



# One electorate or many? Differences in party preference formation between new and established European democracies

Wouter van der Brug<sup>a,\*</sup>, Mark Franklin<sup>b,c</sup>, Gábor Tóka<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Political Science, Universiteit van Amsterdam, Oudezijds Achterburgwal 237, 1012 DL Amsterdam, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> European University Institute, Florence, Italy

<sup>c</sup> Trinity College, Hartford, CT, USA

<sup>d</sup> Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Accepted 3 December 2007

### Keywords:

Comparative politics  
Elections  
Voters  
Central Europe  
EU member states

## ABSTRACT

We investigate differences in the factors influencing citizens' votes between elections conducted in established and new democracies using data collected at the 2004 European Parliament elections, comparing 7 former communist countries with 13 established democracies. Despite contrary expectations in some of the extant literature, voters in 'new' democracies make their political choices in ways that are very similar to the decision processes found in more established democracies. The only systematic difference is that voters in post-communist countries are somewhat less likely to make use of ideological location as a cue to the policy orientations of political parties. Perhaps in compensation, somewhat greater relative use in those countries is made of cues from social structure (particularly religion) and from issues.

© 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Do voters at elections in consolidating democracies behave differently than voters in established democracies? Put another way, does it take many years of practice for an electorate to perform their electoral duties in a sophisticated fashion? What are the differences in terms of influences on vote choice between an election conducted in an established democracy and in one that has only been conducting free elections for 15 years or so?

The elections to the European Parliament conducted in June 2004 provide us with a unique laboratory for evaluating these and other questions that require comparisons between mature and consolidating democracies. For ten of the 25 countries that participated it was their first experience of European Parliament elections. Other countries had already participated in between 2 and 5 such elections,

depending on their dates of accession to the European Union and its predecessor entities.

In this study we are not so much interested in what these elections tell us about the governance of the European Union as in what they tell us about voters. We treat the elections as windows into the *national* political processes of 20 countries in which we interviewed random samples of their electorates in the weeks following the European Parliament elections,<sup>1</sup> affording us the opportunity to pose a standard set of questions in standard circumstances to voters in each country. Many of the survey questions relate to the European arena in which the elections were held, but we focus on questions relating to voting in general. For our present purposes, the elections can be seen as providing a convenient opportunity to conduct a Europe-wide study of national party preferences in circumstances that are as identical as possible across countries.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 (0)20 525 2765; fax: +31 (0)20 525 3681.

E-mail address: [w.vanderbrug@uva.nl](mailto:w.vanderbrug@uva.nl) (W. van der Brug).

<sup>1</sup> The data needed for the analyses presented in this paper are not available for Lithuania, Malta, Belgium, Luxembourg or Sweden.

In this endeavor we take advantage of the fact that elections to the European Parliament are not ‘real elections’ that determine the allocation of political power in the European Union. Indeed, the very first studies, conducted after the elections of 1979, characterized them as ‘second order national elections’ (Reif and Schmitt, 1980; Reif, 1984). The stress on the word ‘national’ in that identifying phrase informs us that these elections did not bring to bear concerns that would divert voters from the orientations that characterize their behavior in national political contexts. Effectively, elections to the European Parliament constitute quite separate elections in each country—elections in which national political processes and concerns are paramount. Recent research (Schmitt and Mannheimer, 1991; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996; Schmitt and Thomassen, 1999; van der Brug and van der Eijk, 2007) has not queried this characterization.

The question why European Parliament elections should fail to have a European flavor has permeated much research in past years and will certainly continue to provoke scholarly concern. One reason for conducting separate elections in each country might have been that the electorates of the member states had such very different orientations towards the political world that a common election campaign and verdict would have been impossible. One of the primary questions addressed by van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) was precisely whether, in 1989 and 1994, the citizens of the then members of the European Union were capable of operating as a single European electorate should they have the opportunity to do so. The answer given in that research was unequivocal:

“Another party system, another electoral system, a new set of political issues, [are] all it would take to turn Dutch voters (for example) into Spaniards... If Dutch voters could through the presentation of relevant stimuli have been turned into Spaniards, then why not into Europeans?” (p. 38).

Much of the van der Eijk and Franklin study was devoted to explaining why relevant stimuli are not presented in European Parliament elections, and their explanation (though refined in subsequent research) still holds true today. Yet the question of whether, through the presentation of relevant stimuli, today’s European citizens could perform as one electorate has acquired new relevance through the accession in 2004 of ten more countries, eight of which have no long experience of democratic elections. If, in order to produce an election outcome faithfully reflecting citizens’ preferences, an electorate needs to have had many years of practice in the performance of democratic choices, then those eight countries might not yet be in a position to take part on equal terms in a common electoral experience. This question, of course, parallels one that has motivated much research on voting behavior in the new democracies of Eastern and Central Europe. Does the short period of time elapsed since their transitions to democracy allow social divisions, performance evaluations, issue conflicts, ideological cleavages and other common determinants of the vote in established democracies to acquire a similar importance in these new democracies, or are elections there decided by inherently idiosyncratic factors (Evans and Whitefield, 1993; Kitschelt et al., 1995)?

In this paper we ask the same question about the electorate of today’s European Union that van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) asked of the European Union of 1994. Do voters in the different countries make up their minds in similar ways when making political decisions? We will explicitly focus on the existence of differences in the heuristics used by voters in *older* and in newer democracies. If the heuristics would turn out to be similar, then voters in the new member states have, in important respects, already acquired the behavior patterns that a more ‘mature’ electorate displays. The question of how to go about conducting truly Europe-wide elections to the European Parliament will remain as important as ever, but at least we will know that, in widening the European Union through the accession of eight consolidating democracies, no new impediments to the conduct of real European elections were introduced.

## 2. Theoretical expectations

What differences in voting behavior do we expect to find between established and consolidating democracies? The fundamental expectation that underlies all research on voting behavior, though seldom stated so baldly, is that people are the same wherever they are found. If they behave differently in some countries than in others it is because they find themselves in different circumstances, such that if those circumstances were replicated in another country the behavior of voters in that country would respond accordingly. Research on political behavior in different political systems finds repeatedly that behavior responds to systemic and contextual differences.

The differences relevant to vote choice concern the sources from which voters get their cues. After all, in no political system do voters spend much time researching the details of the political alternatives on offer at an election. In most circumstances, most voters find shortcuts to the knowledge they need (Downs, 1957; Conover and Feldman, 1984; Granberg and Holmberg, 1988; van der Brug, 1997). They follow the lead of trusted sources, most frequently the social, religious, and political bodies that they are affiliated with or feel attached to (Beck et al., 2002; Cutler, 2002). In established democracies, the most important of these social reference groups, in terms of their influence at election time, are political parties. Parties are, above all, the actors that give meaning to the political world by organizing the policies on offer and providing voters with simple menus of packaged alternatives that may change from election to election.

At a slightly higher level of sophistication, voters in established democracies also evaluate the political alternatives available to them in terms of higher order concepts such as liberalism and conservatism. In Europe the most commonly used higher order concepts of this kind are those of left and right. Policies are often typified in left–right terms, and parties locate themselves in relation to each other in the same terms. The new post-communist democracies seem to be no exception (Benoit and Laver, 2005; Marks et al., 2006). Quite complex political differences are customarily simplified to a position on a left–right scale, and citizens use the latter accordingly (Laponce, 1981; Fuchs and Klingemann, 1989; Huber, 1989).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1052453>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1052453>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)