



Short-term factors versus long-term values: Explaining the 2009 election results[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the way three types of factors influence eastern and western German voters in order to assess the similarities and differences in electoral behavior across the former East-West divide. First, to what extent does the performance of parties and the regime influence party support in the East and the West? Second, how do candidate perceptions affect party support? Third, to what degree do ideological values influence vote choice? The results suggest that even 20 years after unification, voters in the East and the West still follow a partially different logic. While candidate evaluations broadly influence party support similarly, negative performance assessments lead west German voters to support the opposition, whereas eastern Germans tend to either “exit” the electoral arena or support the Linke party. Moreover, ideological values have no effect on party choice in the West, whereas they strongly influence the choice of Die Linke in the East. Theoretically, the results reflect the different East-West experiences, illustrating that voters in newer democracies may base their party choice on a different rationale than voters in more mature democracies.

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1. Introduction

Did eastern and western voters follow a similar decision-making calculus in the 2009 election? While Germany has now been formally unified for nearly two decades, some analysts still find subtle but politically noteworthy differences in electoral behavior across the former East-West divide. Most evident is the importance of Die Linke¹ in former East Germany. Although it has begun to attract sizable numbers of voters in the West, it obtains

considerably more support in the East. Additionally, less visible differences persist at the mass level as when a greater proportion of eastern voters lacks a strong affiliation with a party (e.g., [Arzheimer, 2006](#); [Rattinger and Schoen, 2009](#)) or when socialist values drive party support in the East but not in the West (e.g., [Rohrschneider and Wolf, 2004](#); [Arzheimer and Falter, 2005](#); [Doerschler and Banaszak, 2007](#)).

This paper contributes to this ongoing debate by examining the influence of three types of predictors on eastern and western voters' decision at the ballot box: the performance of parties and the regime; the popularity of candidates, and the impact of ideological values.

There are at least three reasons to provide a comprehensive assessment of the way voters in Germany made up their minds during the 2009 election. First, we examine the influence of several performance factors on vote choice because the “switch” mechanism in regimes with representative governments assumes that voters move from governing to opposition parties when they are unhappy

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¹ Die Linke was formed in 2007 through a merger of the WASG (based in the West) and the left party (mostly based in the East). In turn, the latter is the successor of the PDS which, again, is the successor of the SED. Overall, Die Linke is clearly steeped in East Germany's history, both in terms of its policy planks and the office holders.

with the performance of a government. This idea, however, makes an important assumption: voters presumably believe, or have learned, that they can alleviate their dissatisfaction by means of installing another government. As we will argue below, however, this foundation of the switch mechanism cannot be taken for granted in a newer democracy. Just as citizens have to learn the idea of reward and punishment in economic terms (Duch, 2001), voters may have to learn the foundations of the switch mechanism. This, combined with the severest economic crisis in a few generations leads us to examine how voters in the West and the East translate performance dissatisfaction into party support in comparable ways.

Second, we examine whether we find noticeable differences across the East-West divide in how candidate evaluations influenced voters' choice. Because the grand coalition reduced the choice set for voters, we analyze whether candidate assessments "replace" performance assessments during the 2009 election. Such a pattern would be consistent with one strand in the literature as both pundits and scholars alike have argued that the decline of party affiliations has increased the role of candidate evaluations in voters' electoral choice (McAllister, 2007). But there are conflicting predictions about the relevance of candidates, having to do with formal and informal features of the German political system, but also with attributes of the 2009 campaign. It is therefore important to assess the degree to which the two candidates' images influenced eastern and western German voters' choice relative to other predictors in 2009.

Third, we examine the influence of ideological values on how voters decided their party support in 2009. We know that voters in the former Eastern Germany continue to adhere to a much greater degree than West Germans to some variant of ideal-typical socialism (Rohrschneider, 1999; Hofferbert and Klingemann, 2001; Niedermayer, 2005) which clearly affects which party a voter supports (e.g., Doerschler and Banaszak, 2007). Moreover, the specific circumstances of the world financial and economic crisis which led even well-known adherents of the market economy to be critical about recent developments of 'capitalism' may well have reinforced such sentiments. Since the Linke party tries to appeal to voters with these views, we examine the influence of socialist views on party choice.

All in all, this paper assumes that only a comprehensive comparison of key predictors of voters' choice can shed light on the question whether eastern and western voters differ in their electoral calculus. For that reason, we adopt a comprehensive approach, assessing the explanatory power of three classes of influences on vote choice. This paper first discusses an important assumption of the switch mechanism. Then, we will discuss the relevance of candidates and ideological values. The empirical section tests several hypotheses derived from this discussion, and the conclusion highlights the broader theoretical implications of the findings.

2. The switch mechanism: How performance affects party choice

The performance of governing parties is at the core of theories that explain their success or failure during national

elections. The idea is as simple as it is central. When governments deliver goods that citizens expect, governing parties stand a reasonable chance of becoming re-elected. When a government under-performs, or fails to deliver desired goods, voters can be expected to throw the rascals out, and give the opposition a chance to improve the state of affairs. Crucial in western democracies, therefore, is the idea that unhappiness with a government leads to an alteration in the composition of governments. Robert Dahl describes the importance of the "switch mechanism" when he notes that changes in governments provide "an orderly and peaceful process by means of which a majority of citizens can induce the government to do what they most want it to do and to avoid doing what they most want it not to do." (Dahl, 1989, 95).

The switch mechanism is so widely ingrained in western analysts' ways of thinking that one may overlook a crucial assumption upon which it is based: dissatisfaction with a current government leads one to support another party and, therefore, does *not* lead one to abstain from elections altogether. That is, the switch mechanism assumes that citizens who are dissatisfied with a government support an opposition party without, however, refusing to use the set of rules that led to the installment of an underperforming government in the first place. So, according to the switch mechanism, voters who dislike the performance of the government of the day presumably support an opposition party. They may do so for a number of reasons, including the hope that support for a opposition party will improve the state of affairs, the fact that voters have been socialized to support an opposition party, or the simple fact that voters have learned to participate in an election even if they do not see support for any opposition party as a way to improve matters. The important point here is that a number of reasons can lead voters to avoid the "exit" option when they disapprove of the way the government has performed its duties.

Why do we belabor a point that seems so widely shared in the literature on electoral behavior? We do so because we consider the development of this premise to be based on long-term experience, or learning, in a way that may be more developed in the West than the East. Consider the following question. How do voters come to see the beneficial consequence of an alteration in government—that the state of affairs improves as a result of a government change? Naturally, one answer is that citizens need to have experienced the success of a change in government. That is, the way the switch mechanism restricts the spill-over of policy dissatisfaction from the arena of elections into the arena of system dissatisfaction is by virtue of a demonstration effect: voters un-elect a government when they are dissatisfied with the state of affairs, install a new one and, afterward, matters improve. Another mechanism can be that voters in mature democracies have learned to participate in elections—this norm likely develops over time. This experience, or learning, by its very nature is dynamic—it cannot be acquired through one election only but needs to be developed over multiple elections. The fragile character of this assumption is illustrated by the fact that even in western democracies, there are voters who are so disillusioned with the state of affairs that they either do not

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