

## One Electorate or Many?

Testing the distinctiveness of electoral behavior in new and established member states during the 2004 elections to the European Parliament

by

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## ABSTRACT

What are the differences, in terms of influences on vote choice, between an election conducted in an established democracy and an election conducted in a democracy that has only been holding free elections for fifteen years or so? In this paper we treat the 2004 elections to the European Parliament as windows into the national political processes of member countries. We find that behavior patterns *are* different in established as opposed to consolidating democracies. However, the only systematic differences relate to the use of ideological location (in terms of left and right) as a short cut to help voters make sense of the policy orientations of political parties. Where voters lack agreement about where parties stand in left-right terms, they are less likely to make use of this short-cut. Although some established democracies find themselves in the same position, it is mainly in consolidating democracies that parties' left-right locations are less helpful as cues for voters at election time. In other respects, voters in the ex-communist countries that joined the EU in 2004 make their political choices in ways that are essentially identical to the decision processes found in more established democracies.

Do voters in consolidating democracies behave differently than voters in established democracies? Put another way, does it take 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 an election conducted in a democracy that has only been holding free elections for fifteen years or so?

The elections to the European Parliament conducted in June 2004 provide us with a unique laboratory in which to evaluate these and other questions that require comparisons between mature and consolidating democracies. In these elections European Union citizens in 25 countries went to the polls to elect a new European Parliament. For ten of these countries 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 paper we are not so much interested in what these elections tell us about the governance of the European Union as about what they tell us about voters. We treat the elections as windows into the national political processes of 20 countries in which random samples of their electorates were interviewed in the weeks following the European Parliament elections.<sup>1</sup> Those elections afforded the opportunity to ask a standard set of questions in standard circumstances of voters in each country. Many of those questions did relate to the European arena in which the elections were held. The questions we focus on, however, relate to voting in any arena. For this paper, the elections can be seen as providing no more than a convenient opportunity to conduct a Europe-wide study of party preferences in circumstances that are as identical as possible.

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, since the very first of these elections in 1979, they have been characterized 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 do not bring to bear concerns that would divert voters from the orientations that characterize their behavior in national political contexts.

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

Effectively, elections to the European Parliament, though conducted at the same point in time in the different member countries, constitute quite separate elections in each country. More recent research (Schmitt and Mannheimer 1991; van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; Schmitt and Thomassen 1999; van der Brug and van der Eijk 2005) has not caused us to revise 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 in *Choosing Europe?* (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996) was precisely whether the citizens of the 12 countries 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 an unequivocal 'yes.' As stated there,

“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 *Choosing Europe?* was devoted to developing an understanding of why the relevant stimuli are not presented in European Parliament elections, and that understanding (though refined in subsequent research) still hold 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 countries, eight of which have no long experience of democratic elections. If, in order to produce an electoral verdict, 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. The stability of the party system may also play a crucial intervening role in this respect. In countries where a party system has not established itself, it may be more difficult for voters to know the ideological complexions of parties, and hence to cast an ideologically based vote.

In this paper we ask the same question about the electorate of today's European Union that *Choosing Europe?* asked of the European Union of 1994. Do voters in the different

countries make up their minds in similar ways when making political decisions? In this paper we will explicitly focus on the existence of differences in the heuristics used by voters in older and in newer democracies. If the heuristics turn out to be similar, the electorates of the new member states have already in important respects acquired the behavior patterns that more “mature” electorates display. The question of how to go about conducting true 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.

### **Theoretical expectations**

What differences do we expect to find between the behavior of voters in established as opposed to consolidating democracies? The fundamental expectation that underlies all research on voting behavior, though seldom stated so baldly, is that people are people 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 sorts of differences that are relevant to voting choice are differences in 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. Most voters most of the time find short-cuts to the knowledge they need (Downs 1957; Conover & Feldman 1984; Granberg & Holmberg 1986; Van der Brug 1997). They follow the lead of trusted sources. The most frequently used sources are the social, religious, and political bodies to which voters are affiliated or feel that they belong. People get their cues from their social reference groups. The most important of these 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 policy alternatives on offer and providing voters with simple menus of packaged alternatives.

But parties are only free to shift their positions to the extent that they are not closely linked to other social groups, such as ethnic, class, or religious groups. To the extent that

parties are tied to particular social groups they cannot readily shift their appeals to try and attract voters from beyond those groups.

At a slightly higher level of sophistication, people also typify 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 concept of this kind is the concept of left and right. Policies are typified by their position in left-right terms, and parties locate themselves in relation to each other in the same terms. Quite complex political differences are customarily simplified to a position on a left-right scale.

At the same time, voters are also concerned with strategic considerations. Above all they prefer to vote for parties that have a good chance of exercising government power. Parties that are not likely to play a role in government formation are less likely to attract the support of many voters. In general voters thus prefer large parties.

So voters in a democracy take their cues from reference groups, locate themselves in and the policy alternatives in left-right terms, and take account of strategic considerations. How might these things be different in a consolidating democracy?

Effectively we can look for differences in overall variance explained, and differences in the relative strength of the different forces at work. Historically speaking, emerging democracies (those that are now established) had electorates with very strong group loyalties, which boosted the effects of social structure and limited the effects of policy positions (and presumably also of strategic considerations). When democratic governments were instituted in countries that had previously been ruled by communist parties, this does not appear to have happened. So we have no very clear expectations for the importance of social structure relative to other effects, or relative to their importance in established democracies. However, we do have quite strong expectations for the relative importance of policy positions compared to those in established democracies.

This is because one of the most important things that might be different in a consolidating democracy compared to established democracies is the clarity of the party system. Established democracies have established party systems that remain much the same over a sequence of elections. Having the same parties competing for political power from the same locations in the left-right spectrum at election after election serves an educational function. Voters learn their way around their political system over the course of their first two

or three elections by experiencing it at work. In a consolidating democracy the necessary consistency may not be present. Parties do not necessarily appear fully formed on the political scene with established sizes and locations in left-right terms. In a newly democratizing country many parties are likely to be adapting their policy positions as well as their ideological profiles in the face of rapid social changes as well as changing opportunities for political mobilization. Frequent changes in the identity and locations of political parties will be confusing to voters and prevent the sort of learning that would occur in more established systems. If the system is in sufficient flux, voters may fail to learn where parties stand in left-right terms, and may even be unsure of such fundamental facts as which parties are large and which are small. Without knowledge of which parties are serious contenders for power, voters will be unable to employ the strategies that in more established systems enable them to winnow down the contenders to those with a serious chance of becoming parties of government.

At the same time we should stress that we do not expect all consolidating democracies to have the same characteristics, any more than we expect this of all established democracies. Countries differ in the speed with which their party systems consolidate and in the extent that consolidated systems present voters with clear and simple choices. There may in practice be as many differences among established systems and among consolidating systems as there are between the two groups of countries.

For this reason we are reluctant to formulate strong hypotheses about what to expect. There are good reasons to generally expect the effect of policy positions, and ideological and strategic considerations to have a lesser impact on the vote in consolidating democracies than in established ones. On the other hand we may find large differences in this respect among the consolidating democracies.

### Methods

This study employs data from the European Elections Study of 2004. We compare the determinants of the vote in 13 established democracies (Austria, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain), with those in 7 consolidating democracies (the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia,

Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia). The total sample size in these countries is 21,950 respondents, 1,097 on average in each country, ranging from 500 in Cyprus to 1,606 in Estonia.

The most fashionable plug-and-play methodologies for analyzing party choice, such as MNL, do not enable us to answer our research questions. The dependent variable in such analyses, party choice, is a nominal variable which is a different one in each country. As long as we do not want to redefine this dependent variable to a dichotomy (such as a vote for the government versus a vote for the opposition), we would therefore have to carry out 20 separate country studies, without any means to compare the results between the countries.

Therefore, our enquiry proceeds along the same lines as in *Choosing Europe?* (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996). In each country voters were asked, for each party in their political system,<sup>2</sup> how likely it was (on a scale of 1 to 10) that they would *ever* vote for it. These questions have been carefully designed to yield measures that can be interpreted as the utility, on a 10-point scale, that each voter would obtain from voting for each party (van der Eijk and Franklin 1996; van der Eijk 2002; van der Eijk et al. forthcoming). These measures of party utility can be regarded for ease of exposition as preferences, and we expect voters to make their choice in each election for the party they most prefer.<sup>3</sup> Having measures of party utilities serves many purposes, but in this paper the most important function of these utilities is to provide us with a dependent variable that is comparable across countries: the utility of voting for a party.

When the data matrix is stacked so that each voter appears as many times as there are parties for which her utility has been measured (and other variables have been appropriately transformed as explained below), the question can be posed "what is it that makes a party attractive to voters?" The answer to that question tells us how a vote for a party acquires high utility, and we already know that voters virtually always choose to vote for the party to which they give highest utility. So an answer to the question "what is it that makes a party attractive to voters?" is also an answer to the question "what determines which parties are voted for?"

The main advantage is that even though the question about utilities is framed with reference to each particular party, the variable party utility that appears in the stacked matrix

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<sup>2</sup> In practice the parties asked about included only those with representation in the national parliament or those widely expected to obtain representation in the European Parliament.

<sup>3</sup> In practice this occurs about 93% of the time in established EU member states.

no longer refers to a specific party, but to parties in general. This being the case, once the data for all voters in a country have been stacked into a dataset in which the voter-party is the unit of analysis, that stacked dataset can be extended by the addition of similarly stacked datasets for all the other countries for which we have similar data.

Including party characteristics in this data matrix, is obviously very straightforward. We included one variable at the party level, *party size*, which represents a strategic consideration that voters may take into account: when two parties are about equally attractive on all relevant accounts, voters tend to vote for the largest one because it stands a better chance of achieving its policy goals.

The problem, of course, is how to define individual level variables that also independent of party. For variables such as left-right location, or position regarding European Unification, the surveys not only measured positions of respondents, but also the location of each party on the same scale. This enabled us to transform left-right location into the distance between a voter's own position in left-right terms and the position of each party in left-right terms. If voters prefer parties that are close to them in left-right terms, then the resulting measure of party distance should exert a negative effect on party preference: the smaller the distance the greater the preference. The same procedure was applied for distances on the scale that measures orientations regarding European unification. Measures of similarity between parties and voters would work just as well, though yielding positive correlations between each such measure and party preference.

In principle, similarity measures could be constructed for any variable for which we could relate party characteristics to voter characteristics. For example a measure of Catholic affinity could be coded 1 for each voter-party record in which a Catholic voter was paired with a Catholic party, and 0 otherwise. In practice we often do not know on theoretical grounds where a party stands in terms of particular independent variables, so making the link between the voter and the party has to be done inductively. We do this before we construct the stacked data matrix in a set of separate analyses, one for each party in each political system, in which we predict the utility score of that party from the characteristic(s) in question. For example, if we want to create a variable measuring the affinity between class and party we run a series of regression analyses that predict party utility for each party in turn from any measures we may have of social class. The resulting predicted scores, or Y-hats in statistical

parlance, can be saved and used as the affinity measure in question.<sup>4</sup> Y-hats can be included in the stacked data matrix and are comparable across parties in one or many countries. For variables like gender, where it usually makes no sense to think in terms of a corresponding party characteristic, Y-hats summarizing the relationship between utility and such variables can still be employed, and can still be thought of as the extent to which the individual characteristic in question corresponds with preferences for each of the parties. So, even though we do not have distance measures for these variables, so that we cannot express the voter-party relationship in the data matrix in terms of a logically-defined transformation, the transformation we do employ provides an inductive means to express the same relationship. In this way we created independent variables, one at a time, party by party and country by country, that could be included in a stacked data matrix in which the dependent variable is party utility for all parties across all countries. That is the dataset employed in this study.

The relevant literature on party choice tells us that we should control for the following variables: social class, education (e.g., Swyngedouw, Billiet et al., 1998), gender (Giddengil et al. 2003), valence issues, religion, approval of government, satisfaction with democracy, and approval of the European Union (e.g., Van der Eijk, Franklin and Van der Brug, 1999). Class is a subjective measure represented by a set of dummy variables. Religion is a composite of religious denomination and church attendance. The other variables (valence issues, approval of government, satisfaction with democracy, and approval of the European Union) were redefined in terms of one or more dummy variables. To estimate the effect of these variables on party preference they were transformed in the manner described above, so that their effects are comparable over countries and parties.

The methodology thus entails linear transformations of the independent variables. As a result of these transformations, the effects of these variables will —almost necessarily— be positive. The large benefit is that this allows us to conduct comparative research without transforming the dependent variable. It does, however, come at a certain price, which is that it is unlikely that one will find interaction effects between these transformed variables and country dummy's. Therefore, we will not focus in this paper on differences between established and consolidating democracies in the effects of these variables. Instead, we focus

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<sup>4</sup> These scores present problems of analysis unless they are centered around the same mean for all countries. In practice we subtract the mean value for each country, turning all of them into deviations from zero.

on differences between countries in the effects of left/right, the issue of European unification, and of strategic considerations, which are captured by the variable party size.

Data sets such as ours present certain problems of analysis. The main one is a lack of independence between the values taken on for any one person by the utility scores given by that person to different parties. A similar lack of independence might be found for such values obtained within particular countries. Lack of independence at the level of utility scores provided by each voter might seem to call for panel corrected standard errors (Beck and Katz 1995) but there are often too few parties in particular countries for this method to be employed. Robust standard errors are an alternative we have investigated, but we have decided in practice to calculate our standard errors as though we had only as many cases in our data as we have separate individuals who provided us with utility scores ( $n=21,950$ ). By weighting our stacked matrix to the original number of respondents that were interviewed, we calculate standard errors that are more conservative than are robust standard errors or those that would have been calculated by correcting for panel variance.<sup>5</sup> Because of the large sample size, it was decided to test our coefficients at a significance level of  $p=.01$ .<sup>6</sup>

Because of the multi-level structure of the data, it might be asked why we did not employ multi-level models that are especially designed to analyze this type of data. There are at least two answers to this question. The simple answer is that the level of parties and the level of countries are not represented by random samples from such populations, and, moreover, that the number of cases at those levels (4 to 14 parties, 20 EU countries) is too small for a sensible multilevel analysis. Such an analysis would leave us with so little statistical power that we would not be able to reject the null hypothesis — which says that there are no differences between established and consolidating democracies — even when large differences are observed between the electoral processes in both sets of countries. In

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<sup>5</sup> We weighted the cases in such a way that each country now has the same number of respondents ( $n=1,097$  for each country), so that each country has the same weight in the overall results.

<sup>6</sup> There are mainly two reasons for this decision. First, with this large number of respondents substantively unimportant effects will become significant at  $p=.05$ . Secondly, in some of the exploratory analyses below, where we search for interaction effects between country dummy's and some of the predictors of party utility, we will explore as many as 60 interaction terms. To guard ourselves from finding significant effects where these do not exist, we will employ a .01 significance level.

addition to these simple answers, there is also a more elaborate answer.

Multilevel models were developed in the context of educational research to simultaneously estimate the effect of school, teacher and student characteristics on the achievements of students. The sample of teachers will normally be smaller than the sample of students, so, when we estimate the effect of teachers on achievement scores, it makes sense to compute the standard error on the basis of this smaller sample. Each teacher will have an effect on the achievements of his/her students, so that the actor is clearly defined. But not all situations where individual-level cases can be grouped into a small number of categories that represent conditions under which they operate warrant the analogy to educational settings. It is, for example, quite common to consider class-membership as indicative of social conditions that affect individual experiences, orientations and behavior. Yet, no one would contend that when dealing with class differences measured in 5 categories we are in an  $n=5$  situation that would require the use of multilevel analysis methods. The same argument applies to gender, religion, and so on. What then makes the variable social class — which implicitly is a context or group variable— any different from other contexts, such as the distinction between established and consolidating democracies?

The implicit logic in many multi-level studies appears to be that variables that are *measured* at a higher level of aggregation, represent a higher level in multi-level modeling. In most multi-level models each level of analysis is defined by the level at which the data have been collected. We question this logic. Since we analyze individual choice behavior we think it is most sensible to *model* the data at this level, irrespective of the level at which the data have been *collected*.

Having discussed these methodological considerations, our investigation proceeds by employing regression analysis to study the effects of independent variables on party utilities. It is to the findings of these analyses that we now turn.

### Main findings

Table 1 shows the effects of the various independent variables, created as explained above, on party utility. The table contains three panels, of which the first pertains to all countries and the other two distinguish between established and consolidating democracies. We explain 33.7 percent of the variance in utilities using these independent variables for all countries taken

**Table 1: Regressions findings from full models for the explanation of party choice**

	All countries			Established democracies			Former communist states		
	b	s.e	Beta	b	s.e	Beta	b	s.e.	Beta
Social class	.587	.052	.081**	.588	.058	.084**	.586	.107	.076**
Religion	.660	.041	.116**	.613	.049	.105**	.748	.075	.138**
Gender	.725	.140	.037**	.701	.158	.037**	.778	.286	.037*
Valence issues	.654	.057	.081**	.606	.065	.078**	.774	.118	.090**
EU-approval	.474	.050	.069**	.528	.059	.075**	.367	.094	.056**
Government approval	.629	.025	.188**	.629	.028	.202**	.629	.058	.155**
Satisfaction with democracy	.313	.047	.050**	.284	.055	.045**	.388	.090	.062**
Perceived distance on left-right	-.412	.010	-.326**	-.430	.011	-.336**	-.372	.018	-.301**
Perceived distance European unification	-.084	.010	-.064**	-.075	.011	-.058**	-.103	.019	-.077**
New member (dummy variable)	-.058	.046	-.009						
Party size	4.094	.139	.210**	4.135	.148	.233**	3.840	.341	.153**
R <sup>2</sup> -adjusted (N-weighted)	.337 (13,243)			.367 (9,297)			.274 (3,946)		

Significant at \*.01, \*\*.001.

together (36.7 percent among established democracies). In single country studies the variance explained is normally substantially higher than this, because these models normally include the position issues that are most relevant in each of the particular countries. In this joint data collection effort, only one position issue was included (position on European unification), but in most countries other position issues will be relevant as well. Left/right distance explains some of the variance in policy voting, but in most countries position issues will explain 5 to 10% of the variance after left/right is controlled for. Not having measured more position issues therefore lowers the explanatory power of the models.

More important than the R<sup>2</sup>'s, however, are the striking similarities in the findings for established and consolidating democracies. Because of the linear transformations of the variables social class through satisfaction with democracy, the unstandardized regression coefficients cannot be compared in a straightforward manner. Visual inspection of the standardized coefficients, however, shows that the strengths of the effects are very similar in the two sets of countries. The former communist states see slightly more effect from social

structure (class, religion and gender) than more established democracies do, and slightly less effect of policy positions (all of the other individual-level variables apart from satisfaction with democracy). But overall the effects seem very similar.

We now turn to the variables that were not transformed: left/right distance, distance on the issue of European unification, and party size. Effects of left-right position are particularly reduced in former communist states. Strategic considerations also play a lesser role there, as shown by the lesser effect of party size, though the difference is not large. Indeed, the strongest message to take from the comparison between established and consolidating democracies is how little difference we see (though variance explained is notably lower in consolidating democracies, suggesting the presence of rather more unmeasured and perhaps idiosyncratic effects than in established democracies). The fact that a dummy variable for "formerly communist country" fails to prove significant in the analysis for all countries shows that the overall level of party support is not different in the two sets of countries.

These findings lump all established democracies and all consolidating democracies together, yet we have already said that we would expect differences between countries in each group. After all, van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) did find differences between the then member states that could only be accounted for by interactions defined at the systemic level. We would expect that still to be true, and we similarly expect differences among consolidating democracies. To identify these differences we need to introduce the possibility of heterogeneous effects – effects that are significantly different in one country than in another. It is to such effects that we now turn.

#### Differences between countries

The first analyses presented in Table 2 (Model A) include three interaction terms between former communist states, on the one hand, and on the other hand left/right distance, party size and distances on the issue of European unification. It turns out that the effect of left/right distance on party choice is somewhat weaker (less negative) in former communist states than in the more established democracies. The differences are small however. The main effect (unstandardized) is -.429. In former communist states this effect is .054 weaker, i.e., it is -.375. Even though the differences are small, they are, however, statistically significant at  $p < .01$ .

**Table 2: Regression findings for models explaining party choice, with interactions (all countries)**

	Model A			Model B			Model C		
	b	s.e	Beta	b	s.e	Beta	b	s.e.	Beta
Social class	.587	.052	.081**	.575	.052	.080**	.575	.052	.080**
Religion	.661	.041	.116**	.666	.041	.117**	.667	.041	.117**
Gender	.725	.140	.037**	.721	.140	.037**	.721	.139	.037**
Valence issues	.654	.057	.081**	.656	.057	.082**	.655	.057	.081**
EU-approval	.476	.050	.069**	.472	.050	.069**	.475	.050	.069**
Government approval	.626	.025	.187**	.617	.025	.184**	.614	.025	.183**
Satisfaction with democracy	.314	.047	.050**	.300	.047	.048**	.302	.047	.048**
Perceived distance on left-right	-.429	.012	-.339**	-.413	.010	-.327**	-.428	.011	-.339**
Perceived distance European unification	.075	.011	.057**	-.084	.010	-.064**	-.084	.010	-.064**
Party size	4.157	.156	.214**	4.158	.139	.214**	4.134	.139	.212**
Former communist state (dummy variable)	-.063	.046	-.010				-.053	.046	-.008
Former communist state * left/right distance	.054	.020	.024*				.048	.019	.021
Former communist state * European unification	-.029	.021	-.012						
Former Communist state * party size	-.381	.344	-.009						
LR system agreement * LR distance				-.445	.073	-.044**	-.443	.073	-.044**
R <sup>2</sup> -adjusted (weighted N)	.338 (13,243)			.339 (13,243)			.339 (13,243)		

Significant at \*.01, \*\*.001.

An equally important finding is that the other two interaction effects are *not* statistically significant. In other words, the strategic consideration that a larger party is more powerful and hence a more attractive candidate for one's vote, applies equally in the two sets of countries. Moreover, the issue of European unification is *not* more important in elections in former communist countries (which are all new member states) than in the more established democracies. So, Model A strongly supports the impression based on visual inspection of

Table 1, which is that the patterns of determinants of party choice in the two sets of countries are very similar.

So far we distinguished between two sets of countries. This separation of countries into two different groups is based upon the central research question, but leaves open the possibility that various other types of differences exist between voting patterns in the different countries which are not captured by the distinction between established and consolidating democracies. An extensive search for interactions between country dummy's and individual level variables demonstrated that the effect of left/right on party choice was significantly different from the general pattern in Model A in five countries: Denmark, Portugal, Spain, Cyprus and the Czech Republic. Moreover, the effect of party size turned out to be different in several countries.

The analyses in *Choosing Europe* indicated that a systemic variable could possibly explain differences in the effect of left/right distance on party choice. When positions in left/right terms are very clear, these left/right positions provide a good indication of parties' ideological complexions, and thus of their future actions. When, on the other hand, voters are not so much aware of the positions of parties on a left/right dimension, these left/right positions do not help to inform voters of the political programs of parties. Therefore, voters are most likely to rely upon left/right positions of parties when these positions are very clear and less likely to do so when these are less clear. An indication of the clarity of party positions is the amount of agreement among voters about such positions. The more that voters agree about where a party stands, the less ambiguous this position apparently is.

To test whether this is indeed the case, Model B introduces an interaction term between, on the one hand, the amount of perceptual agreement (see Van der Eijk 2002) about the left/right positions of parties in each country, and on the other hand left/right distances. Model B shows that the effect of left/right distance depends indeed upon the degree of perceptual agreement in each country. Van der Eijk & Franklin (1996) and Van der Eijk et al. (1999) report the same findings on two different sets of data, so that this pattern turns out to be very robust. The question is whether the interaction between former communist states and left/right distance (see Model A) does still exist after we control for the interaction between

left/right perceptual agreement and left/right distance. Model C shows that this is no longer the case at the 0.01 level of significance.<sup>7</sup>

To what extent does Model C explain the different patterns of party choice in each of the countries? None of the interactions between individual country dummy's and left/right distance are significant in Model C. Moreover, none of the interactions between countries and the issue of European unification turned out to be significant. The only significant interactions were found with party size: the effect is different from the general effect in 7 countries. There are evidently various idiosyncratic factors that operate in each of the countries and that determine the strategic positions of parties vis-à-vis each other, thus determining why party size has a different effect in different countries. We were unable to specify variables by which to replace the proper names of countries in relation to the different effects of party size. In particular, as already seen in Model A, we did not find that former communist states as a group were any different from established democracies in these terms; and there were quite as many differences among established democracies in terms of effects of party size as there were among consolidating democracies.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper we analyzed voting patterns in 20 EU-countries with very different party systems and with very different historic pasts. Many of these countries have experienced more than a century of democratic rule, whereas other countries have a very short experience with parliamentary democracies. We searched for differences in voting patterns between these 20 EU countries and we explicitly distinguished between former communist countries and more established democracies. The main finding is that, despite the large differences between all these countries, the determinants of the vote are strikingly similar.

Some minor differences were found in the extent to which voters use left/right positions as a cue to decide which party to vote for. These differences could be explained by a systemic variable, the degree of agreement about party positions in left/right terms. Van der Eijk, et al. (1996:358) reported similar findings for 1989 and 1994. Their interpretation of these findings was that they display "a clear indication of a kind of meta-rationality on the part of vot-

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<sup>7</sup> This level was chosen because we estimate 60 interaction terms. At a lower level of significance (.05) we are very likely to detect a number of significant effects on the basis of chance alone (see also note 6).

ers". When voters are well-aware of the locations of political parties in left-right terms, they will be more certain about policies enacted on the basis of those policy positions than if they are less aware of party locations. So, if voters wish to use their votes to influence policies, it is rational for them to bear in mind the extent to which parties take clear positions on the respective policy dimensions. As mentioned earlier, in *Choosing Europe?* van der Eijk and Franklin (1996) pointed out the implication of their corresponding finding: that one could take a Dutchman and, by moving him to Spain and giving him time to acclimatize, turn him (for electoral purposes) into a Spaniard. The same is now seen to be true of a Hungarian or Pole (or anyone else in the newly-admitted EU states). This would be good news if European elections were going to demand of such voters that they evaluate EU issues and leadership in a common fashion across the EU's member countries.

Nowadays, of course, EU elections are still organized as 25 separate national elections, with separate national lists of national parties. If the EU wanted to create a European polity and enhance a sense of European citizenship and, above all, conduct meaningful elections that would contribute to eliminating the EU's democratic deficit (cf. van der Eijk and Franklin 1996) it might wish to organize real European elections. In such elections European citizens would be treated as one electorate and would vote for Europe-wide lists of European parties.

The important implication of our findings is that the performance of voters is no impediment to such elections being held.

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