement in the other studies. Again, the gray dots correspond to the measured values of strength, and the black line connects the mean values calculated at every point of the left-right. The political systems are ordered by the level of party polarization.

As the figure shows, the average preference strength is rather uniformly distributed toward the top values along the ideological space in the most of the systems. However, as polarization increases, it gets more common to observe a decrease around the center, as the black line shows. This is particularly evident in Hungary, Italy, Spain, as well as in Malta and in the Czech Republic. Interestingly Cyprus, the most polarized political system surveyed in the 2009 study, does not show a particularly accentuated drop in the middle scale. Rather, the distribution of strength along the left-right in this country looks more uniform than in other less polarized systems, such as Poland, Lithuania or Portugal. As in the case of certainty in Figure 1.3, in some countries preference strength seem to follow an asymmetric pattern, indicating that voters on one ideological side are more attracted by the parties offered than the ones on the opposite side. This is the case for Belgium-Flanders, the UK and Estonia.
A quick observation of the distribution of the parties in Figure 1.2 shows that in those countries the left side of the ideological space is rather empty in terms of offered options. In all three cases the leftmost large party is positioned around 4, a fairly moderate left position. Although these examples represent cases where certainty decreases on the extremes in systems characterized by low levels of polarization, there does not seem to be any tendency to have weaker preferences among extreme voters in non-polarized countries. In general, in none of the countries in the 2009 study the variation of strength along the space is particularly accentuated, indicating that the construct does not change as much as certainty across ideological positions. Still, a slight pattern seems to emerge from the picture, making the theoretical expectation worth a test with the extended database.

Similarly to the test for certainty, a multilevel model to predict preference strength is run on a pooled set of EES studies, including the years 1994, 1999, 2004 and 2009, for a total of eighty elections. The first model specified, Model 1 in Table 1.4, is a baseline model including all the main effects without any interaction. The social-structural controls are gender and age of the respondent, a categorical variable indicating the social class in which the respondent locates herself, and the frequency of attendance to the religious services. The only control for spatial effect is the absolute distance from the closest party, which should capture the level of alienation from the policy supply at every point on the left-right. To control for individual factors of motivation the model includes the level of interest for
politics and the strength of party attachment, both rescaled from 0 to 1. An additional control is a variable indicating the proportion of PTVs where the respondent gave either the maximum or the minimum value. Although such a variable may seem to be inappropriate, as introduces obvious endogeneity in the model (the fact that a person has preference strength equal to the maximum will be recorded by the variable) its presence it necessary to control for the tendency of some respondents to give extreme responses, even though they do not actually have strong preferences. Moreover, given that dependent variable is measured on a continuous scale, rather than a dichotomous variable indicating maximum strength, there should be no risk that this control overpredicts a positive outcome. The country level predictors included in the model are the effective number of legislative parties, the distance in weeks from the closest first-order election, and the level of polarization. Last but not least, the level of ideological extremity is measured as the absolute distance by the metric center of the scale. The other three models follow the same logic and order as the models for preference certainty. In Model 2 left-right extremity is interacted with polarization. Model 3 adds country fixed effects, to control for country specific intercepts. Finally, in Model 4 polarization is interacted with the strength of party attachment, to control for a possible moderating effect of partisanship on preferences. In all the three models, the effect of the interaction is expected to be positive, while the main effect of polarization is expected to turn negative due to the lack of attractive options for the moderate voters. The results of the multilevel models show that preference strength is influenced by several social-structural variables, as well as factors related to individual motivation. However, when it gets to the hypothesized phenomena, the scenarios confirm only partially the presence of the expected effects. But let us proceed step-by-step.

In all models, the gender dummy has a positive and significant coefficient, indicating that female voters have, in general, stronger preferences than males. The effect of age is negative, indicating that the older voters are less attracted by the options offered than the younger. Among other social-structural indicators, class has a weak negative effect only for those putting themselves as members of the lower-middle class, while the frequency of attendance to the religious services seems to work as a strong motivating factor, with a positive and significant coefficient. A motivating effect is also given by the interesting for politics and by the strength of partisan attachment.
Moving to the variables of interest for the study, the baseline model shows a negative effect of polarization and a positive effect of ideological extremity, in both cases significant. On the one hand, a negative main effect of polarization in the model with no the interaction with ideological extremity is not expected. This implies substantially that in more polarized countries all the voters have weaker party preferences, no matter their ideological position. On the other hand, for a slight pattern of increased strength toward the extremes of the distribution in all the countries was visible from Figure 1.5, a positive main effect of ideological extremity does not come as a surprise.

Moving to the models with the interaction effect, the main expectation of this study is confirmed only in part. While ideological extremity is always positive and significant in more polarized party systems, the main effect fails to turn negative, and in Model 4 it is even positive significant. This reconfirms the scenario implied by Figure 1.5, namely that preference strength simply does not become weaker for extreme voters, even when the parties are converging towards the center. The second point is more

### Table 1.4: Multilevel models for Preference Strength on EES 1994, 1999, 2004 and 2009.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
<th>Model 3</th>
<th>Model 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (1 = female)</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.02***</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.02***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.00***</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.00***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class (base = Middle class)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower-Middle class</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.02***</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.02***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper-Middle class</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper class</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Attendance</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.02***</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.02***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance Closest Party</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.02***</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.02***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weeks from the closest NE</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective N. of Electoral Parties</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarization</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.08**</td>
<td>-0.33</td>
<td>0.10***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Extreme PTVs</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.03***</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.03***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest for Politics</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.03***</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.03***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of Party ID</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>0.03***</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>0.03***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strength of Party ID * Polarization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-Right Extremity</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.01***</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-Right Extremity * Polarization</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.02***</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.02***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>7.39</td>
<td>0.20***</td>
<td>7.62</td>
<td>0.21***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** = P < 0.01; ** = P < 0.05; * = P < 0.1
problematic. The negative main effect of polarization gets stronger in Model 2 and Model 4, but it becomes positive, although not significant, in Model 3, when country fixed effects are introduced in the equation. This result can imply that, while a negative effect of polarization on the motivation of moderate voters can be found in the cross-country comparison, such an effect disappears as the variation of polarization is compared across elections within the same country. This means that over-time changes in the level of polarization do not decrease or increase the motivation to vote for moderate voters, while it seems clear that in more polarized countries moderate voters are in general less motivated than in less polarized countries.

All in all, preference strength seems to be in general bigger for extreme voters, no matter the level of polarization (although the effect in non-polarized countries loses statistical significance in two models out of three). On the other hand, moderate voters have weaker preferences in more polarized political systems, although this effect disappears when we control for country fixed effects. The next section will resume the results presented here and in the previous part, and discuss their implications for assessing the effect of polarization on electoral competitiveness.

### D.2.5 Conclusions

This study starts from a simple question: is party polarization good or bad for the competitiveness of a political system? Over the last decade, some literature has been answering this question affirmatively: party polarization increases the substantive issue or ideological content of the elections, offering to voters meaningful alternatives among which they can coherently choose what they prefer (Lachat 2008, 2011; Wessels and Schmitt 2008). However, other studies have pointed out that polarization can also increase voters' partisanship, making party identities more salient (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Hetherington 2001). While these two points do not necessarily exclude each other, the effect of party polarization on the overall quality of democracy seems to be rather curvilinear (Schmitt and Freire 2011).

The substantial contribution of this paper is based on a reasonable assumption: in competitive political systems, parties actually compete for the votes. This implies that voters are to a certain extent open to change their party support in case they are disappointed by their old choice, or in case they find a new, more attractive option. Given this assumption, this paper shows that high levels of party polarization can decrease the competitiveness of a political system by reducing the number of alternatives that voters find attractive. However, this is meant to happen in different ways for different groups of voters.
First, as polarization increases, the political conflict moves from the sides to the center, that is to say, the competition between parties on the same ideological side gives way to the competition between parties standing on opposite ideological sides. In other words, while less polarizes systems can be characterized by several left or right-wing parties competing for an ideologically-similar electorate, in more polarized countries the main focus of the competition will be between left and right parties, with the within-side local competition eventually reduced to the minimum. This is congruent with Lachat's (2008) claim that ideological polarization increases the relevance of the ideological conflict. However, this can also imply that ideologically “partial” voters, i.e. those who are positioned on one of the two sides, are only interested in the most relevant party on their side, and are not interested at all in its main competitor, which happens to be far away on the opposite side. This makes them fairly reluctant to switch their support over time, and more likely to stick to the same party across elections. Second, polarization implies somehow a weakening, if not a disappearance or displacement, of the party options standing around the ideological center. Such a phenomenon reduces the alternatives for the moderate voters even more, to the point that they can not actually find any attractive option at all. This, in turn, decreases their willingness to bother going to vote.

These results are based on a two-step model of voting presented in section 2. After evaluating each party option independently, citizens are expected to assess to what extent they prefer each one of them. Then, assuming that they will go for the most preferred one, citizens are meant to make a party choice. In this framework, the main focus of the study is on two characteristics, or parameters, of each voter's distribution of preferences: the certainty and the strength of their preferences. Certainty refers to the exclusion of the alternative options. It reaches the maximum when a citizen has only one party option that she would ever vote for, and the minimum when a citizen would vote for all the parties running for an election. Strength refers to what extent citizens are attracted by what is on offer. It reaches it maximum when a voter has at least one party that she feels very motivated to vote for, and its minimum when she would not vote for any party.

The second section has confirmed that higher certainty has a positive effect on the probability to stick on the same party for two following elections, or to switch to abstention, rather than switching to another party. Thus, the first construct has been confirmed as a valid measurement of the antecedents of vote choice. Moreover the test in the second section, conducted on a large number of elections, has confirmed that the more a party system polarizes, the more the distribution of certainty of the voters positioned along the left-right dimension approximates a U-shaped curve: lower for the voters
positioned in the middle, higher for the voters positioned on the sides.

The third section has confirmed that preference strength is indeed positively associated with a higher probability to turnout. Moreover, it has been shown that in more polarized systems preference strength is reduced for the moderate voters, although such an effect disappeared when country fixed effects were added to the model, indicating that changes in the level of polarization within the same country do not alter the strength of the preferences of moderate voters.

Thus, the question formulated at the beginning of this section can be answered in the following way: as long as system competitiveness is related to the extent to which parties are competing for the same electorate, polarization decreases competitiveness. However, for it to be meaningfully reduced by the means of the mechanism described above, some particular circumstances are required. First, that there is one most important option for each side of the ideological continuum. This condition refers to the effective reduction of the local competition within the same ideological side. In many polarized countries, it can be observed that while voters on one side are more certain of their preferences, those on the opposite side are not, because two or more parties are competing there for ideologically-similar citizens. Second, high levels of polarization should be, presumably lasting for a certain amount of time. To make moderate voters become less attracted by the party options on offer, it is not necessary that the level of polarization of a party system changes from an election to another. Rather, it is comparing the polarization across countries that this phenomenon emerges.

All in all, these findings are relevant in two ways. First, they help understanding voters' choices, i.e. the choices to switch or stay on the same party, the choice to vote or to abstain, as partially influenced by the political supply that they have to face. This point includes the fact that some analyses run in this study show that different types of voting behavior, such as switching, are indeed influenced by the distribution of a voter's preferences, distribution that can change over time given the options on offer. Second, they also help to understand electoral results, and electoral change, as embedded into party-system characteristics that are proper of a country. Thus, we can expect lower levels of electoral volatility in countries characterized by more polarized party systems because voters on the sides are likely to have a distribution of preferences such that their propensity to switch will be lower, and the voter in the center may be not attracted enough by the options to go and vote. A possible direction for further research would be, after assessing these party-system effects on voters behavior, to test for potential party effects. This may contribute to our understanding of party competition and, again, of the quality of electoral democracy.
D.3 Study 2

When it's hard to change. Party system polarization as a constraint for the voters' choice
D.3.1 Introduction

In this paper I argue that party polarization can work as a constraint for the voter, reducing the set of alternatives that she perceives as viable, and therefore making it more difficult for the electorate to punish the government when it performs poorly. In this perspective, in a highly-polarized system the electoral competitiveness is reduced and the government is relatively more free to act inefficiently or in a way which does not represent the interests of the most of the citizens. In the long run, this is expected to undermine citizens' political confidence and satisfaction with democracy. The intended contribution of this work is double: first, it intends to contribute to the literature on the effects of party system polarization on voting behavior with a different conceptualization and a new, alternative set of hypotheses. Second, this is expected to provide an additional contextual explanation of why voters keep rewarding the governing parties although, according to rational models of performance vote (e.g. Duch & Stevenson 2008), they should not.

The interest for the effects of political polarization has characterized the work of a large part of political research in the last decade. On the one hand, there has been growing concern among US scholars for the increased level of partisanship among Republican and Democrat elites (Hetherington 2001; Hetherington & Weiler 2009; Layman & Carsey 2002; Layman et al. 2006; McCarty et al. 2006) and its alleged extension to the mass public (Abramowitz & Saunders 2008; Fiorina et al. 2005, 2008; Fiorina & Abrams 2008; Levendusky 2009). On the other hand, scholars interested in European multiparty systems have been conceptualizing polarization as the level of divergence of the policy stands taken by the political actors on the ideological left-right dimension (Dalton 2008, 2011; Klingemann 2005; Kroh 2009; Lachat 2011; Sartori 1976; Schmitt & Freire 2010). In this framework, a highly-dispersed distribution of the political actors on the policy space may hint at the fact that the preferences of the groups in the society are widely differentiated, due to the presence of deep social cleavages (Lipset & Rokkan 1967; Sani & Sartori 1983). In fact, scholars provided abundant evidence of the correlation between the degree of party divergence on a given policy dimension and the saliency of such dimension for the electoral competition (Adams et al. 2005; Alvarez & Nagler 2004; Kroh 2009; Lachat 2008; van der Eijk et al. 2005).

The aim of this work, rather than going against the view supported by previous findings, is to contribute to the literature on the electoral effects of party polarization by pointing out a consequence that higher ideological conflict between the political parties can have on voters' volatility in multiparty systems. To put it bluntly, what I argue in this paper is that the degree of party polarization may reduce
the level of the competitiveness of the elections by influencing the extent to which voters are willing to change their party support over time. If we admit that citizens' evaluation of parties is influenced by their policy positions (see e.g. Adams et al. 2005; Downs 1957), we should expect voters to be more likely to switch from one party to another the more the set of alternatives offered to them allows choosing for options which are not too different from what they want. Moreover, given that parties' capacity to implement policies without compromise is a function of their electoral strength, we should expect voters to be more reluctant to move when the options are politically stronger. These two aspects (i.e. distance from the alternatives and strength) are expected to make it more difficult for those whose policy preferences are best represented by one party, to consider voting for another. Thus, in more politically polarized contexts, voting behavior should display in general less variability.

This group-based concept of polarization draws from the “identification-alienation” framework, proposed by Esteban & Ray (1994). Assuming the possibility to divide the population into a given number of groups, in respect of a set of characteristics, the level of polarization is supposed to increase as a function of both the internal homogeneity of the members of the same group and the heterogeneity between members of different groups. In this conception, identification stands for the the sense of belonging shared by the individuals who are in the same group, which is supposed to increase as the relevant traits get more uniform and clearly identifiable, while alienation stands for the sense of distance they perceive to separate them from the members of the other groups. Clearly enough, the latter concept of distance refers to the difference between the attributes shared by the members of one group and those shared by the members of another (see also Duclos et al. 2004; Esteban et al. 2007).

In this paper I apply this group-based concept of polarization to the well-known ideological left-right space. In this view, an exemplary situation of high identification resembles a constellation where the supply for a given set of preferences (say leftist policies) consists in a single big party, while lower identification corresponds to a constellation where the same portion of space is covered by several, smaller parties. Furthermore, a situation of high alienation between groups corresponds to a party constellation where the alternative options stand very far from the best position, as it may be for a leftist voter who evaluates an extreme right-wing party. Putting these two elements together, political polarization should be higher in a system consisting of strong and distant parties (e.g. two equally big parties placed at the two extremes of the policy space), and lower in a system where the power is shared among several small parties (low identification) or the strong parties are close to each other (low alienation). At the aggregate level, I expect the vote switching to be lower when a system is more
polarized, since voters should find it more difficult to find a viable alternative. At the group level, I expect supporters of bigger parties which are ideologically distant from the others to be less likely to switch than supporters of parties which are small or which policy stands are positioned in a relatively “crowded” area.

In the next sections I will explain why this theoretical framework represents an advancement in the scholarly understanding of ideological polarization and its effects on the electorate. Then, I will discuss why the Netherlands represent a good environment where to find evidence for my theoretical expectations. Finally, I will test the hypothesis derived from the theory on a set of Dutch National Election Studies going from 1981 to 2006, using a multilevel cross-classified model. The findings suggest that in the Netherlands, supporters of parties which are highly polarized from the others are indeed less likely to switch, even when they are not satisfied by the policy implementation of the party they support. The bigger implication of this result is that when the polarization between parties is bigger the level of competitiveness of the political system is reduced, and the Governments have less incentives to satisfy their electorate.

D.3.2 Party system polarization and voting behavior so far

Research on the electoral consequences of party system polarization has been taking different ways in the past decades. Scholars have put their focus on two main factors shaping the political game: the degree of partisanship and the degree of policy differentiation. Given that these two aspects are not completely unrelated to each other (Levendusky 2009; Schmitt & Holmberg 1995; Schmitt 2009), this present work is meant to contribute to the latter research tradition, namely the one concerned about the consequences of party polarization as a function of the level of policy divergence between parties.

The starting point of this pattern is the simple claim that in a system where all the parties offer the same policy options, the voters will not bother thinking about their own policy preferences, but rather they will rely on different heuristics, e.g. party identification, to make a choice. This concept constitutes the base of Key's metaphor of the *echo chamber*: “The voice of the people is but an echo. The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the input. As candidates and parties clamor for attention and vie for the popular support, the people's verdict can be no more than a selective reflection from among the alternatives and outlooks presented to them” (Key 1966, p. 2).

This view has been widely supported by empirical evidence over the years. The more the parties express different positions with regard to issues, the more the electorate's response will reflect clarity in
this respect (Carmines & Stimson 1986; Pomper 1972). Broadly speaking, what the literature shows regarding party divergence, is that it is has a strong saliency effect on the calculus of voting. When parties represent clear alternatives over a given set of policies, the voters will choose the policy option that they prefer. This has been empirically confirmed for different issues in different contexts (Alvarez & Nagler 2004, Lachat 2011), for the traditional class identity (van der Eijk et al. 2005), value orientations (Knutsen & Kumlin 2005) and the more encompassing ideological dimension (Dalton 2008, 2011; Ensley 2007; Lachat 2008; Kroh 2009; Wessels & Schmitt 2008).

There are two different types of argument that can be moved in response of this view. The first is that party do not necessarily emphasize issues on which they offer alternative positions, but they may also do it simply because they think they are better in handling the problem (see Budge & Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). This reputation-based argument is particularly valid for valence issues, i.e. those issues on which there is no real disagreement, but rather the same goals are shared by all the citizens (see Budge 1994; Stokes 1963). In fact, these arguments have been proven not to be challenging the strength of the association between policy differentiation and policy saliency. Van der Brug (2004) demonstrates that the effect of issue saliency on the vote is generally mediated by ideology. Bélanger & Meguid (2008) show that the issue ownership strategy works mainly on those individuals who are more interested in a certain issue. Finally, Green (2007) and Green & Hobolt (2008) show that in Britain the competence argument has become fairly strong when the two major parties have started depolarizing.

A second point which can be moved against the saliency effect of party polarization on voting behavior regards the direction of the causality. In short, parties may be strategically taking diverging positions on issues which are already considered important by the voters. Adams et al. (2005) show that the equilibrium position of parties tends to become more polarized the more the issue dimension considered is more salient (p. 55). Moreover Bernstein (1995) demonstrates that for appealing those citizens who consider an issue important, converging to the central position is hardly the winning strategy.

What I argue here is that these two criticisms do not necessarily go against the theoretical assumptions on which this study is based. The direction of causality between the degree of party divergence and the voters' perceptions of issue saliency does not represent a problem here, as long as we can assume that the left-right dimension is relevant both for the voters and the parties. Making this assumption implies expecting that voters will take into consideration parties' policy positions on the ideological dimension,
thus engaging in *policy voting*\(^{16}\). Given the amount of literature built on this premise (see e.g. Adams et al. 2005; Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1982) this choice seems to be unreasonable. Regarding the “performance-evaluation” point, this will be partially included in my model. More specifically, the way in which I conduct the empirical test will be to put polarization as a moderator for the effect of Government satisfaction on the probability to switch for those who voted for a governing party in the past. The reduction of the propensity to change for the unsatisfied voters due to polarization may hint at the fact that the “position” argument holds even in case of “valence” considerations. Thus, this paper does not challenge previous findings about the saliency effect of party divergence on voters' issue considerations. Rather, this effect will be assumed as a starting point to investigate what happens when the policy options are strongly *identified* and *alienated* from each other. In the next section I will go through this conceptualization of polarization, and draw my hypotheses.

### D.3.3 Party system polarization in the identification-alienation framework

Esteban & Ray's (1994) definition of polarization is based on a simple intuition: given a population of actors defined by a set of relevant characteristics (e.g. the income of the citizens in a country), polarization should be related to the presence of *clusters*, rather than the *range* of the overall distribution. In other words, the information that we are seeking when we study the degree of polarization of a certain population does not refer to how dissimilar two individuals can be from each other, but whether the dissimilarity occurs between groups which are big enough to reach a critical mass. When this condition is met, society is expected to end up in conflict or social unrest.

In this conceptualization, there are two aspects which need to be considered if we want to assess whether, and to what extent, a society is polarized: the relative *size* of the groups in which the population is clustered and the *distance* between them (on the dimension where the relevant characteristics are observed). In Esteban & Ray's view, these two group-level characteristics are supposed to affect the individuals in two complementary ways: a larger group size should increase the level of *identification* of its members, while a higher dissimilarity from the other groups should

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\(^{16}\) In the literature, the terms 'policy voting' and 'issue voting' are used as two nuances of the same concept. Generally, the term 'policy' refers to a concrete course of political action about a certain topic, while 'issue' refers to the topic itself. Therefore, the expression 'policy voting' emphasizes more what is being chosen (a desired policy outcome), while 'issue voting' emphasizes more the area of interest of the choice (a certain policy domain). On the other side of the coin, the term 'ideological voting' is normally used when the issue domain under study is the left-right dimension, which can be considered a summary of the political issues which are relevant in a certain system at the time of a certain election (see Freire 2008; Huber 1989; Inglehart 1990; Schmitt and van der Eijk 2009). In this paper I use the expressions 'issue voting', 'policy voting' and 'ideological voting' interchangeably.
increase their sense of *alienation* from the rest of the society (Esteban & Ray 1994, p. 830). Thus, the two effects are supposed to work interactively: “polarization is related to the alienation that individuals and groups feel from one another, *but such alienation is fuelled by notions of within-group identity.*” (Duclos et al. 2004, p. 1737, emphasis in the original).

Initially, this framework was to be applied to the domain of income inequalities, to provide a new measurement and a new concept that could link such a phenomenon to the rise of social conflict. However, it can be applied to the domain of politics too. As described above, the concept of *party system polarization* adopted by political science is a function of the parties' positions on a given policy space. Substantially, each of these positions refers to a set of political actions that a party is expected to implement or support in case it is elected. In this perspective, the ideological left-right space provides an almost 'natural' dimension where the policy preferences of the actors are observed. If we consider the parties running for an election as the *policy supply*, then the vote can be understood as a choice between a finite set of available options on a single ideological dimension. These options can be seen as the *clusters*, or the groups, in which the supply is divided. If we admit that voters choose the party which best represents their policy preferences (see Downs 1957), then we can also cluster the voters into a number of groups of *party supporters*, i.e. all those individuals who have their policy preferences best represented by one party.

In this perspective, *alienation* refers to the ideological distance between the parties, while *identification* to their relative size. The first point is fairly straightforward, for it refers to the well-known definition of party system polarization discussed above. A polarized party system indicates a situation where the policies offered by the parties are very different from one another. A likely consequence of this will be that the policy outcome expected from the electoral success of one party instead of another will be increasingly different the more the two parties are distant on the ideological space. Thus, a larger distance between the alternatives implies that the number of viable policy options for each voter will be reduced. In Esteban & Ray's terminology, this will *alienate* the voters from a certain portion of the policy supply.

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17 Insights from this theory have also been applied to other types of polarization. A similar index has been proposed for measuring ethnic polarization (Montalvo & Reynal-Querol 2005), and the Esteban & Ray one has been expanded to capture a more encompassing concept of 'social polarization' (Permayer 2008). This framework has also been applied in a wide project on the study of polarization and conflict (see http://www.polarizationandconflict.org).

18 I am not using the term 'partisans' on purpose. Although a feeling like party identification would fit nicely with the Esteban & Ray's conceptual framework, the scope of this paper remains in the limited range of the policy voting. A deeper understanding of the effects of party polarization on the partisan identity and on the formation of in-group and out-group categorization would possibly require the use of experimental data. A recent example of this can be find in Nicholson (2011).
Why a bigger party size should be an indicator of bigger identification is less intuitive. After all, a big party may also be a *catch-all party*, namely a party meant to represent a more heterogeneous range of interests. However, in Esteban & Ray's view, identification is supposed to work in interaction with alienation, i.e. mediating the effect of individual alienation by providing the group members with a bigger sense of their own and the others' condition. To put it differently, alienation itself becomes relevant when it involves significant portions of the society (see Duclos et al. 2004 p. 1738). Again, if we translate this concept to the domain of political supply, we end up admitting that polarization is not a simple measure of the range of policy space occupied by the parties, but rather that different parties should be given different weights according to their relative size. Two party systems that occupy the same policy range will report two different levels of polarization depending on whether the most extreme parties are big (more polarization) or small (less polarization). This is nothing more than the implicit assumption on which many measures of party polarization found in the literature are based (for some significant examples see Hazan 1995; Taylor & Herman 1971; van der Eijk et al. 2005).

However, the Esteban & Ray index differs from the most of the others in two respects. First, rather than focusing on the (weighted) distances of each party from the center, it is based on the (weighted) distances between each party and all the others. This operational choice is driven by a *group-centered* conception of polarization proper of the identification-alienation framework. The focus on the group is also reflected in a second peculiarity of the Esteban & Ray index: for each party, a measure of the distance from all the other parties (alienation) is weighted by the relative size (identification). This last component can be weighted by a parameter, $\alpha$, which represents the level of importance that identification has in the operationalization, i.e. the extent to which the presence of small parties is discounted in the construction of the index.

The Esteban & Ray measure is based on four axioms which are derived from the identification-alienation framework\textsuperscript{19}. The first three summarize the necessary elements for the index to resemble the theoretical expectations: global divergence from the center and local convergence of the groups both increase the level of polarization. Thus, the ideal maximum level of the Esteban & Ray index is empirically represented by two equally sized groups placed at the two extremes of the distribution. The fourth axiom states that the disappearance of a very small extreme party should not decrease the level of polarization. This is not directly derived from the identification-alienation framework and, by the authors' admission, it is less restrictive than the previous three. The equation below describes the

\textsuperscript{19} For a formalization of the axioms see Esteban & Ray (1994). For a good explanation of them applied to the domain of party systems see Indridason (2011).
operationalization of the index.

\[
POL(\pi, x) = \sum_{i=1}^{n} \sum_{j=1}^{n} \pi_i^{1+\alpha} \pi_j |x_i - x_j|
\]

Where \(\pi\) refers to the relative size of the group, \(x\) refers to the position of the group on the observed dimension and \(\alpha\) is a parameter that sets the level of sensitivity of the index to the group size, i.e. the level of identification\(^{20}\). The group focus of the measure is suggested by the fact that the index is nothing more than the sum of \(n\) party-level sub-measures, which are made by two components: the distance of each party \(j\) from the reference party \(i\) (weighted by \(j\)'s relative size), and the size of \(i\). This is weighted by \(1+\alpha\), with \(\alpha\) ranging from 0 to 1.6\(^{21}\).

Figure 2.1: Esteban & Ray polarization index in two hypothetical party systems.

To give an example of how the index works, let us take the two hypothetical party systems displayed in Figure 2.1. In the upper panel we have four parties which occupy a policy range of seven points on a

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\(^{20}\) The original index proposed on Esteban & Ray (1994) also includes as the first term on the right hand side of the equation a scaling parameter \(K\) used to normalize the measure (e.g. to constrain the range from 0 to 1). This parameter is a constant, and does not influence the relative ordering of the cases on which the measure is applied. Thus, its presence in the equation is not necessary.

\(^{21}\) Note that the fourth axiom postulated by Esteban & Ray (1994) further constrains \(\alpha\) between 1 and 1.6. As mentioned above, the function of this axiom is to state the non-importance of small groups and to differentiate the polarization index for income categories from the Gini index of income inequality. Yet, the fourth axiom is supposed to be only relevant as long as the measure aims to differ from the one of inequality precisely for the strong emphasis on identification – and its expected effect on the generation of social conflict. I argue that in case of party policy positions such a restriction is superfluous, for the introduction of the identification component already represents a conceptual departure from previous polarization measures.
scale from 1 to 10. In the lower panel, the two parties on each side merged at their middle point, and now they occupy a range of five points. Still, the level of polarization measured using the Esteban & Ray index is bigger in the lower panel, in spite of a smaller range of policy supplied.

Figure 2.1 also shows the effect of the parameter $\alpha$. The degree of measured polarization is more than the double in the lower panel when $\alpha$ is set to 1.3 (the middle value of the range recommended in order to satisfy the fourth axiom), but it is only slightly bigger when $\alpha$ is set to 0. In other words, the more the index is sensitive to identification, the more the level of polarization will indicate the presence of few, big groups. Conversely, decreasing the weight of the identification component by reducing the parameter $\alpha$ will produce an index where alienation, namely the distance between the groups, is equally weighted.

If we accept the definition of polarization stated above, we should expect that in a situation where the policy supply is highly-polarized, the level of electoral competitiveness is reduced. Given the assumption that voters choose a party according to their policy preferences, it is reasonable to expect that when the alternatives are polarized in terms of ideological stands, the set of viable options among which the electorate can choose will be, on average, reduced. An observable implication of this will be that the overall level of electoral volatility will be lower if polarization is higher. In a context where the spectrum of policy options is very wide, voters on the left (right) may find it very unlikely to switch to a right (left) party, because such a switch will mean for them choosing a set of policies that are too different from what they want. However, this will also depend on the number and the relative size of the parties occupying the range. The case whether there are many small or middle-sized parties or only a few, bigger parties, distributed along the same portion of the policy space, should make a bigger difference on the probability to switch. In the first case (many small parties) the distance between each party and its neighbors is supposed to be smaller, and therefore changing party support will not necessarily mean to undertake an excessively big policy shift. Moreover, in such a system it will be very unlikely that each one of the parties will form a government on its own. Thus we can expect voters not to be, in general, too much intransigent in terms of policy claims, for the only way to obtain policy gains would be through power-sharing. In the second case (few big parties) a switch from a left to a right party should imply a bigger policy shift because the parties on the left and the right are proposing way more homogeneous policy stands. Moreover, the more the strength of a party increases, the more

22 In a recent paper, Lachat (2011) hypothesizes that polarization should rather increase competitiveness. Whereas this appears to be in contradiction with the operating hypothesis in this paper, this is only due to the different conceptualization of competitiveness. In fact, Lachat defines more 'competitive' an election where voters rely more heavily on their issue preferences to make a party choice. In this paper such an effect is assumed, rather than questioned.
the possibility to rule without constraints or, at least, to have bigger weight in the bargaining process among those who share the power. Thus, the distance between the options will be reinforced by the fact that they are more likely to be mutually exclusive. In other words, a left (right) voter, will perceive a right (left) party to be way less likely to act for her interests.

D.3.4 An individual level test for the Dutch case

A first piece of empirical evidence supporting the claim that higher polarization reduces electoral competitiveness would consist in observing a negative covariation between the degree of party polarization and the amount of vote-switching taking place in a certain context. The Netherlands represent a good environment where to seek for this piece of evidence. Recent literature points out that the Dutch party system has experienced a consistent pattern of depolarization on the left-right issues during the last two decades of the 20th century (Adams et al. 2011; Schmitt & Freire 2010; Thomassen 2005). Moreover, during the same period, the electoral behavior of the Dutch electorate has shown an increasing level of instability (Mair 2008; van del Meer et al. 2011). This has been explained by the disappearance of the cleavage structure that kept the electorate loyal to their political representatives (Mair 2008) and by the emergence of new issue dimensions which 'shuffled' the patterns of volatility between traditional and new parties (Aarts & Thomassen 2008). Although this literature suggests a pattern of depolarization and increased volatility, a direct link between the ideological configuration of the party supply and the individual behavior of “switchers” and “standpatters” (both definitions borrowed by Key 1966) is still missing.

The importance of the cleavage-based explanations of the electoral outcomes follows the definition of the Netherlands as a pillarized society. The term refers to the traditional segmentation of the Dutch society into religious (Catholic or Protestant) and secular (Social Democrat or Liberal) subcultures, which displayed an impressive stability over time. Each one of these “pillars” has been for long represented in the political arena by a single party (Andeweg & Irwin 2002). However, the situation started changing during the 1960s, leading traditional social divisions to become less salient and party support less stable. By the 1970s, many of the indicators used to define the level of pillarization had weakened (see Andeweg & Irwin 2002, 34–38). Still, the major Dutch parties kept on being fairly polarized on the ideological dimension until the second half of the 1980s. After then, the two biggest parties, the social-democrat PvdA and the Christian-democrat CDA, engaged in a process of significant ideological convergence. On the right, the CDA moderated its position in terms of welfare policies,
although still remaining fairly conservative on moral issues such as euthanasia. On the left, the PvdA dramatically corrected its ideological stand towards the center, eventually entering into a coalition with the “historical adversary”, the liberal VVD (Adams et al. 2011).

However, together with the ideological convergence of the two major parties, a factor to contribute to the decrease of polarization of the Dutch political supply consists in the gain of importance of other minor parties. On the left-to-the-center side, following the rise of new post-materialistic values such as quality of democracy and the environment (see Inglehart 1977) and their integration into the general ideological space (Inglehart & Klingemann 1976), the progressive-liberal D66 and the green-leftist GroenLinks contributed to the dispersion of the leftist policy supply to a less homogeneous, and therefore less “identified”, set of options. On the right side, the relatively recent politicization of the ethnic integration issue, and its re-framing in terms of law-and-order policy stands (van Kersbergen & Krouwel 2008), coincided with the emergence of extreme right parties, such as the populist Pim Fortuyn and, more recently, the PVV. In terms of range of policy space occupied by the political supply, this new arrangement definitely implies an increase in polarization (Oosterwaal & Torenvlied 2010; Pellikaan et al. 2003). However, this also entails an increased dispersion of the right-wing choice set. Therefore, following the concept proposed earlier in this paper, the degree of polarization should be reduced.

There are other three aspects that make the Netherlands a good case for the test of my hypothesis. First, the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies offer a fairly wide time-span where the ideological positions of the most important parties are observed. This implies having a relatively high context variation due to the political dynamics discussed previously, controlling at the same time for the institutional set-up. The time frame chosen for the analysis, from 1981 to 2006, allows to capture the whole process of depolarization described above. The cumulative file published in 2010 represents a good data set for an empirical observation of the phenomena considered here. Second, the number of relevant parties in the Netherlands is highly stable during the time span considered in the analysis. This aspect should minimize any spurious effect of polarization given by the variation in the number of parties, and leave us free to focus on their position and relative strength. Third, the great level of openness of the Dutch

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23 Due to the absence of all the variable needed, the 1982 and 2003 elections will be excluded from the analytical model. More on this in the next section.

24 The data utilized in this paper were originally collected for the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies series. The original source studies documentation reports details about the authors and funding details for each individual study. The construction and documentation of the cumulative 1971-2006 data file have been made possible by the NWO grant 480-04-009. The original collectors of the data do not bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations published here.
electoral system gives virtually every party the same chance to get into a governing coalition, therefore making the electorate's preferences the most free as possible from strategic considerations, and giving the voters the factual possibility to move along the whole policy space (Mair 2008). A useful implication of this point is that the number of seats held by a party in the national Parliament will represent a good proxy for its strength among the public at the moment of the election. Moreover the variation of the distribution of seats, together with the variation of the parties' positions, should resemble fairly closely the patterns of actual policy preferences among the public.

Given the appropriateness of the Dutch context for a valid test of my theory, the next step consists in designing a model of individual voting behavior. As stated above, I use the probability to switch from a party to another between two elections as an indicator for the extent to which an individual is subject to party competition. According to this logic, in the extreme, hypothetical case of an election without any party competition, the voter should not even take into consideration other parties, and therefore keep on voting for the same, no matter what. Yet the opposite is hardly the case. We cannot expect voters who are subject to intense competition to be certainly switching, for the competition may be indeed won by the party that they voted for at the previous election. Therefore, a test for this theory requires first to find a condition under which the voters should switch. Then, if polarization indeed constrains the voter's choice, the main effect of this variable should be moderated by it. Drawing from the literature about economic voting, a fairly safe expectation is that voters tend to punish governing parties when they perform poorly. Following this fairly safe claim, we would expect citizens who voted at the previous election for a party that ended up in the governing coalition to be motivated to switch in case they are not satisfied by Government's policy implementation. Then, if the theory is correct, the probability that they actually switch is reduced when the party system is highly polarized.

As discussed above, one of the conceptual strengths of the Esteban & Ray's polarization measurement is the focus on the group level. In fact, given that a condition of polarization is a consequence of the presence of clusters (i.e. the index can not be computed if the distribution consists in only one cluster), the variable itself is nothing more than the sum of \( n \) cluster-level indicators. In other words, each group is supposed to measure a different level of alienation, due to its position relative to the others, and a different level of identification, due to its relative size. Thus, the influence of polarization on the

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25 Actually, in the vast literature on economic voting, the retrospective evaluation model has been proven to work differently under different institutional circumstances. However, in this test such circumstances are fairly stable (given that I consider only one country which kept the same electoral law for all the time), so there is no reason to expect that the strength of the retrospective voting to covary with polarization. For an exhaustive review about the literature on economic voting see Burlacu & Toka (2011).
probability to switch should be different between supporters of different parties, depending on these two factors. If a party is not isolated from the others, or it is not big enough to influence the policy-making, its supporters will not perceive voting for another party as a big change, therefore they will be less constrained from moving than the supporters of an extreme and big party.

This point allows to reduce the level of aggregation and directly test the group effect on the individual. I will call this variable “party polarity”, to distinguish it from the more general “party system polarization”. It represents the disaggregation at the group level of the measurement of polarization proposed by Esteban & Ray\textsuperscript{26}. Conceptually, it is not a property of the party by itself. Rather, it is a property of the party in relation to all the others. In other words, a single party is not supposed to have a complete control on its own level of polarity. For example, in a two party system, the change of policy position of a party will unavoidably influence the level of polarity of the other party as well. The aim of this paper is not to make claims regarding possible party strategies to keep their electorate from voting for somebody else. Rather, the scope of the measure of polarity proposed here is only to offer a more accurate level of measurement for polarization, taking advantage of the focus on the group level of the concept proposed by Esteban & Ray\textsuperscript{27}.

Thus, given the theoretical expectations discussed above, the micro-level hypothesis to be tested in the empirical model applies:

\textit{H1: A negative evaluation of government's performance will increase the probability to switch among those voters who supported a governing party at the previous election. However, this effect should be reduced the more the party supported at the previous election is polarized from the others.}

This expectation is based on the assumption that the party supported at the previous election corresponds to the actual best policy preference of the voter. This assumption may not apply to the whole electorate. However, I expect the voters who chose against their policy preference in the past to be more likely to switch, no matter what is the level of polarization in the present. In other words, not accounting for the presence of this type of voters may deflate the coefficient, rather than inflating it. In the next section I will discuss the measurement and the operationalization of the variables, and I will describe the construction of the empirical model.

\textsuperscript{26} The formula for computing party polarity, corresponding to the disaggregated version of the formula in Equation 1, is reported in Appendix 1.

\textsuperscript{27} A positive side effect of this choice is an increase of the number of cases at the second level, given that the very low number of elections (and therefore of cases where polarization is measured at the system-level) included in the analysis.
D.3.5 A macro-micro model of vote switching

The dependent variable of the model is the individual vote switching, i.e. the fact of voting for two different parties at two different elections. The variable has value one when an individual has moved from one policy option to another and value zero otherwise. The measure is constructed combining two different variables present in the Dutch NES cumulative file: the party voted for at the current election and the recall of the party voted for at the past election. This choice may arise some concern among the readers regarding the well-known problem with the vote recall variables (see Himmelweit et al. 1978). Briefly, such variables have been said to be a biased measurement of the actual past vote, for individuals tend to overestimate their choice consistency and therefore to say they have voted in the past for the same party that they have chosen at the current election (van Elsas et al. 2011), resulting in a over-reported stability. Given the scarce diffusion of electoral panel studies, this problem represents a point of struggle for several researchers who are interested in modeling the effect of context on electoral volatility by testing macro-micro connections.

However, to simply discard vote recalls as “biased” may be a hasty choice, considered the plenty of high-quality cross-sectional electoral surveys available. A more reasonable approach would be to make sure of (1) the size of the bias, and (2) its possible correlation with the variable(s) of interest in our study. In fact, measurement error will turn into an estimation bias only in the case it significantly covaries with polarization. More precisely, for this to represent a concrete risk of incurring in a type-I error, the over-reported stability should be positively correlated with polarization. If polarization has a positive effect on the individual tendency to report a false stable behavior, the error would go in the same direction as the expected effect of our independent variable of interest, leading to an inflated coefficient. Conversely, if the error correlates negatively with polarization, this would rather deflate the coefficients, increasing the possibility of a type-II error. Finally, in case of independence, the over-reported stability can be discarded as unavoidable random error.

To claim the adequacy of vote recalls for this study, I provide a cross validation using panel data from four waves of the Dutch Parliamentary Election Studies, three of which are included in the sample used

28 For this paper I selected only those respondents who voted at both the elections, therefore excluding those who abstained in any of the two time points. This is mainly due to the need of keeping the model simple. Moreover, In this paper I do not formulate specific hypotheses regarding the effect of polarization on turnout or abstention. For some research about the topic, see Aarts & Wessels (2005) and Dalton (2008).
29 Given that all the waves observed are post-election studies, it was possible to use the variable regarding the actual voting behavior, instead of the 'vote intention' measured in pre-election studies.
30 This variable was not available for 2003, thus the wave has been excluded from the analyses.
for the analysis: 1981-1982, 1982-1986, 1986-1989 and 1989-1994. Panel data are not exempt from problems either (e.g. panel attrition), but they are normally considered as the best survey-based measurement of electoral volatility (see van der Meer et al. 2011). To find a relatively small and randomly distributed difference (in regards to polarization) would therefore provide some leverage for the use of vote recalls. The table in Appendix 2.2 shows the percentages of movers and stayers in the cross-sectional and the panel data, together with the difference between the two, aggregated by election and party voted at the previous election (the level of measurement of party polarity). The over-representation of the stayers among groups happens to be both positive and negative, indicating that the error is not systematic. In the aggregate, there is indeed a tendency to have more stayers in the cross-sectional data, but the difference is always lower than 1.3%, depending on the level of clustering, with a relatively big standard deviation. Furthermore, if the differences for each party (last column of the table in Appendix 2.2) are correlated with the polarity measurement used in the analysis, the Pearson $r$ for the available cases is not significantly different from zero ($r = 0.04; p\text{-value} = 0.82$). In other words, there is no covariation between the independent variable of interest and the measurement error of the dependent variable. Given these results, the use of vote recalls seems to be a fairly safe solution for the micro-level test of my hypothesis.

An appropriate way to model the data for the hypothesis testing requires a 3-term interaction. Dissatisfaction with Government's policy should have a different effect on the probability to switch depending on whether the individual has previously voted for a party which ended up in the governing coalition or not. Then, this effect should be moderated by the level of polarity of such party. Both the level of polarity and incumbency refer to the party previously supported by an individual, i.e. they are measured at a higher level in respect to the single observation. This introduces three sources of correlation. First, all the observations belonging to the same election year are not independent from each other because they share the same context. Second, all the observations belonging to the same group of party supporters are not independent from each other, for they are assumed to share the same policy preferences. Third, all the parties that are competing in more than one election (the most of them) supposedly keep the same identity over time. The PvdA is expected to be recognized as the PvdA both in 2006 and in 1986. The common identity implies a common set of party characteristics (e.g. leaders, ideological traits, interest for particular issues) which are supposed to add a layer of correlation that crosses the single election context. Thus, a supporter of PvdA in 2006 will share some common

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31 For a list of the relevant and control variables included in the model see Appendix 1.
characteristics with a supporter of the PvdA in 1986. These aspects require to model the data in a multilevel cross-classified structure.

In the model employed here, the current level of polarity of the party supported in the past is interacted with the incumbency dummy and the perceived (dis)satisfaction for the Government's policy (3-term interaction). The slope for incumbency is left free to vary across election years, for it is expected to have different effects on switching depending on the actual performance of the Government, and the slope for individual satisfaction is set to vary across groups of past party supporters, for it is supposed to have a different impact depending on whether an unsatisfied citizen previously voted for a governing party or not, and on the level of party polarity. Given the complexity of the model, I will derive predicted probabilities to switch given all the scenarios led by the interactions. Being the dependent variable a dichotomy (switch or stay) the model assumes a binomial distribution of the dependent variable with a logit link function, and is optimized using Maximum Likelihood estimation with the R package 'LME4'.

D.3.6 Results

A piece of descriptive evidence provided to support the theory regards the over-time covariation between the degree of ideological polarization of the Dutch party system and the amount of vote-switching taking place among the electorate. Figure 2.2 shows the time trends of the two variables of interests, with polarization calculated using two different levels of the parameter $\alpha$.

The first thing to be noticed looking at the picture is that there is indeed a fairly strong negative covariation between the two variables. The percentage of vote-switching increases dramatically from 1989, reaching its peak in 2002\(^{32}\), while polarization drops constantly from 1986 to 1998. However, after 1998 the index behaves differently depending on the level of $\alpha$. Given the function of the parameter, this difference is not surprising. In the upper panel, where $\alpha$ is bigger, the size of the clusters is more weighted than their relative distances, while in the lower panel these two elements are equally weighted. Accordingly, the lower panel shows an increase of the parties' policy distances between 1998 and 2002, which can be traced back to the entrance of the Lijst Pim Fortuyn in the political arena, while the upper panel shows a fairly stable pattern, indicating that the distribution of electoral strength across parties remained fairly disperse. Nevertheless, in both cases vote-switching and polarization seem to be inversely correlated, as suggested by the theory.

\(^{32}\) Given the absence of the vote recall variable in 2003, the value showed in the figure is the mean between 2002 and 2006.
The next step is to test the full-interaction model with group-level and individual-level effects. Table 2.1 shows the results of the model described earlier. All the independent variables are linearly rescaled to go from 0 to 1, so all the coefficients show the effect of the independent variables as they go from their minimum to their maximum value. To keep the right balance between the effect of between-party distance and party strength, the level of party polarity has been calculated with $\alpha = 0.33$.

The strength of party adherence has a strong, negative effect on the probability to switch. Conversely, the level of interest in politics has a positive and significant effect, a result that fits with van der Meer et al.'s (2011) claim that the more sophisticated Dutch voters are more likely to switch, a finding obtained using different data. Finally, the level of external efficacy, used as a proxy to capture the level of political marginality of the respondents, does not seem to have an effect on the individual propensity to switch.

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33 See Appendix 1 for the formula. The analysis has been repeated using $\alpha = 1.3$ with similar results, although with such a specification of the variable the model fit, as measured by the AIC index, is slightly lower.
Moving to the variables related to the hypothesis, the interpretation gets fairly complicated due to the complex three-term and all the two-by-two interactions included in the model. To make the interpretation more intuitive, and show some meaningful values, I computed predicted probabilities for every possible scenario led by the outcomes of the three variables. Figure 2.3 shows the distributions of the probability to switch for each combination. It can be read in three directions: first, the two left panels refer to those voters who voted at the previous election for a party which did not enter in a governing coalition, while in the two right panels they voted for a party which managed to get into office. Second, the two upper panels show the predicted probabilities to switch for the fully satisfied (by Government's policy), while the two lower panels refer to the completely unsatisfied voters. Finally, in each panel the predicted probabilities are differentiated between those who supported a low-polarity party (left-leaning distribution) and a high-polarity party (right-leaning distribution). The distributions are obtained by running the same model and calculating predicted probabilities over 1000 different bootstrapped samples. The horizontal dotted lines indicate the mean probability for each

Table 2.1: Multilevel cross-classified model for vote switching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>β</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strength of Party Adherence</td>
<td>-1.81</td>
<td>0.08 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Interest</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>0.10 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Efficacy Index</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatisfaction with Government Policy</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote Incumbent t-1</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.46 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vote Inc t-1 * Dissatisfaction with Gov</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Polarity</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>0.49 †</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Polarity * Vote Inc t-1</td>
<td>-4.63</td>
<td>0.97 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Polarity * Dissatisfaction with Gov</td>
<td>-2.61</td>
<td>0.78 ***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Polarity * Vote Inc t-1 * Dissatisfaction with Gov</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>1.75 *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

AIC: 8764  
N: 8684  
N Groups: Election Year: 12
N Groups: Party Supported t-1: 7

*** = P < 0.001; ** = P < 0.01; * = P < 0.05; † = P < 0.1

*a Total number of groups given by “Party Supported t-1 * Election Year” : 65

The predicted probabilities from a logit model are calculated using the inverse-logit function of an equation where each coefficient is multiplied by an interesting value of the respective independent variable, using the following formula:

\[ P(y=1|X) = \frac{1}{1 + \exp(-X\beta)} \]

Where \( \beta \) is the matrix of coefficients returned by the logit model (in this case the fixed effects of the multilevel model) and \( X \) is the matrix of independent variables. Since all the variables were rescaled from 0 to 1, the probabilities are
scenario, while the vertical bars indicate the confidence interval between the quantiles 2.5 and 97.5 of the distributions.

![Predicted probabilities for a 3-term interaction model of vote switching.](image)

*Figure 2.3: Predicted probabilities for a 3-term interaction model of vote switching.*

The first thing to be noticed is that among the supporters of parties which are not so polarized from the others (left-leaning distributions), the probability to switch is always relatively high, with the lowest point touched by those who supported an opposition party but are satisfied by the Government. This may seem fairly counterintuitive, although it should be noticed that even for them the probability to switch is around the 50%. A more surprising finding is that the propensity to switch for those who supported a governing party and are satisfied by the Government is fairly high when the party is not polarized from the others. An explanation for this involves the 'identification' component of the concept of polarization. As we saw, low party polarity means that the differentiation from the other parties is calculated for the minimum or the maximum values of party polarity and Government dissatisfaction, depending on the combination. The strength of party adherence is always kept constant at zero. The level of political interest and the index of external efficacy are always kept constant at their mean value.
relatively low, due to small policy distance from the alternatives and not a big strength to support it. Therefore, supporters of a governing party with a low level of polarity may give it credit for a small contribution to the Government's job, and thus switch to a stronger, ideologically well-defined coalition partner. This would fit with the most recent findings by van der Meer et al. (2012) about the “bounded” nature of the recent electoral volatility in the Netherlands. To be sure, this can not be assessed from the results of the model presented in this paper, for its focus is on the propensity to switch, rather than the direction. The inclusion of the direction of the switch in a model which accounts for party polarization may carry interesting results, and should be object of further research. For the time being it should be noticed that, in general, Dutch voters have a higher propensity to switch when the party they support measures a low level of identification and alienation from the others.

Moving to the right-leaning distributions, the propensity drops in three scenarios and remains substantially equal in one. Supporters of an incumbent party who are satisfied by the Government (top-right panel) are very unlikely to switch, but this happens only if such a party has a strong identity and it is clearly differentiated from the others. The opposite scenario, namely supporters of an opposition party who are not satisfied by the Government (bottom-left panel), presents a similar outcome. A comparison between these two panels suggests that the level of polarity of the supported party, i.e. its identity and differentiation from the alternatives, has a stronger influence on the propensity to switch than the evaluation of the performance.

Moreover, the probability drop involves also those who support a governing party but are not satisfied by the Government. The bottom-right panel shows the effect of party polarity on the propensity to switch for this important category of voters. The mean of the left-leaning distribution is around 0.9, indicating that unsatisfied supporters of an incumbent party are on average 90% likely to switch if the party is not so polarized from the others. However, as party polarity increases, the propensity to switch falls substantially, moving back to around 50%. The confidence bound of the right-leaning distribution is fairly wide, signaling a probability to switch that goes from 20% to about 80%, but the difference between the means of the two distributions is big and statistically significant\(^\text{35}\). In other words, the stronger and more ideologically differentiated a party is, the less its supporters are likely to switch to another party, even when the party is an incumbent and the supporters are completely unsatisfied by the Government's policy. This result confirms the hypotheses stated previously in this paper. When the alternatives are very different, and those differences are supported by a high level of identification of

\(^{35}\) Paired, one-sided t-test: \(t = 59.93; p < 001\)**
the party supported, Dutch voters are less likely to change and vote for another party, but they rather remain stable on their previous choice. As we saw, the party effect (which is nothing more than a disaggregation of the system-level polarization) works as a moderator for the propensity to switch of those voters who are motivated to do so. In the next section I will draw some conclusions and discuss the implications of this finding.

D.3.7 Conclusions

The aim of this paper is to show that ideological polarization in multiparty systems can work as a constraint for the voter, reducing the set of viable policy alternatives and therefore increasing the probability to stick to the same party even for those who are expected to switch. The rationale behind this argument is that, in order to feel free to modify their party support, voters need not to be put in front of a too radical change. Thus, when the distance between the alternatives is low, and when the distribution of electoral strength between them is such that they need to be open for more power-sharing, the propensity to change among the electorate is expected to be higher. Conversely, when the ideological difference between the parties is big, and the electoral strength is distributed in a way that does not make it necessary for them to seek for compromise, voters should rather stick to the same party than being confronted with such a big change, and their propensity to switch should be reduced.

This expectation builds on a concept of ideological polarization borrowed by Esteban & Ray's 'identification-alienation framework' (1994). According to this conceptualization, the distance between groups on a given dimension (in the case of this paper, the main policy dimension represented by the left-right) becomes more salient as their strength increases. Although this concept has been first developed to explain how income inequality turns into social unrest, political science has recently started applying elements of the identification-alienation framework to party systems (see Indridason 2011; Oosterwaal & Torenvlied 2010; Rehm & Reilly 2010; Schneider 2006). However, the effects of this concept of polarization on voting behavior have been so far ignored, keeping the scholarly debate standing on the well-known 'saliency effect' of party differentiation on policy voting (see Lachat 2011). Thus, the main goal of this study is to contribute to the literature by improving our understanding of what effects a polarized party system can have on electoral volatility.

The question whether higher volatility should be a desirable outcome or not is a matter of normative taste. The point of view under which this research was conducted is that in a competitive system, voters should be free to change their party support, if they want to. Thus, rather than a matter of electoral
volatility, the constraining effect of polarization should be understood as something which reduces the level of *competitiveness* of an election. This subject is relevant insofar as it shows that polarization makes it indeed more difficult for the voters to abandon a given policy option in favor of another. This finding has some implications for Government accountability, for it suggests that when the policy alternatives are polarized voters' willingness to punish an inefficient incumbent are reduced, i.e. Governments are subject of less competition. However, this finding also suggests that it is not only a matter of policy distances or, under the perspective of a single party, isolation. Rather, the results of this study show that strength matters. The policy distance is not expected to be particularly salient if it does not go together with the possibility of a party to *stand alone*, a quality related to its size. Thus, in case of multiparty systems, the concentration of electoral success in the hands of a few parties should be a point of bigger concern than the simple presence of extreme parties.

In this paper I tested my theoretical expectations in a particularly favorable setting. In fact, the Netherlands represent a fairly typical case of *open system*, where each party is virtually given the same chance to get into office, and where voters' consideration are supposed to be relatively free from strategic considerations. Moreover, the ideological depolarization of the Dutch party system has taken place only a few decades after the “depillarization” of the society, and seemed to move together with an increasing electoral volatility. Thus, the Netherlands represents a unique opportunity to observe a fairly big contextual variation while controlling at the same time for party system characteristics and, even more important, party identity. On the other side of the coin, these findings can hardly be generalized to systems where electoral laws influence the legislative size of the parties in a way that is not completely consequential to their electoral strength, or where idiosyncratic cleavage structures multiply the dimensions of competition. Testing the functioning of this theoretical framework in different party systems will be the subject of further research. It should allow to cast a light on the effects of party polarization on voting behavior in a broader perspective, and to increase our understanding, and possibly adjust our evaluation, of the quality of electoral democracy.
D.4 Study 3

Proximity, Valence, or just Partisanship? On the effects of ideological polarization on voters' evaluation of parties
D.4.1 Introduction

The question how people evaluate political parties or candidates has been the core focus of the studies on voting behavior since the early years of the discipline. More recent, yet fairly prolific, is a body of research that deals with the question how the way in which people evaluate parties or candidates changes across political contexts (Curtice 2002). While the relation between some individual characteristics and party preferences, or between some party characteristics and parties' electoral fortunes are hardly questionable nowadays, the focus of much research moved to asking what makes these associations stronger or weaker.

Among these, a question that captured the attention of several scholars in the last decade is how context can influence ideological voting on the one hand, and competence voting on the other. I put this as a single question, although in fact we are talking about two different types of evaluation, because scholarly literature in the last decade has been suggesting that ideological evaluations and competence assessments are in part influenced by the same contextual conditions. In particular, what scholars found to be a relevant moderating factor for these two antecedents of vote choice is the level of polarization, or dispersion, of the party system. The logic of the mechanism that regulates this moderation goes back to the Stokes' (1963) criticism of Downs' (1957) spatial model of vote choice. Briefly, while the latter suggests that issues present diverse positions, consisting in different preferred directions to be given to policy-making, and voters are meant to choose the most proximate party or candidate on this space, the former argues that the most of the issues actually regard widely-shared policy goals, and voters are supposed to choose the party that they perceive as the most competent to handle them. This claim led to the conceptual distinction between position issues, i.e. issues where different positions are possible and, in fact, promoted by the parties, and valence issues, i.e. issues “on which parties or leaders are differentiated not by what they advocate but by the degree to which they are linked in the public's mind with conditions or goals or symbols which almost everyone approves or disapproves” (Stokes 1992, p. 143).

While Stokes admits that the degree to which an issue is characterized as position or valence is more of an empirical matter, rather then a predefined condition (Stokes 1963), scholars of voting behavior have since then regarded the level of party polarization as a proxy for this empirical distinction, leading to two consequent expectations. First, higher polarization means more intense ideological conflict, i.e. more differentiated policy positions promoted by the parties. This should make the positional nature of issues more salient, and therefore drive citizens to choose according to positional criteria. Second,
lower polarization means higher issue consensus, i.e. more agreement about the ideological direction to be given to the policy-making. This should promote the valence nature of issues, and therefore encourage citizens to evaluate parties and discern between them according to their competence.

However, while the first expectation has been supported by unambiguous empirical evidence (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Dalton 2008; Lachat 2008, 2011; van der Eijk et al. 2005), tests of the second expectation, namely the negative correlation between polarization and competence voting, led to conflicting results. On the one hand, evidence based on single-country studies suggests a negative impact of party dispersion on valence voting (Buttice and Stone 2010; Green and Hobolt 2008). On the other hand, findings from cross-country studies tell an opposite story, i.e. they find a positive correlation between polarization and the impact of valence (Clark and Leiter 2010; Pardos-Prado 2012). Admittedly, the evidence shown by the empirical analyses performed in the latter group of studies does not follow the hypothesized direction (Clark and Leiter 2010) or is taken as evidence against the general idea of a zero-sum game between ideology and competence (Pardos-Prado 2012). However, a theoretical link accounting for why higher polarization should be positively associated with valence is still missing.

The aim of this paper is to provide such a link. The specific question to be answered here is: why is the observed effect of competence on voting stronger in more polarized contexts? In other words, the focus of this study is on the characteristics of polarized party systems that can influence perceptions of party competence and, as a consequence, its observed effect on voting. However, the more general goal is to clarify our understanding of the mechanisms that regulate the connection between party-system polarization and the different types of evaluation employed by voters as they evaluate parties. In this respect, I argue that the explanations of the relationship between competence or policy voting and party polarization so far has forgotten to take into consideration one piece of the puzzle. This piece is partisanship. As functionalist views describe party identification as a provider of cost-saving cues to help citizens evaluating the political environment (Lodge and Hamill 1986; Rahn 1993; Shively 1979), its function should become less relevant as party dispersion increases and policy alternatives become clearer (Carmines and Stimson 1986; Key 1966). However, some studies show that there is a positive relation between the level of elite polarization and the degree of mass partisanship (Hetherington 2001; Schmitt 2009; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995). This relation is often ignored by scholars interested in the moderating effects of polarization on the determinants of vote choice. What I argue here is that the characteristics of polarized party systems that are associated with higher mass partisanship (i.e. higher
relevance of the parties and higher ideological conflict) are the same that make us observe a bigger association between policy and competence evaluations and party preferences. As Schmitt argues “[t]he more ideological conflict there is between parties, the more politicized and mobilized a society will be and the more partisanship we expect to find” (2009, p. 76). Similarly, Hetherington asserts that “[b]ecause greater ideological differences between the parties on the elite level should produce a more partisan information stream, elite polarization should produce a more partisan mass response” (2001, p. 622). In other words, higher polarization should be associated with both a higher tendency from voters to describe themselves as attached to a party, and a higher association between partisanship and more substantive political evaluations, such as issue preferences and competence assessment.

In the next sections I will present and discuss the links between party polarization, ideological and valence considerations. Then I will discuss the connection between partisanship and polarization, and derive some expectations about how this can be related to ideological and competence considerations. Finally, I will provide some pieces of micro-level evidence using a pooled data set of European Election Studies spanning from 1994 to 2009.

**D.4.2 Party polarization and ideological voting**

A common explanation of the reasons why people vote in the way they do, is that they evaluate parties according to their ideological position, i.e. left or right, liberal or conservative. These labels are generally indicative of a relatively congruent set of preferences regarding the orientations to be given to the public policy-making (Hinich and Munger 1994). Although the use of a spatial terminology to refer to ideology is a common practice since at least the French Revolution (Benoit and Laver 2006, p. 16; Sartori 1976, p. 334) the most famous and widely-accepted formalization of this explanation was provided by Downs (1957) and subsequently deepened, challenged and expanded by many other studies (see, respectively, Enelow and Hinich 1984; Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989; Adams et al. 2005).

The key assumption here is straightforward: citizens are distributed along a continuum according to their ideological-policy preferences, and parties compete by taking advantageous positions, i.e. positions that can grant them the maximum or most stable public support, on this space. Here voters preferences are assumed to be deterministically influenced by the utility income they would expect from each party's government action following a spatial proximity logic. A citizen's utility income expected from voting for each party is assumed to decrease as a function of their distance, with the
maximum utility consisting in a party standing on her same position. However, to make it possible for voters to link their preferences to party stands, it is required that parties are differentiated enough to provide the electorate with cues for recognizing their relative positions (Carmines and Stimson 1986; Pomper 1972). This condition, i.e. that in order for people to vote according to their ideological or policy preferences parties should offer meaningful ideological or policy alternatives, is the central point around which much of the literature about party polarization and policy voting developed. The main insight, upon which decades of research has built on, comes from the work of Key (1966), where it is metaphorically described through the image of an echo chamber:

“As candidates and parties clamor for attention and vie for popular support, the people's verdict can be no more than a selective reflection from among the alternatives and outlooks presented to them. Even the most discriminating popular judgment can reflect only ambiguity, uncertainty, or even foolishness if those are the qualities of the input into the echo chamber.” (Key 1966, p. 3)

There are two different types of argument in the literature linking party polarization, or differentiation, and policy voting. Both of them build on Key's insights, and in fact share the same rationale, but they differ in terms of the focus of the interest. The first, made by the scholars interested in the meaningfulness of the elections (Schmitt and Wessels 2005), focuses on the policy outcome expected by the citizens. If the parties or candidates running for an election do not offer meaningful alternatives, i.e. if the electoral success of one or another would not lead to a different expected policy implementation, then it is no use for the voters to take their policy preferences into account as they choose for a party. Conversely, when the party options supplied to the citizens convey different policy directions, then voters will make a choice based on which policy alternative they like most (Dalton 2008, Wessels and Schmitt 2008). Studies focused on this argument are generally interested in explaining, next to the effect of ideology on the vote, the contextual factors that influence electoral turnout. In respect to this, their explanation focuses on a mechanism that is known in rational choice literature as indifference-based abstention (Adams et al. 2006; Plane and Gershtenson 2004). The idea is that a citizen will vote for the party she prefers if the difference between the utility for her favorite party and the one for the competitors is big enough to pass a certain threshold (Sanders 2001). Here the concept of “utility” is equivalent to the one employed by Downs (1957) as it is based on spatial calculations. Thus, higher polarization should increase the utility differential between each pair of parties, therefore decreasing the number of citizens

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36 This type of argument is also made by Alvarez and Nagler (2004), although the general focus of their study is more congruent with the cognitive argument presented in this section.
who feel indifferent to the alternatives, and promoting the turnout.

A related argument for why voters in more polarized party systems should weigh more ideological orientations in their vote calculus is rather of a cognitive type. This body of research has been putting the focus on the contextual factors that make policy voting easier. In this framework, following an economic metaphor, polarization can be considered as equivalent to the product-differentiation on the market: when citizens can recognize clear differences among the supply, their choice will be helped. Moreover, as parties differentiate themselves from the others following vote-maximizing strategies, they will possibly try to emphasize their difference during the campaign, referring more often to policies in their communication. This should increase the availability of policy-related information in the voters' mind, information that will be used to evaluate parties (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Ensley 2007; Hellwig 2011; Knutsen and Kumlin 2005; Kroh 2009; Lachat 2008, 2011).

This argument points to a saliency effect of polarization on policy or ideological voting (Lachat 2011). When parties are polarized over a certain issue, that issue is more likely to become salient to the voters. Whether this is due to their focus on the domain where parties can be really differentiated from each other, or to a greater availability of information about it, the presence of the saliency effect is generally uncontroversial. However, while this explanation refers to a between-issue comparison, i.e. it uses different issue dimensions as counterfactual, the most of the studies interested in polarization normally compare different contexts, where the levels of polarization are measured on a single left-right scale (Dalton 2008; Kroh 2009; Lachat 2008; van der Eijk et al. 2005. See Alvarez and Nagler 2004 for an example of comparison across issue dimensions). The difference is not trivial, for two reasons. First, it forces us to take into consideration the meaning of the ideological left-right dimension and its function as an indicator of the level of issue conflict, both at the voters' level and at the party level. Is the left-right to be considered as equivalent to any other issue domain, i.e. can it become more or less salient depending on whether parties are polarized on it or on something else, or is it rather a “super-issue” that describes the extent of the current policy conflict, if there is any? Second, it puts us in front of a phenomenon, i.e. ideological polarization, that may have other implications next to the saliency effect described in this literature. Should we expect a similar type of competition when parties are polarized over ideologies as the one that we have when parties are polarized on some issues and not polarized on others? Does ideological polarization increase the salience of ideology as opposed to what?

The first point resembles a common struggle for scholars doing comparative research, that is normally

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37 An interesting exception is the “European integration” issue, where, as shown by de Vries (2007), party disagreement does not necessarily correspond by more issue-based voting.
presented as a methodological concern, while in fact it is genuinely substantial. Briefly, the labels “left” and “right” are generally considered valid only in West European democracies, and even in this relatively narrow group of countries, their meaning has been found to be rather variable (Schmitt and van der Eijk 2009). On the one hand, the traditional component reflecting different preferences in economic policy is found to be still strong especially in West Europe (Benoit and Laver 2006, p. 158), where such a conflict played a primary role in shaping party systems (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). On the other hand, the emptiness of significance of these labels makes the left-right space a very flexible construct (Sartori 1976). In other words, the question is not whether the meaning of left and right is the same among the contexts included in one study, but rather whether it describes the dimension of competition in an equally, or at least comparably, accurate way. Here two types of position are generally taken. The first consists in recognizing a possible multi-dimensionality of the political space, and asking whether the left-right is able to incorporate the main dimension over which parties are competing for the votes (Sani and Sartori 1983). The second position is to assume that the left-right is a super-issue describing whatever is the political conflict taking place in a given country at a given point in time (Inglehart 1984, 1990). While it is not in the scope of this paper to evaluate each of these two approaches, it is noticeable that they both agree in granting the left-right a different role from all the other issues. The left-right is commonly interpreted as an ideological dimension, whose meaning is more abstract than the one of any other one issue, and whose function is to organize the political space, i.e. to set preference profiles and to provide symbols by which people can connect their individual preferences to party policy platforms (Hinich and Munger 1994).

This suggests that polarization on the left-right should be understood as a different phenomenon than polarization on, say, immigration issues or abortion. If a function of ideology is to organize people's preferences in a coherent way, then ideological polarization should indicate a type of political conflict that spans across the relevant issue domains. Evidence for this process has been found for instance in the US politics, where the Republican and the Democrat elites have been growing increasingly polarized during the last decades (Layman and Carsey 2002). Although citizens' individual preferences on specific issues are not necessarily more extreme, their positions across issue domains are more coherent, or consistent, as a consequence of clearer ideological cues that parties offer them (Levendusky 2010). This goes together with a greater homogeneity among party supporters' positions, next to a larger distance separating them (Jacobson 2003; Rehm and Reilly 2010). Moreover, ideological polarization is associated with an intensification of the debate, a stronger focus on
“principles and fundamentals” (Sartori 1976, p. 137), rather then pragmatic policy concerns, and an overall framing of the political competition as an adversary conflict (Schmitt 2009).

To sum up, there are two different types of phenomena that have been investigated in the literature focused on the effects of party polarization on voters. The first regards single issue domains, and it generally refers to different degrees of elite polarization on different issues within the same system. This type of polarization has been found to provoke a strong saliency effect, as the issues on which parties are more polarized are also the issues that citizens weigh more in their considerations as they want to make a party choice (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Lachat 2011). The second phenomenon does not refer to a particular issue domain, but it rather involves ideological orientations. Here polarization refers to a generalized disagreement between parties spanning across several relevant policy domains, and is generally associated, next to an increased saliency of ideology (Lachat 2008), to an intensification of the political conflict and its framing in adversarial terms (Sartori 1976; Schmitt 2009). While the continuation of this reasoning leads to a different set hypotheses that link polarization to partisanship, rather than to purely-issue effects, I first introduce in the next section a body of research interested in voters' behavior when party competition is rather based on consensus, i.e. the literature on “valence issues”.

D.4.3 Party polarization and competence voting

The term “valence” is used in psychology to indicate a set of positive or negative emotions attached to a certain object (Frijda 1986, p. 207). When Stokes introduced the term in political science, the intent was to provide a definition of issues that emphasized the difference from the positional interpretation that was in style after Downs' formalization (Downs 1957; Stokes 1963). The strength of the term “valence” lies exactly in its clear reference to a vertical distinction between positive and negative evaluations, opposed to the conception of a horizontal space where parties take more or less nuanced positions that can nevertheless be equally attractive to some portions of the electorate. In fact, the first synthetic definition provided by Stokes describes valence issues as issues that “merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate” (1963, p. 373). Then the next logic step, i.e. to assess what type of evaluation citizens are meant to perform given this definition of issues, introduces the idea of performance and competence assessments. Positive valence is associated with the positive conditions led by a good past or present performance on the one hand, and with the likelihood to bring positive conditions in the future, a
feature related to *competence*, on the other. Conversely, negative valence is associated with negative evaluations of past performance, and negative perceptions of competence for the performance to deliver. Finally, in Stokes' argument, the world of political issues is not meant to be populated only by purely-valence issues. Issues can indeed be positional, as long as they offer alternative positions. Instead of trying to conceptualize a typology of conditions for an issue to be valence or positional, and assigning different issues to different categories, Stokes argued since the beginning that the extent to which issues belong to these two types is an empirical matter. The most logic factor that should empirically set the balance between the valence or positional nature of an issue should be its strong or weak *ideological focus*, i.e. the extent to which clear alternative positions are presented to and recognized by the public (Stokes 1963). This reaffirms the initial premise: to be valence, issues need positional *consensus*. This point was somehow expanded in following reformulations responding to some criticisms (Alt 1979; Robertson 1976; Stokes 1992), conceding that there can be indeed agreement over the policy goals (i.e. economic prosperity) but disagreement over the means to reach them (i.e. keynesian economic policies versus fiscal austerity). However, the take-home messages that subsequent research built on were mainly two. First, for issues to be considered valence, there needs to be ideological agreement. Second, when positional considerations do not make a difference between parties, competence becomes the relevant point.

Following research introduced different nuances of the concept of valence. Several studies have been investigating the evaluations of parties and candidates on two fronts. The first and more prolific body of research is also the one that gets closer to Stokes' original interest, and investigates the electoral effects of policy-related valence factors. These are the type of factors that this study is focused on, and they will be discussed more in detail below. The second front is more interested in nonpolicy-related components, and studies the effects of leader or candidate attributes such as e.g. honesty or integrity, traits that are generally referred to as character-based valence factors (see Abney et al. 2011; Clark 2009; Clark and Leiter 2010; Stone and Simas 2010). Both these types of factors have been proven to exert a significant influence on voters' choices, although for both of them the moderating effect of positional consensus leads to contradicting results.

The policy-related valence factors have been studied for long in the framework of the “issue ownership” theory. Similarly to the literature building on spatial models (e.g. Adams et al. 2005), this theory aims to account for both party competition and citizens' voting behavior. The two important elements of valence in this model are *issue saliency* and *competence attributions* (Bélanger and Meguid
The starting assumption is that parties have a competitive advantage when they are perceived as more credible or competent in handling some certain issues, i.e. when they own those issues to the eyes of the public (e.g. the environment for green parties, the social welfare for leftist parties). Given this premise, parties are meant to compete by increasing the saliency of the issues that they own, and trying to discard the issues that they do not own as less important, rather then engaging in a direct confrontation. On the voters' side, the assumption states people to seek for the most competent party in handling the issues that they find more important. If a citizen believes that protecting the environment is not important at all, or she simply thinks that there are some other more relevant problems to be tackled, she should not vote for the green party, even though she recognizes that they may be the most likely to deliver good policies in that issue domain. Thus, it would be the green party's task to convince as many voters as possible that the environment is a very important issue, so they could benefit from owning it.

Models of party competition based on these assumptions do not generally mention spatial considerations. Rather, it is through the selective emphasis of particular issues, and the effort to convince voters that they are very important, that parties seek to maximize votes. This lack of a main ideological dimension that organizes the different policy domains and highlights parties' positions resembles rather closely Stokes' definition of “weak ideological focus” (1963, p. 376, emphasis in the original). In fact, the way in which voters are expected to evaluate parties in this framework is a genuine valence one: the party that manages to link its own image to a certain issue, will be evaluated positively by those voters who find that issue important.

The expectation that competence attributions should become more important as party ideological positions converge is first derived formally by Green (2007) and then tested empirically with a case study about the UK by Green and Hobolt (2008). Here the growing importance of competence evaluations observed in the British case is accounted “for difference” with the decreasing effect of spatial considerations on the vote, due to the ideological convergence of the major parties since the rise of the New Labour (see also Heath et al. 2001). The strength of this model lies in its simplicity, both in its formal statement and in its substantial interpretation. The first shows that as parties converge towards a similar position, the within-individual variation in distance from all the parties should decrease, and therefore the parameter associated with ideological proximity should weaken (Green

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38 An important exception is Riker's dominance/dispersion principle (Riker 1993), where parties are assumed to drive the attention towards issues where parties take diverging positions (dispersion) and try to secure themselves the support of the voters on one side (dominance).
The substantial interpretation of this effect is rather straightforward, as it argues that as party positions become more and more similar, citizens will find it increasingly hard to choose between them based on positional considerations (a reverse of the one described in the previous section). Thus, “when policy distances between parties are modest, we can expect vote choice to be largely determined on the basis of which party is best trusted to deliver on this particular issue dimension” (Green and Hobolt 2008, p. 463).

The positive effect of party convergence on the importance of competence-based evaluations is based on the assumption that ideology and competence are somehow a zero-sum game (Pardos-Prado 2012). While this builds in part on Stokes' claim that issues can occur in both valence and positional form, depending on the ideological (that is, the conflictual) focus, the approach overlooks the fact that competence may still be taken into consideration when parties' ideological stands are well-differentiated. As Pardos-Prado points out, party polarization “can increase voters' and media interest in all aspects of political competition, including party competence” (2012, p. 3), following the same logic of the saliency effect found in many studies discussed above. In other words, it sounds like a courageous assumption to expect that, among all the statements and the pieces of information provided by parties to differentiate themselves from the others, none of them could be able to provide voters with any idea about party competence. Moreover, Sanders et al. (2011) have recently shown that people's perceptions of competence can be strongly influenced by positional considerations, i.e. voters tend to evaluate a party more positively when it takes stands on some policy domains that are more proximate to their own. In fact, this finding suggests that maybe voters can evaluate a party as more competent just because they think the ideological direction that it proposes is the most likely to reach a given policy goal, i.e. one may think that right-wing parties are more likely to lead the country towards economic prosperity, and still intend such a positional consideration as a competence assessment. All in all, the expectation that competence attributions should become more salient as parties depolarize and less salient as parties polarize may be based on a too strong assumption. In fact, in a comparative study of twenty-one European countries, Pardos-Prado (2012) finds the opposite effect: stronger impact of competence evaluation is found in more polarized countries, and it also correlates positively with the impact of ideological proximities.

Similarly contrasting results are found by scholars focused on character-based valence factors, i.e. those party or candidate characteristics that can generate positive or negative valence in spite of not being related to any particular policy domain. In a single-country study about the US Congressional
elections, Buttice and Stone (2010) show that the difference between the candidates' character qualities have a strong effect when their ideological differences are minimal, effect that decreases in magnitude as the ideological differences grow. However, in Clark and Leiter's (2010) cross-country comparative study using data about actual political events recorded by the Keesing's Record of World Events (see Clark 2009), the results indicate again the opposite effect. Thus, the more dispersed parties' ideological positions, the stronger the effect of character-based valence factors such as competence, integrity and unity.

To sum up, there are two good reasons to expect the effect of competence considerations on vote to shine when party ideological positions are not much differentiated. The first is that competence voting should be stronger on valence issues, i.e. issues that do not offer alternative positions, but rather widely agreed-upon policy goals (Stokes 1963). The second reason is that if parties take similar policy stands, voters should be more likely to differentiate between them according to competence considerations (Green 2007). While the first explanation poses ideological consensus as a condition for valence voting (which holds competence as the most important factor), the second expects the effect of competence voting to emerge as the effect of ideological voting weakens. However, recent findings show that the contextual conditions that are optimal for ideological voting (i.e. the party positions are well polarized) have a positive effect on valence voting as well (Clark and Leiter 2010). Moreover, there is evidence that the effect of competence assessments and ideological proximities correlate positively, indicating that the factor or the factors that strengthen the former do so also for the latter (Pardos-Prado 2012). In the next section I will introduce a third factor that has been found to be related to the level of party polarization, and I will argue that taking it into consideration may provide some useful insights about the mechanisms that regulate the connection between polarization and voters' evaluations.

D.4.4 Party polarization and partisanship

The importance of partisanship is widely recognized by scholars interested in voting behavior since the 1960s, when the concept was introduced in the context of the study of American elections (Campbell et al. 1960, 1966). In its original conception, party identification was regarded as a form of group identity, similar to ethnicity or religious affiliation (Greene 1999; Miller and Shanks 1996). Early descriptions characterize it as a very stable trait, developed in the early years of a person's political socialization, and bound to influence the following short-term political considerations, including policy preferences, competence attributions and the evaluation of political objects such as leaders and candidates
(Campbell et al. 1960; Green et al. 2002). This view has been criticized during the years after the publication of the Michigan School's groundbreaking studies, due mainly to further evidence that questioned the actual stability of partisanship. A revisionist interpretation, largely built on rational choice premises, argues that party identification is rather a “running tally”, i.e. a readily-updated sum of evaluations where parties' past performance and spatial positions are supposed to play a major role in influencing individual attachments (Fiorina 1981; Franklin and Jackson 1983; Ordeshook 1976).

However, further studies have somehow rehabilitated the early psychological interpretation of partisanship, as opposed to the rational choice-based critique, by showing that retrospective and prospective policy evaluations are in turn filtered by pre-existing partisan attachments or past party support (Bartels 2002; Evans and Andersen 2006; Tilley and Hobolt 2011).

A fairly different perspective is taken by scholars who are interested in the contextual characteristics that can promote or dampen partisan attachments. In this respect, one of the most prolific bodies of research focuses on changes in partisanship in the context of the “secularization” of advanced industrial democracies (Thomassen 2005). Here the focus of the interest is on general and wide-spread social changes that should make partisanship less relevant for the citizens, such as a wide-spread process of cognitive mobilization (Dalton 1984). This idea builds on a functional view of partisanship. Party identification is understood as a cue-provider that helps people in cutting informational costs required to evaluate political objects in complex political environments (Lodge and Hamill 1986; Rahn 1993; Shively 1979). In this framework, the great diffusion of education, and the spread of information provided by the mass media that occurred in the last decades in advanced industrial societies, have been hypothesized to make partisan cues less necessary for an increasing number of citizens (Dalton 1984). However, while the importance of partisanship has been observed to decline over time in several Western societies (Dalton 2004) its effect has been found to be more strongly associated with more fluctuating changes at the contextual level (Belgrund et al. 2005).

That the propensity to form partisan attachments, rather then being the general phenomenon advocated by earlier studies, could be influenced by characteristics of the context, has been the matter of concern of some studies. The evidence provided by these scholars suggests that partisanship is favored in contexts where the group identities are stronger, where citizens are less likely to be cross-pressured by the presence of many parties, where there is higher clarity of responsibility and when party discipline is bigger (Huber et al. 2005). Moreover, and more interesting for this study, both the likelihood to develop partisan attachments and the strength of the attachments themselves, are found to be increased where
the ideological polarization between the competing parties is greater (Belgrund et al. 2005; Bowler et al. 1994; Schmitt 2009; Schmitt and Holmberg 1994).

These findings go somehow against what a functional view of party identification would predict. If partisanship is a cue-provider for people who live in complex political and informational environments, then it should become of little use as the differences between parties increase, i.e. as the environment becomes less complex, or clearer. Voters in highly polarized party systems should find it easier to recognize which positions are taken, even without relying on partisan cues. This, together with the increased availability of information due to the saliency effect, should actually reduce citizens' propensity to have a partisan attachment (Lachat 2011). On the other hand, partisanship is not necessarily a need, or at least not only for when the political context is blurred. One could decide to rely on partisan cues, for example, when different sources of information argue from extreme opposite positions. If the political environment is characterized by conflictual relationships between the political actors, citizens may feel pushed to “take a side”. Moreover, if people weight every new piece of information that they find according to the ideology or the partisanship of the source (Zaller 1992), they should do even more carefully when the ideological positions of the sources are very different from each other.

In general, there are two mechanisms through which party system polarization can, first, increase people's propensity to develop partisan attachments and second, increase their propensity to rely on partisan cues as they evaluate political objects. First, in more polarized political systems, parties are simply more relevant (Schmitt and Holmberg 1995). The protagonist role of political parties in the democratic process is generally unquestioned in political science, based on Sartori's claim that “citizens in Western democracies are represented through and by parties. This is inevitable” (1968, p. 471). However, even in the most engaging play the protagonist can give a very small contribution to the story, if his actions are not sharp enough to stand out. That is to say, a party's claims, decisions or initiatives are likely go unnoticed if they cannot be distinguished from what other parties claim, decide or propose. There are two aspects of ideological polarization that can increase the relevance of party identities. First, by stressing the ideological differences between each other, party profiles become better defined, and therefore more easily identifiable. As Rehm and Reilly (2010) notice, polarization is not only characterized by ideological distance between parties, but also by ideological homogeneity within their constituencies. This is related to the fact that as party ideologies diverge, partisan stereotypes become more clearly characterized (Green et al. 2005). Thus, in polarized contexts people
will be more likely to identify with a party, if they think that it better resembles their preference profile. Second, party polarization is also indicative of an increased ideological conflict. As Schmitt and Holmberg point out “[d]ecreasing levels of ideological and issue conflict undercut the relevance of both parties and partisan ties” (1995, p. 110). The general idea is that, without conflict, parties lose their reason to be, or at least their role in articulating the political discourse becomes marginal to say the least. Of course, in ideologically polarized party systems, conflict in the society is more politicized (Schmitt 2009). Social divisions are sharply represented by political actors, who are in turn less likely to compromise with each other. In such contexts, every conflict or social claim is likely to be incorporated by parties' ideological discourse. This should increase the probability that people feel particularly attached to the party that succeeds in being the better spokesman of their claims. In other words, the more the role of the parties in a system is relevant, the more the citizens should be inclined to take one as a lens through which to evaluate the political events.

This last point leads to a second mechanism that could lead people to reason and behave in a more partisan way when politics is polarized. The general idea is that when ideological divisions are sharp, politics should be more likely to be framed as a conflict between adversary groups. In this framework, when citizens are asked to express their opinion, it is more likely that they will feel like they need to take a side. Similarly, when the pieces of information coming from the elites are discordant and accusatory, people will be more likely to discount the source based on their partisanship, therefore confirming, rather than questioning, their preferences. In a way, it is a matter of trust. In polarized party systems, where ideology is a salient component of the political competition, parties are advocates of certain ideological directions to be given to the policy making. When people decide to believe that a certain ideological direction is more likely to lead the society in the direction that they prefer, they should also be more likely to ignore claims and statements coming from other directions. This can apply to opinions about issues, as well as to the perceptions of competence. This point is made quite clear in a criticism to Stokes' valence model by Sartori:

“So-called valence issues point, it seems to me, to the juncture at which issue perceptions become largely monitored by party images and identifications. Ultimately, the question hinges on whether identifying with a party establishes – first and above all – “the authorities”, indeed the cognitive authorities, on whom mass publics rely for believing, or not believing, in what they are told.” (1976, p. 330-331)

To sum up, previous literature points out a number of mechanisms through which ideological polarization should increase the propensity to develop a partisan attachment on the one hand, and the
propensity to use partisan cues in processing new information and form opinions on the other. However, these mechanisms have been largely ignored by scholars interested in the relation between party polarization, ideology and competence attributions.

The argument that I make in this study is that taking into account the effects of polarization on partisanship can help understanding the apparent puzzle unveiled by recent research. The idea is not that partisanship *causes* biased perceptions of competence and stronger spatial rationalization, but rather that partisan cues should be more useful, and indeed more used, when the political environment is highly conflictual and the messages sent by the elites refer to extreme opposing views. In other words, the mechanisms that make us observe more partisan attachment in more polarized systems should be the same that lead people to evaluate party competence and ideology in a party-centered perspective. The next step would be to seek for some empirical evidence of an overlapping between partisanship, competence attributions and ideological proximities. This is done in the next section.

**D.4.5 Some pieces of evidence**

In the first three sections of the paper I revised the relevant literature about the effects of party polarization on, respectively, ideological voting, competence voting and partisanship. Cross-country evidence so far suggests that we should observe three effects. First, left-right polarization should increase the extent to which people vote ideologically, i.e. vote for the most proximate party on the left-right (Lachat 2008). Second, left-right polarization should increase the extent to which people vote for the party to which they attribute highest competence to tackle the issue that they find most important (Pardos-Prado 2012), although single-country evidence suggests an opposite effect (Green and Hobolt 2008). Finally, left-right polarization should increase the probability that citizens are party identifiers, i.e. that they state a partisan attachment for a party (Schmitt 2009).

In the first part of my empirical work I run a straightforward empirical test for these three relationships, so that I can provide evidence of the fact that the correlations under investigation are actually represented in the data in use. To do so, I use a pooled data set of surveys conducted on representative national samples during the last four waves of the European Election Study, from 1994 to 2009. The total number of elections in the pooled data set adds up to 82, although some issues of variable missingness reduce the count between 80 and 77, depending on the model specification\(^\text{39}\). To test the three expected relations derived from the previous studies, I run three simple multilevel hierarchical

\(^{39}\) A complete list of the studies included in the file can be found in Appendix 1.2.
models, with individual observations nested within elections. The dependent variable of first model is called “Ideological voting”, and it is computed combining three different observations. The first, and most important, is the individual self-placement of the respondents on a left-right scale going from 1 to 10. The second is the position of the relevant parties on the same scale. In general, there are different ways to obtain party positions from survey data. One possibility would be to use, for each respondent, the individual perceptions of where the parties are positioned. A second option, used normally when questions about parties' placement are not asked, is to use as a party's position the mean self-placement of its voters, or its partisans. The strategy followed here, however, consists in taking for each election the mean of all the respondents' perceived positions. Then, the following step is to calculate the absolute distances from every party for each individual, and record the party corresponding to the smallest distance as the ideologically closest party. As a final step, this observation is matched with the actual party indicated by the respondents as the one that they would vote if there was a national election the following day. If the two observations match, i.e. if the ideologically closest party is the same as the vote intention, then the “Ideological voting” variable has value 1. If they do not match, the variable has value 0.

The dependent variable used in the second model is called “Competence voting”, and it is obtained in a more straightforward manner. Studies interested in valence voting normally rely on two survey items. The first is an open-ended question about what is the most important issue that the respondent thinks her country is facing at the moment of the election, and the second is a follow-up question about which party the respondent thinks is the most competent party to handle the issue. While the first variable generally consists in a list of issues, reduced in categories from the answers to the open-ended question, the second asks the respondent to name a party. Because the issue ownership theory asserts that people should vote for the party that is best to cope with their own most important concern, then the second variable should indicate for which party a respondent should vote if she did it based on her evaluations or party competence. Thus, the “Competence voting” variable is computed by matching the one indicating the competence assessment with the vote intention. Again, the variable has value 1 if the respondent voted for the party that she believe is the most competent to handle the issue that she thinks is the most important, and 0 otherwise.

The dependent variable for the third model, an indicator of “Partisan attachment”, is a simple dummy that is equal to 1 if the respondent said to feel attached to one of the relevant parties, and 0 if she said she does not. For all the variables asking to mention a party name, only the relevant parties were
considered as valid answers, i.e. only those parties for which information about both ideological placement, competence, partisanship and vote intention is available. These normally cover the greatest majority of the party mentions in the surveys, i.e. people who mentioned a non-relevant party responding to any questions are very few.

An important thing to be noticed here is that the Ideological voting variable, due to the operationalization and to the actual type of measurement, should be the most conservative among the three. In other words, the way in which this variable is computed should penalize the probability to observe ideological voting, for two reasons. First, to use the mean party positions to calculate individual-party distances is likely to produce a number of cases for which the actual closest party would be different if we used the individual perceptions. Thus, this operationalization choice should downplay ideological voting. Second, while for the vote intention, the competence attribution and the party attachments variables people are asked every time to return a party name, here the ideologically closest party is obtained using two different variables. Even the most motivated partisan, the one who wishes to voice his party affiliation at each and every chance offered in the interview, should find this practice less straightforward when it consists in giving at least two answers instead of one. This should happen with individual perceptions of party positions, and it surely happens with party means. On the other hand, the ideological voting variable is also the one that, among the three, is less likely to be affected by projection or persuasion effects, a rather common problems with spatial models (Brody and Page 1972).

The three models are specified with a very similar set of independent variables, that include at the individual level the respondent's gender, the age, the frequency of attendance at religious services, the extremity of the individual self-placement on the left-right and the degree of political interest. For the first two models, i.e. the ones to predict ideological and competence voting, the partisan attachment dummy is also included among the predictors. The election-level variables included in the model are the effective number of electoral parties, the distance in weeks from the most proximate first order election, and, last but not least, the degree of party polarization on the left right. This predictor is computed using the same mean party positions used to compute the “Ideological voting” variable. For each election, parties' ideological polarization is computed with a formula similar to the one used to calculate a weighted standard deviation:

\[ Pol = \sum |\bar{x} - x| \ast w_i \]
Here $\bar{x}$ refers to the ideological center of the party system, and it is calculated as the weighted mean of all the party positions using as weights the vote shares $w_i$ obtained by each party at the election under study, normalized dividing them by the total vote share of the relevant parties considered in the study. From here, every party's $x_i$ absolute ideological distance is multiplied by its relative vote-share weight.

### Table 3.1: Multilevel logit models for Ideological Voting, Competence Voting, and Partisan Attachment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Model 1: Ideological Voting</th>
<th>Model 2: Competence Voting</th>
<th>Model 3: Partisan Attachment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>S.E.</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (1 = Female)</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.02 *</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00 **</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Attendance</td>
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<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left-Right Extremity</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.01 ***</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest for Politics</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.04 ***</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eff. N of Electoral Parties</td>
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<td>0.03 ***</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from Closest 1*OE</td>
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<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partisan Attachment</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.03 ***</td>
<td>0.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Polarization</td>
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<td>0.13 ***</td>
<td>0.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
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<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Var Intercept</td>
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<td>0.570</td>
</tr>
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<td>BIC</td>
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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>N Groups</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** = P < 0.01; ** = P < 0.05; * = P < 0.1

Table 3.1 shows the results of the three hierarchical logit models to predict, respectively, ideological voting, competence voting and partisan attachment. The number of individual-level and group-level observations varies among the three models, depending on the availability of the data. Most of the predictors have an effect on each of the three dependent variables, and there are no coefficients which have significant opposite effects between two models. This indicates that the correlates of the three
phenomena are rather similar. However, some results are worth noticing. For example, the coefficient of political interest is positive and significant for ideological voting, substantively larger for partisanship, but completely absent for competence vote. This confirms previous claims that ideological considerations are more complex than valence-related considerations, and therefore ideological voting should be more common among more sophisticated citizens than competence voting (Leiter 2012). However, this finding also suggests that citizens who are highly interested in politics are more likely to identify with a party, an argument that goes in part against the functional model of partisanship. If the function of party identification is to provide cues to cut the costs related to acquiring new political information, people who have strong interest in politics should be motivated enough to gather the information they need without relying on partisan cues. On the other hand, it is also plausible to expect that a person who is strongly interested in politics is likely to be a supporter of a party. This would characterize partisanship as something different from a pure cost-saving tool, but rather as an expression of political engagement, a view that goes in parallel with its link to political conflict (Schmitt 2009).

However, the main focus of this investigation is the effect of party polarization on each of the dependent variables. Here the coefficients are even more impressively similar. Figure 3.1 shows the predicted probabilities to, respectively, vote for the most proximate party, vote for the most competent party, and feel a partisan attachment, changing the level of polarization from the minimum to the maximum and holding all the other predictors constant at their mean.

Two things in the figure are noteworthy. First, bringing polarization from its minimum to its maximum leads to the same increase in probability to vote ideologically and based on party competence. Only the intercepts change. So, while the probability of ideological voting goes from about 21% to 36%, the one of competence voting goes from about 73% to 87%. The reason why the intercepts are so different lies most likely in the operationalization of ideological voting, that, as discussed above, penalizes to a great extent the probability to observe a positive outcome, compared to the other two variables.

However, the fact that the direction and the magnitude of the effect of polarization is the same for the two types of voting confirms both Lachat's (2008) and Pardos-Prado's (2012) findings based on similar but smaller cross-country data sets. The second thing to notice is that the effect of polarization on partisanship is even stronger, pushing the probability to feel attached to a party from the 55% of low-polarized systems, to almost the 80% of highly-polarized systems.
Although the bigger magnitude could be due to the fact that Model 3 was specified with one individual-level predictor less than the other two (partisanship itself, which has a substantively strong effect in both Model 1 and 2), the effect fully confirms the relationship suggested by other cross-country studies conducted on different data, and generally based on macro-level analyses (Schmitt 2009; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995).

In Section 4 I argue that the mechanism through which partisanship becomes more important in more polarized systems may be the same that leads us to observe a stronger effect of ideology and competence attributions on the vote. In general, that partisanship should have a political content is a widely uncontroversial expectation. As Schmitt and Holmberg point out “[t]he strength of party

Figure 3.1: Predicted probabilities of Ideological Voting, Competence Voting, and Partisan Attachment.
identification should be related, preferably strongly related, to such political factors as the ideological closeness of voters to the parties and their evaluation of the policies of parties on specific issues” (1995, p. 114). However, the argument made here is that, because citizens should be more likely to use partisan cues when the system is polarized, the association between partisanship and substantive political preferences or evaluations should increase as a function of the level of polarization.

To provide some evidence of this phenomenon, I run three other multilevel logit models, similar in the conception to the ones discussed above. The first model (Model 4) has as dependent variable the probability that the party that a person feels attached to is also the ideologically closest one. In the second model (Model 5) the dependent variable is the probability that a person indicates as the most competent the party she feel attached to. For the third model (Model 6), the predicted overlap is between the ideological closest party and the one as perceived as most competent. In this case, partisanship is introduced in the equation as a predictor, and it is also interacted with polarization.

The expectations are straightforward. If partisan cues are more heavily used in more polarized systems, the main effect of polarization should be positive in Model 4 and in Model 5. However, the most compelling evidence should come from Model 6. Here, the effect of polarization interacted with partisanship should be positive and significant, due to the same process taking place in models 4 and 5. However, for non-partisans the effect should be different. As discussed above, people in polarized contexts should be more likely to develop a partisan attachment because the claims made by the elites point to extreme opposite directions, and partisan cues can provide them with a coherent framework to interpret the pieces of information and opinions that they receive. However, even in highly-polarized elections there will be a portion of the electorate who does not have any partisan attachment, as it is also shown in Figure 3.1. Those citizens may remain independent just because they do not necessarily feel that they need to “take a side” to be part of the political discourse, or because they do not need partisan cues to help them evaluating political information. Thus, for the same reasons why they do not identify with a party, those voters may be better able to separate ideological and competence considerations, and therefore the overlap between their ideological closest party and the one that they perceive to be the most competent may be smaller. If this expectation is correct, the effect of polarization on non-partisans, i.e. the main effect of polarization, should be smaller.
Table 3.2 shows the results of the models 4, 5 and 6. The effects of the control variables go, again, in the similar direction in all three models, and the only differences are rather in terms of magnitude and statistical significance. The only two variables which have a significant coefficient in all models are the individual ideological extremity, and the effective number of electoral parties at the contextual level. The first has a positive effect which becomes particularly strong in models 4 and 6, where ideological proximity is used for the computation of the dependent variable. Although the reason of the inclusion of this variable in the model is mainly for controlling for correlates of higher ideological polarization (i.e. more extreme voters) that could possibly have an influence on the dependent variable that maybe mistaken for the effect of polarization, it seems that its effect is rather systematic. Extreme voters should be, in general, more likely to put a particular emphasis on ideology than moderate voters. This emerges in a fairly strong effect of extremity in all the models where the dependent variable was computed taking into account ideological proximities. However, its effect is generally widespread across dependent variables, suggesting that more extreme voters are also particularly likely to feel particularly attached to one particular party. A second variable, the effective number of electoral parties,
has always a negative coefficient that is similar in magnitude across the three models. This does not come as a surprise, being the dependent variable an indicator of overlapping between two parties. A context where less parties are competing should be associated to a higher chance that people both feel a partisan attachment, are ideologically closest, and attribute highest competence to the same party.

The effect of party system polarization is statistically significant and substantively strong in both Model 4 and 5, indicating that in more polarized systems, partisans are more likely to be positioned close and to attribute highest competence to the party they feel attached to. Also Model 6 confirms the expectation, with the coefficient of the correlation between partisanship and polarization being positive and of distinguished magnitude. Moreover, the main effect of polarization, i.e. the effect of polarization for non-partisans, is practically null, confirming that people who do not feel particularly attached to any party in more polarized systems are also less likely to overlap in their ideological and competence-based party evaluations. In Model 6 the main effect of partisan attachment is negative and non-significant. This is probably due to the fact that, because polarization is also positively correlated to the probability to be a partisan (Figure 3.1), the coefficient of the interaction is correlated with the coefficient of the partisanship main effect. A clearer idea of the outcome of the three models can be seen in Figure 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4.

![Figure 3.2: Predicted probability – Partisanship consistent with Ideological Proximity.](image)

Figure 3.2 and Figure 3.3 describe the main effect of polarization on the probability that the party that the respondent feels attached to is also, respectively, the ideologically closest and the one perceived to
be the most competent, and they are obtained using the estimations in Model 4 and Model 5. The two figures offer an interesting parallel to the first two panels in Figure 3.1, where it is shown the effect of polarization on ideological and competence voting. The overlap between ideological proximity and partisanship in Figure 3.2 is generally much smaller than the one between competence and partisanship in Figure 3.3, although here the effect is slightly stronger. The predicted probability in Figure 3.2 increases of about 20% as polarization goes from the minimum to the maximum, but it never reaches the 50%.

Figure 3.3: Predicted Probability – Partisanship consistent with Issue Competence.

In Figure 3.3, the probability attribute competence to the party one feel attached to goes from about the 75% in the least polarized contexts to about the 90% in the most polarized ones. Again, the different intercepts are probably due to the way in which ideological proximity is obtained, although the effect of polarization on the two overlaps is practically the same.

Figure 3.4 shows the effect of polarization on the overlapping between ideological proximity and perception of competence for partisans and non-partisans. Here three things are noteworthy. First, both the intercepts are rather low, and this is expected, given the use of the ideological proximity measurement to compute the dependent variable. Second, and more important, while the slope for non-partisans is flat, the slope for partisans goes from around 21-22% to almost 39%, i.e. the effect for partisans is very similar, only slightly weaker, than the one shown in Figure 3.2. A third thing
noticeable from the picture is that the difference between partisans and non-partisans becomes relevant only around the average level of polarization, while in non-polarized elections the confidence intervals of the two groups overlap. This suggests that in elections where party positions are ideologically similar, partisans evaluate competence and ideology in a way that is not significantly different from how non-partisans do. The effect does not seem to be particularly strong, i.e. the difference between partisans and non-partisans is indeed significant in more polarized systems, but the magnitude of the effect is relatively small, with the two point-estimations differing for about 15%. Nevertheless, this confirms the expectation that partisanship is more heavily used as a cue-provider in highly-polarized contexts, and those who feel this type of attachment are indeed more likely to overlap their ideological evaluations with the competence attributions.

D.4.6 Conclusions

Ideological voting and voting based on party competence are generally considered as two different phenomena. The first is most often conceived and empirically tested in spatial terms (Downs 1957), while the second is normally considered in the framework of the valence politics model (Stokes 1963, 1992). Because these two frameworks are based on two different assumptions regarding how the policy

![Figure 3.4: Predicted probability – Competence consistent with Ideological Proximity.](image)

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space should be conceived, i.e. offering alternative ideological positions the first, and characterized by broad positional consensus the second, several scholars have been expecting, if not assuming, that these two types of evaluations exclude each other (Green 2007). This assumption led scholars to face an interesting puzzle as empirical results suggested that competence voting actually increases in magnitude in contexts where the parties are more ideologically polarized (Clark and Leiter 2010) and its effect is positively related to the strength of ideological voting (Pardos-Prado 2012). This paper offers a solution for this puzzle, i.e. it offers an explanation for why both ideological and competence voting appear stronger in electoral contexts where parties are more ideologically polarized.

The explanation offered in this study builds on several pieces of evidence that show that party polarization increases mass partisanship (Hetherington 2001; Schmitt 1009; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995). The idea is that, in more polarized party systems parties become more relevant to the voters because their identities are more clearly-defined, and because the intensity of the ideological conflict motivates citizens to “take a side”. What I argue here, is that this effect can also apply to the observed increase in ideological and competence voting. When the political environment is highly conflictual, and the messages sent by the elites refer to extreme opposing views, citizens may choose to trust one particular source of information and opinion, to have a coherent framework in which to interpret political events and to minimize the cognitive dissonance given by being cross-pressured by extreme opposite claims. Thus, the reasons why people develop a partisan attachment may be the same that make ideological and competence considerations overlap in their evaluations.

In the empirical section of this paper I provide some pieces of evidence of that this phenomenon takes place in more polarized systems using a fairly broad data set. However, given the cross-sectional design of the data, the evidence shown here does not allow for any sort of causal inference. I argue that this is not a problem, for the scope of the explanation that I provide here is based on association, rather than causation. In other words, I am not arguing here that partisanship causes people to attribute competence to the ideologically closest party, or the other way round. Indeed what I argue here is that to know what causes what is not a relevant question to ask, for these processes are meant to happen simultaneously and, at the end, the observed correlations should point to the same phenomenon.

This finding has two major implications. The first is for the scholars interested in the dispute between valence and positional voting, and their correlation with party system polarization. What this study suggests is that to observe bigger effect of competence may not necessarily be related to the fact that parties are competing in a valence, or non-partisan way, but quite the opposite. On the other hand, also
the increased effect of ideology may point to the same direction, although the measurement of ideological voting used here is less sensitive to positional rationalization. The second implication regards the evaluation of the consequences of party polarization for the quality of electoral democracy. The claim here is that, probably, a very loud, conflictual and partisan behavior of the political elites' side, does not help citizens to evaluate and choose peacefully what is better for them. If the tones of the political confrontation force people to choose an advocate to rely on, and to provide them a lens through which to evaluate the political environment, this may probably lead people to approach politics in a more stressed way, and maybe eventually lose trust in the whole democratic system just because they lost trust in their advocate. In other words, given the party elites' relative freedom to confront each other in more consensual terms, a polarized competition may pay off in terms of having strong supporters, but it is probably not the best if we want citizens to make meaningful choices.
E. References


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F. Appendices

Appendix 1.1: Variables in Study 1 and 3

Question wordings in this section are included as example, and come from the UK questionnaire of the EES 2009 (http://www.piredeu.eu). For some variables (e.g. political interest, strength of party attachment, frequency of attendance to religious services) the measurement has been slightly changed over the years, mainly due to a changed number of categories, or a different number of filter questions. The variables affected by changes of this type have been recoded from 0 to 1. The question wording for the older surveys is not reported here.

PTVs:
The Propensity to Vote scales have been used in Study 1 to generate Preference Strength and Preference Certainty.

We have a number of parties in Britain each of which would like to get your vote. How probable is it that you will ever vote for the following parties? Please specify your views on a scale where 0 means “not at all probable” and 10 means “very probable”.

In 2009 the scale goes from 0 to 10, while in the previous years the scale goes from 1 to 10. For the pooled file the scales have been harmonized, so they all go from 1 to 10.

Left-Right scales:

Self-placement (also used to compute ideological extremity): In political matters people talk of “the left” and “the right”. What is your position? Please indicate your views using any number on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means “left” and 10 means “right”. Which number best describes your position?

Parties' placement (the mean of this measure for each country was used to compute party objective positions): And about where would you place the following parties on this scale?

In 2009 the scale goes from 0 to 10, while in the previous years the scale goes from 1 to 10. For the pooled file the scales have been harmonized, so they all go from 1 to 10.

Party attachment variables:

In studies 1 and 3, three different indicators of party attachment have been used: a dummy, indicating whether R feels attached to any extant to a party or not, a measure of intensity, indicating how strong is R's attachment (rescaled from 0 to 1), and a measure of direction, indicating which of the relevant
parties R feels attached to.
In EES 2009, following a format common in the CSES study, the first question asks whether R feels attached to a party, and, if yes, which party: *Do you consider yourself to be close to any particular party? If so, which party do you feel close to?*

The second question asks the intensity of party attachment: *Do you feel yourself to be very close to this party, fairly close, or merely a sympathiser?*

Finally, a third question tries to retrieve those respondents who did not express a partisan attachment in the first place. The following question is asked to the respondents who answered “No party”, “Don't Know”, or refused to answer at all, to the first question of this series: *Do you feel yourself a little closer to one of the political parties than others?*

The latter question, when present in the questionnaire, has been combined with the question about the intensity to build a comprehensive scale of party attachment. This was rescaled from 0 to 1, to be comparable across survey waves.

**Competence Attribution:**
In the most of the surveys, competence assessments are measured in two steps. In a first question, the Respondent is asked in an open-ended question what he/she thinks is the Most Important Problem (or Issue) facing the country at the moment of the interview: *What do you think is the most important problem facing Britain today?*

Then, a follow-up question asks which party R thinks is the most competent in tackling the problem: *Which political party do you think would be best at dealing with [MIP]?* Here a party list is provided, such as in questions regarding the direction of partisan attachment and vote intentions.

The answer of the open-ended question is recoded into categories. In the EES the question is actually repeated for a Second and a Third Most Important Problem. Unfortunately, the latter two do have a corresponding party competence question.

**Vote choice:**
To measure the vote intention at the National Elections, the following question is included with the same format in all the EES waves: *And if there was a general election tomorrow, which party would you vote for?*
Interest for Politics:

To what extent would you say you are interested in politics? Very, somewhat, a little, or not at all?
Because the number of categories varies across waves, the variable has been recoded from 0 to 1.

Other social-structural indicators:

Age: What year were you born? (the answer was subtracted from the year of the interview).
Gender: Are you … (possible answers: male; female)
Class: If you were asked to choose one of these five names for your social class, which would you say you belong to – the working class, the lower middle class, the middle class, the upper middle class or the upper class?
Frequency of Attendance to Religious Services: Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services nowadays?
Possible answers in EES 2009:

1 – several times a week
2 – once a week
3 – at least once a month
4 – a few times a year
5 – once a year or less
6 – never
7 – [REFUSED]
8 – [DK]

Because the number of categories changes across waves, the variable has been rescaled from 0 to 1.
## Appendix 1.2: Elections in the EES Pooled data file

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Appendix 2.1: Party selection and variables in Study 2

Parties included in the analyses:
1981: PvdA, CDA, VVD, D66, SGP, GPV.
1982: PvdA, CDA, VVD, D66, SGP, GPV, RPF.*
1986: PvdA, CDA, VVD, D66, SGP, GPV, RPF.
1989: PvdA, CDA, VVD, D66, SGP, GPV, RPF.
2002: PvdA, CDA, VVD, D66, GroenLinks, SGP, SP, ChristenUnie
2003: PvdA, CDA, VVD, D66, GroenLinks, SGP, SP, Lijst Pim Fortuyn, ChristenUnie*
2006: PvdA, CDA, VVD, D66, GroenLinks, SGP, SP, Lijst Pim Fortuyn, ChristenUnie
* Not included in the multilevel model.

Left-right party positions:
For every election year, a unique ideological position for each party included in the analysis was derived from the mean of the survey respondents' perceived party placement.

Variables V46_3 – V46_25
It is also said of political parties that they are left or right. Would you please indicate the degree to which you think that a party is left or right? (see Todosijevic et al. 2010, p. 161-172)

Party strength:
As a proxy for party strength, it was used the share of seats held by a party at the moment of the election. The data were taken from the ParlGov database (Döring and Manow 2011).

Party polarity:
Being a disaggregation of the Esteban & Ray polarization index, the formula for party polarity follows the same logic of the one presented in Equation 1, although in this case a different measure will be computed for each party. The equation below describes how to compute party polarity for every party i:

\[ PTY_i(\pi, x) = \sum_{j=1}^{n} \pi_i^{1+\alpha} \pi_j |x_i - x_j| \]
Where $\pi$ refers to the strength of the parties $i$ and $j$, $x$ refers to their position on the left-right and $\alpha$ is the weighting parameter that sets the level of sensitivity of the index to the group size. For the multilevel analysis party polarity was computed with $\alpha = 0$. The variable was then rescaled from 0 to 1. The mean of the variable in the sample is 0.44, with a standard deviation of 0.26.

**Vote switching:**
The vote switching variable was built using the vote at the current election and the recall of the vote at the previous election.
*Which party did you vote for?* (see Todosijevic et al. 2010, p. 68)
*For which party did you vote then?* (see Todosijevic et al. 2010, p. 67)
Only those individuals who voted at both elections were considered. The dependent variable has value 1 in case the respondent voted for two different parties at two different elections, and value 0 otherwise.

**Dissatisfaction with Government's policy:**
Variable V34_4: General satisfaction with government (not available for 1982).
*With the help of this card, could you indicate how satisfied you are in general with what the government has done during the past four years?* (see Todosijevic et al. 2010, p. 120)
1 Very satisfied – 5 Very unsatisfied
The variable was rescaled from 0 to 1.

**Strength of party adherence:**
Variable V9_1: Strength of party adherence (not available for 2003).
*Constructed from V7_1 to V8_3.* (see Todosijevic et al. 2010, p. 62)
0 Neither adherent nor attracted – 7 Very convinced adherent
The variable was rescaled from 0 to 1.

**Political interest:**
Variable V1_5: Political interest score
*Constructed from V1_1 to V1_4.* (see Todosijevic et al. 2010, p. 52)
0 Low – 4 High
The variable was rescaled from 0 to 1.

**External efficacy index:**
Variable V48_6: External political efficacy score
*Constructed from V48_1 to V48_5.* (see Todosijevic et al. 2010, p. 175)
0 Low – 5 High
The variable was rescaled from 0 to 1.

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