



# Does context matter – The impact of electoral systems, political parties and individual characteristics on voters' perceptions of party positions



Stefan Dahlberg\*

Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Box 711, SE 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to investigate under which circumstances policy representation can exist in terms of agreement in voters' perceptions of parties' left–right positions. The focal point in the study is on how voters' perceptions are affected not only by individual characteristics but also by various contextual factors related to the political parties and the political systems. With data from the CSES on individual voters and various system characteristics from election surveys in 32 countries, this article shows that what in earlier findings have appeared as national context effects rather are party effects when being decomposed. System related variables have only a small impact on voters' perceptions while the party-followed by the individually related variables exerted the greatest impact.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the key elements in the history of modern representative democracy has been government by the consent of the people rather than government by the people as in the Athenian direct democracy (Manin, 1997; Schattschneider, 1960). The consent of the governed is a central component in the mandate model of representative democracy, also known as the responsible party model (RPM). In this model, parties are assumed to present prospective policy programs between which voters choose. Voters thus are assumed to choose the party whose policy program is closest to their own preferences. Elections in this context are reckoned as a process of mandate giving and to succeed they must function as a mechanism for generating agreement between the opinions of voters and those of their elected representatives (APSA, 1950; Esaiasson and Holmberg, 1996; Thomassen and Schmitt,

1999). In this respect, it is essential that voters' have accurate and shared perceptions of parties' policy positions, since this affects the extent to which voters are meaningfully represented in a system. A lack of such agreement about policies would obstruct the emergence and formation of public opinions (Granberg and Holmberg, 1988; van der Brug and van der Eijk, 1999).

Perceptual agreement (PA) has been considered as a necessary but not sufficient, condition for an electoral process to function as an effective channel of communication. If elections are to bring about preference aggregation, a large majority of voters must similarly perceive each party's election platform (Downs, 1957; Stokes, 1963). The aim of the present study is to investigate how different factors related to individuals, political parties and the political and the institutional context serve to create an agreement in voters' perceptions of parties' ideological left–right positions. Whilst the left–right dimension does not refer to specific policy issues and it is neither the only nor most salient issue-dimension in many countries, it is one of the few comparable measurements for belief systems available and it is known to be strongly related to the

\* Tel.: +46 (0)31 786 17 81, +46 (0)70 363 86 58 (mobile); fax: +46 (0) 31 786 45 99.

E-mail address: [stefan.dahlberg@pol.gu.se](mailto:stefan.dahlberg@pol.gu.se).

most important issues in at least most Western democracies (Bobbio, 1996; Budge et al., 1987; Dahlberg et al., 2005; Jones, 2004; Klingemann et al., 1994; Knutsen, 1995, 1999; Thomassen and Schmitt, 1999; Warwick, 2002). Ideological positions on a left–right dimension therefore also summarize party policies effectively on a wide range of specific policies and issues (Dahlberg, 2009a; Fuchs and Klingemann, 1990; van der Brug, 1997).

Much research has examined the impact of individual-level characteristics on voters' perceptions of parties' ideological left–right positions. For example, we know that factors such as political knowledge, left–right self placement and party sympathy are influential (Granberg, 1993; Granberg and Holmberg, 1988; Popkin, 1991; van der Brug, 1997). Despite the pioneering work by Granberg and Holmberg (1988), a question that remains partly unanswered is whether external stimulus or personal features mainly determine the perceptual process of voters. Consequently, if the internal characteristics of an individual are important in the process of forming voter agreement, what are the effects of externally related factors? Can different contextual factors associated with the political parties and the electoral system also facilitate or motivate voters' apprehension of political information?

It has been suggested that voters' perceptions are affected by various party characteristics such as ideological labels (Budge et al., 2001; Snyder and Ting, 2002), divergence in ideological positions (Dahlberg, 2009b) and electoral size (Cox, 1997; van der Eijk et al., 1999). It also is now well known that proportional electoral systems tend to promote stronger and more ideologically committed parties than do majoritarian systems, which are more candidate centered (Holmberg, 2006). Given the assumption that voters orientate themselves in the policy space by the ideological positions of political parties, the extent of agreement in voters' perceptions of party positions could for example be expected to be higher in the case of proportional electoral systems.

This article continues with a theoretical discussion and a literature overview. A section then follows where operationalizations, data and methodological considerations are discussed. Next follows an empirical section presenting data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) modules 1, 2 and 3 on both individual voters and various system characteristics from election surveys in 32 countries and 86 811 respondents.

## 2. Prior research

A vast field of research focuses on various motivational and facilitative determinants of voting behavior (see Franklin, 1996; Franklin et al., 1996 for a further discussion on motivational and facilitative factors). Earlier research has shown that voters are motivated or facilitated by a number of individual characteristics (Campbell et al., 1960; Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004). However, from prior research we also know that voters are affected as well as by the various characteristics of political parties (van der Eijk et al., 1999; van der Brug et al., 2008; Snyder and Ting, 2002). Furthermore, other studies have shown that different electoral systems not only have different affects

on both parties and the party systems but may also motivate voters in different ways (Gordon and Segura, 1997; Granberg and Holmberg, 1988; Holmberg, 2006). From this perspective, different institutional or contextual factors can also be expected to affect the perceptions of individual voters. Such influences may be motivational or/and facilitative: a motivational factor can induce voters to obtain information about the political parties; a facilitative factor will simplify this process. Both motivational and facilitative factors are then expected to affect the clarity of voters' perceptions of the party positions, and so enable PA.

Hypothetically, we believe that factors related to different levels such as systems, parties and individuals will have a direct impact on voters' PA. Fig. 1 illustrates the theoretical relationship between these three classes of independent variables and their expected impact on PA.

### 2.1. Causes of misperceptions among individual voters

Education and age are often stressed as important factors behind voting behavior in general and political sophistication in particular. Empirical results show that older people generally know more about politics than do younger due to a greater familiarity with politicians, parties and electoral procedures (Milner, 2002; Popkin, 1991; Holmberg and Oscarsson, 2004). A comparative study by Holmberg and Oscarsson (2004) on the effects of education, age and gender on political knowledge indicated that educated older men tended to be best informed about political matters.<sup>1</sup> The perception of the parties' left–right positions can be expected to be more robust among this group of voters. Age, education and gender are thus to be reckoned as resources/factors that facilitate clarity in voters' perceptions.

Political ideologies have both an affective and a cognitive component. Most voters are able to relate to parties in terms of left and right – the cognitive part (Knutsen, 1995) – and simultaneously to identify themselves within the same ideological spectrum – the affective part. According to the Heider's (1946) balance theory people are motivated strongly to maintain cognitive balance. Consequently, individuals may exaggerate the closeness to themselves of those parties or candidates that they like or with whom they perceive shared ideological beliefs and conversely may overstate the differences to those that are disliked or perceived to be more ideologically distant. Subjective agreement between self placement and ones placements of parties or candidates on a left–right scale is a direct consequence of such assimilation and contrast effects, *i.e.* 'wishful thinking' (Granberg, 1993; Granberg and Holmberg, 1988; Popkin, 1991).

<sup>1</sup> In the literature of voting behavior it has often been stressed that political interest is an important determinant behind the degree of political sophistication among voters (Zaller, 1992). Unfortunately, the present datasets lacks any question measuring political interest among voters. Political knowledge also is a factor that has been proven to affect the perceptions among voters (van der Brug, 1997) but knowledge is difficult to compare between different countries and knowledge items are limited to the CSES module 2. Education thus must serve as a proxy for political knowledge or sophistication in this respect.

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