



Regime transition, value conflicts and the left-right divide at the mass level: The Baltic States and Southern Europe compared



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ABSTRACT

By comparing the Baltic States with Greece, Portugal and Spain, we seek to discover whether the type of authoritarian legacy and regime transition has any effect on the way citizens think about the left-right (L-R) divide in new democracies. We argue that while the authoritarian legacy is important, the type of transition and, particularly, the kind of political alliances and party-politicization of issues during the new regime's formative years is more important. Evidence confirms our expectations, even after several cross-validating tests.

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1. Introduction

The formation of ideological and partisan identities is a process that continues to evolve during socialization (Niemi et al., 1985; Barnes et al., 1985). Moreover, the formation of either of these two identities is strongly dependent upon effective partisan and ideological differentiation at the supply side level, associated with the existence of free political competition.

In the right-wing authoritarian regimes that existed up to the beginning of the 1970s in Southern Europe, the political parties were a proscribed reality, and ideological differences were repressed. The Baltic States, on the other hand, were under Soviet rule since at least the end of Second World War and thus lived under a single-party (officially according to the Soviet ideology shaped by leftist ideas, therefore we treat it as a left-wing) totalitarian (or post-totalitarian) regime between 1945 and 1991–1992.¹ We derive our research questions and design from these very different political contexts: in a new democracy, does the type of authoritarian legacy and/or the type of regime transition have any effect on the way citizens think about and use the left-right political divide and which of them is more important explaining variance in the level of value

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¹ Some might argue that we should be rather careful in defining the Soviet regime as left-wing, namely because some of the literature on totalitarianism and authoritarian regimes is not so favourable to a right-left definition. Indeed, the very fact that we can find both totalitarian and authoritarian regimes leaning either to the left or to the right clearly shows that there is much more on these dictatorial regimes than the left-right divide can suggest. Moreover, on many aspects, some authors have even argued that at least Stalinism was a right-wing regime. However, we can also say three things here: first, at least the Soviet ideology (which is different from the regime) was shaped by leftist concepts, and even if regime ideology does not exhaust regime type, it is nevertheless a component of it; second, there was much more of the USSR regime than only Stalinism; third, the leaning to the left of the USSR regime is clear in the provision of social services (education, health, social security) and its results (levels of equality according to the Gini Index).

anchoring of the left-right divide at the mass level across countries? In methodological terms, we can say that we rely on the “most dissimilar systems comparative design”: we will be comparing two very different sets of cases (3 Baltic States, 3 South European cases), even though within each set the countries are rather similar (although with significant internal variation); that is, it is a case selection that tries to encompass different cases according to the independent variables where the differences in the authoritarian regime legacy and in the type of democratic transition are the two major criteria for the choice of the cases.² To answer our research questions, we will analyse and compare the strength of the value anchoring of the left-right divide in the six countries under scrutiny (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; Greece, Portugal and Spain) between 1985/1996–97 and 2008. We will show that for the impact of value conflicts on left-right self-placement at the mass level, that is, for the encapsulation of value divides within the left-right ideological cleavage, the type of regime transitions is more important than the type of authoritarian legacies, and that the diversity of regime transitions within each region entails significant variation at the level of mass left-right anchoring on value conflicts. We acknowledge that we have a small N problem (only a six country comparison), and thus this is only an exploratory study that should be further investigated with more cases/countries. This being said we will also show that, for these six countries comparison across time, our results are robust because they resisted several cross-validating tests.

But why should we care about these matters? First of all, we should bear in mind that ever since the French Revolution, and at least among so-called mature democracies, the left-right divide is a fundamental instrument for mass politics both at the individual level, where it functions as a kind of short-cut to help citizens to cope with the complexities of the political word and helps them arrive at political decisions, and at the macro level, where it works as a tool for communication between politicians, mass media and voters. Second, in spite of the enormous importance of the left-right divide in structuring mass politics in modern democracies, the studies that exist are rather limited in terms of their scope, particularly in terms of the countries compared and the focus of the analysis. To our best knowledge there are no studies comparing new democracies with different regime legacies (right-wing authoritarianism versus left-wing authoritarianism) and different modes of transition to assess the impact of those different legacies and/or pathways to democracy upon the way voters think about and use the left-right divide. Thus, the present study can shed more light on the formation and nature of this ideological division at the mass level.

As to the structure of the article, it is as following: in the second section, we review the relevant literature and formulate our hypotheses. In the third section, we briefly describe the main characteristics of the six new democratic regimes, as well as their major legacies from the previous regimes and the main changes during the democratic transition. Then, in the fourth and fifth sections we describe the data and methodology, and test our hypotheses. The article ends with some concluding remarks.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

As we mentioned, by comparing the Baltic States with Greece, Portugal and Spain, we seek to discover whether the type of authoritarian legacy and regime transition has any effect on the way citizens think about the left-right (L-R) divide in new democracies. Before proceeding, we need to clarify two conceptual and empirical issues that underlie our empirical research. The first is about the meaning of the expression «the way citizens think about the left-right (L-R) divide in new democracies», which in the present paper refers basically to the value correlates and/or the issue orientation correlates of left-right self-placement (LRSP in a ten-point scale from 1, left, to 10, right) at the mass level. The second question we will answer is about the following: since much of the understanding of ideological left-right divides comes from the Western European literature, should we expect similar divides encapsulated by the left-right divide in Eastern Europe? Ever since the seminal paper by [Inglehart and Klingemann \(1976\)](#) and later by [Knutsen \(1997\)](#), [Freire \(2008, 2015\)](#), [Freire and Kivistik \(2013\)](#) and others, at the mass level the left-right has been defined by having three components:

- a social component, which explains LRSP by citizens' social positions and identities;
- an issue or value component which explains LRSP by citizens' value and/or issue orientations;
- a partisan component, which explain LRSP by citizens' party identification.

The three components have both independent and cumulative effects ([Knutsen, 1997](#)). We follow this definition but concentrate only on the more substantive dimension, that is, value or issue orientations, after controlling for the social component, because it is causally prior to values/issues in the «funnel of causality metaphor». Moreover, it has been shown abundantly that both Western and Central-Eastern Europe share similar templates of value correlates for LSRP at the mass level ([Markowski, 1997](#); [Jerschina and Górnica, 1997](#); [Freire, 2015](#); [Freire and Kivistik, 2013](#)), contrary to what happens in some non-central areas of the capitalist world like Asia, Africa and Latin America ([Freire and Kivistik, 2013](#)). We should also keep in mind that both within Western and within Central-Eastern Europe there is considerable variation in the level of value anchoring (and in the type of value conflicts relevant in each country) of LRSP (that is, the level of variance in citizens' LRSP explained by values/issues), which is dependent upon both micro and macro factors. Precisely, we want to explain the expected variance in our six countries by using regime heritage, democratic transition and politicisation of issues/party polarization as the macro explanatory factors.

² Although this discussion is not the central focus of our paper, the interested readers can find a discussion of these topics in [Seawright and Gerring \(2008\)](#).

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