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The Electoral Implications of Political Polarization

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Introduction

Context competition and behavior

One of the most important achievements of the last decades of comparative political research is to have shown that, to fully understand the voters, we need first to look at the politicians. This is the message of many recent large–scale comparative efforts, whether focused on institutions (see Klingemann 2009) or on the citizens themselves (see Dalton and Anderson 2011; Thomassen 2005). However, this should not be regarded as just another neo–institutionalist claim. While nowadays few dare questioning that "institutions matter", to say that "*politics* matters" implies taking into account a wider range of cases where citizens can be affected by the political *context* in which they act—with the latter consisting of the multitude of actors, behaviors, rules, habits, customs, symbols, and information to which citizens are exposed as they turn their eye towards the political realm. To say that context matters implies assuming that citizens living in the same place at the same time have something in common, and their behavior can only be fully understood by looking at the characteristics of their environment, rather than speculating on their interests and individual motivations.

The importance of taking context into account is well understood among people who find themselves discussing politics of their home country with somewhat surprised foreigners. However, this is even more important to political scientists who wish to disclouse patterns of behavior that can be generalized across geographical and temporal contexts. Moreover, to identify the mechanisms by which the context influences individual behaviors is essential for those who are in the position to evaluate, and possibly impact upon, the well–functioning of democratic institutions. To inform the decisions of policy–makers is a role that political science has been invested for long (see APSA 1950). Yet, to rigorously assess which components of individual behaviors are innate, and which are driven by the circumstances, is an endeavor made possible only in relative recent

times, by the increased availability of comparative data on the one hand, and by some important advancements in the techniques for analizing them on the other. Thus, while part of political research is rightfully interested in explaining regularities in people's behavior and/or the sources of individual differences, another part of the discipline focuses on how different contexts can explain differences across groups of people that are assumed to be *similarly motivated* and *equally heterogeneous*.

This work belongs to the latter group of studies, as it investigates the consequences for the voters of the way in which parties or candidates conduct their competition, or in other words, of the way in which they interact with each other in the public arena. More specifically, this book focuses on the implications of *political polarization* on some specific political behaviors that are crucial for the good functioning of democratic politics. Political theory identifies *accountability* and *responsiveness* as two important elements of the full realization of the democratic purposes, i.e. to allow politics to bring objectively–valued positive effects to the society (see Bartolini 1999; Dahl 1971, 1989; Strøm 1989). Accountability reflects the possibility for the citizens to change who is in charge, and therefore the obligation for who is in charge to be *responsible* of his/her actions to the public. Responsiveness is a further step towards the realization of a collective good through the political action, as it refers to those who are in charge being *receptive* of the public's demands and opinions. The principal way by which these two elements or values are fostered in a liberal democratic system is through party competition. It is by competing with each other for the political power (whether it is represented by maximizing votes, office positions, or the possibility to influence the policy–making) that parties are expected to produce a fully responsive and responsible government in representative democracies. However, different aspects of competition can be emphasized or restrained by different competitive strategies.

The concept of "competition" in political science has been often used to describe different phenomena, spanning from the "closeness of the race" between parties or candidates (e.g. Griffin 2006; Grofman and Selb 2009) to fully–multidimensional constructs (Bartolini 1999; Strøm 1989). In the most complete conceptual work on this topic, Bartolini (1999, 2000) distinguishes between four different dimen-

sions of political competition.[1] *Contestability* refers to the degree of openness of the electoral market for actors who are interested in entering the competition. A minimum degree of contestability is also a necessary condition for a democratic system to be regarded as such, i.e. to allow the citizens to select peacefully their ruler at fixed time intervals (see Schumpeter 1976). On the same line, *vulnerability* is what provides full realization to this aspect, as it refers to the extent to which an incumbent government can be replaced or modified in its composition. Because this aspect is strongly determined by the «visibility of the division line between government and opposition» (Bartolini 2000, p. 54), the way in which these two dimensions of competition relate to each other refers to a well–known trade–off in political science. In fact, by setting a low treshold for new actors to enter into the electoral arena, high contestability can promote *fragmentation*, which in turn may blur the separation line between government and opposition. The degree by which political systems lie between perfect contestability and incumbent vulnerability ultimately determines the "clarity of responsibility" of their governments, whose impact on the voters has been subject of extensive research in the past decades (Duch and Stevenson 2008; Powell 2000).

However, other two dimensions of electoral competition are particularly relevant here, namely the *decidability* of the political offer, and the *availability* of the voters to switch their party support. The former dimension refers to the distinctiveness of the political supply, or to put it differently, the extent to which the voters perceive the policy options to be actually different from one another. This dimension is crucial for electoral competition, as there is no point for the voters to choose among two parties that offer the same thing. In other words, by being undifferentiated in their political offer, parties can avoid competing, favoring other and possibly collusive types of interaction (Bartolini 2000). On the other hand, parties can also defect from competing with each other when there is low electoral availability, i.e. when voters are not sensitive to the appeals of the different parties. The portion of electorate that is open to change

1. A similar decomposition of the concept of political competition into different dimensions is made by Strøm (1989). However, while for some categories the two conceptualizations are rather close, I focus here on Bartolini (1999, 2000)'s scheme because of its wider conceptual scope.

their vote from one party to another is in fact what is at stake in electoral competition. To avoid their defection is what ultimately motivates parties to be responsive to public demands. Thus, low electoral availability is as detrimental for the quality of democracy as low decidability, as in both cases the ruling political elites have no incentive to do what the voters want.

In this work I argue that the degree of decidability of the political offer and the degree of availability of the electorate trade off against each other, and the relative prominence of both elements is given by the degree of *party polarization*, or the perceived ideological distance between the parties running for an election. Studies that in the past have more or less explicitly linked polarization with competitiveness have privileged the first aspect, i.e. the differentiation of the policy supply (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Dalton 2008; Lachat 2008, 2011). In this study I argue that high party polarization affects electoral availability by decreasing the extent to which voters are available to change their party support, thus reducing parties' incentives to engage in direct competition with each other. As we shall see in the next chapters, polarization is hypothesized to have both a "mechanical effect" on electoral availability, by directly impacting on the distribution of voters' preferences, and an indirect "psychological effect" on the way in which voters perceive and evaluate parties. However, differently from other studies showing the moderating effect of polarization on the importance of issues and ideology (e.g. Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Lachat 2008), I argue here that polarization increases the chance that partisan *loyalties* will bias people's political perceptions and evaluations. This expectation builds in part on a body of literature linking party polarization to (political) group conflict, a phenomenon that has been widely observed in American politics (e.g. Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Hetherington 2001; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Levendusky 2009).

To be sure, other factors beside party polarization can reduce electoral availability by "freezing" the party electorates. The most obvious is the presence of highly–politicized cleavage lines, whose impact on the electorate has been widely investigated for decades in the context of West–European party systems since Lipset and Rokkan (1967). However, the stability of voting behaviors hypothesized by the theory of social cleavages was put into question right after the theory itself was developed, in the 1960s. On one front, starting from

the 1970s, political scientists identified as a secular trend of social modernization a number of signs of an increased individualization of citizens' opinions and behaviors (see Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck 1984). On a second front, once the importance of the context has been taken into account, many types of voting patterns have been shown to be moderated by genuinely political factors, such as the behavior of the political elites (Thomassen 2005).[2] Hence, given the focus of this study on a time period that goes from the mid 1990s to the end of the 2000s, the encapsulation of the electorate that characterized Western European political systems in the cleavage era can be easily regarded as an exception that may possibily affect some sub–groups of voters, rather than the rule.

In sum, while previous research focused on the potential problems for competition related to low policy differentiation, I concentrate here on the opposite set of concerns, i.e. those that derive from an excessively–stable or partisan electorate. The resulting picture provides support to a narrative that pictures the relationship between polarization and the quality of democracy as "bell–shaped". However, unlike previous studies arguing about this type of relation (see Schmitt and Freire 2012), this works discusses a set of micro–level mechanisms by which a contextual–level phenomenon such as party polarization can ultimately influence aggregate electoral competition passing through voters' individual behaviors. Thus, this work represents a substantial contribution both to the empirical literature focused on the ways in which the political context can impact on the public opinion's considerations and behaviors, and to the normative literature regarding the consequences of parties' conduct for the good functioning of democratic competition.

Structure of the Book

This book is structured in five chapters. The first three explore the concept of polarization and its measurement, while the other two deal with the implications of polarization for citizens' behaviors and perceptions. The fist chapter, called "Polarized Politics", proposes a light definition of political polarization and offers some examples.

2. Even an most archetypal expression of cleavage politics such as class voting, has been shown to be moderated by party polarization (e.g. Evans and Tilley 2012).

The second chapter, called "Elements of Polarization", goes deeper into the conceptualization of polarization by describing three features that qualify this phenomenon. Given a general definition of polarization as "a number of actors taking diverging positions on a given substantive dimension", the second chapter will decompose this concept among its three constitutive parts: the *positions* taken by the actors, the *dimension* on which the actors take their positions, and the *actors* themselves. For each of these parameters, some potential categories are discussed. For instance, the dimension of disagreement could be a single policy issue or a more encompassing ideological orientation, and the actors who take diverging positions can be citizens or parties. Different combination of these elements lead to different types of polarization that are of interest for political science.

The third chapter, called "Measuring Party Polarization", focuses on the type of polarization that this study investigates, i.e. between parties on the ideological left–right dimension, and I discuss the possible ways by which this can be measured.

The fourth chapter, called "Party Polarization and Voters Availability", deals with the first mechanism by which high party polarization is expected to influence the voters. In particular, the chapter focuses on one aspect of voting behavior that is strongly connected to the concept of electoral availability introduced earlier in this chapter: the extent to which citizens are open to support more than one party. The general expectation is that voters in more polarized party systems are less likely to change their party support for the simple fact that the positions that parties take are *too different* from each other, and therefore switching would be too much of a change. To provide an empirical test for this expectation, the chapter is divided in two parts. The first part introduces the concept of *preference certainty*, and discusses a way to measure it using survey data using the so–called "probability to vote" (PTV) variables, a type of party rating scales rather common in empirical research on voting behavior. The second part of the chapter shows that preference certainty is influenced by how parties are arranged in a given context, an effect that I define "mechanical" because it is related to the mere party distribution, i.e. to the *spatial properties* of party systems.

The fifth chapter is called "Party Polarization, Perceptions and Evaluations", and deals with a second type of mechanism by which polarized party systems are expected to impact on the voters. Here, what counts is not only the way in which parties are distributed,

but what type of interaction we expect to observe between parties when polarization is high. Looking at previous research, two models of choice are known to be influenced by the level of party system polarization: spatial/ideological voting (e.g. Lachat 2008) and valence/competence voting (e.g. Pardos-Prado 2012). The chapter looks at the implications of party polarization on the way in which voters perceive the ideological stances of parties, and evaluate their competence. Building on a body of literature linking elite polarization to mass partisanship, I derive expectations about the impact of partisan loyalties on citizens' perceptions of ideological proximity and party competence, and how this should vary as a function of the degree of party polarization. The idea is that higher polarization is likely to imply greater partisan conflict. Thus, what is observed to be reliance on party ideological similarity or competence may be a sign of a perceptual bias driven by partisanship.

The conclusion provides a wrap–up discussion about the theory and findings in this book, as well as their implications for the way in which polarization can be related to electoral competition. Moreover, the limitations of this study and avenues for further research are discussed.

Chapter I

Polarized Politics

On the morning of June 7th, 2012, the Greek private TV station *Antena* was live broadcasting a talk show hosting a group of people discussing around a table. The group included a man and two women, the first two sitting right next to each other on one side of the table, and the third a bit further, on the opposite side. During the show, in a scene doomed to be widely reported by media from all across Europe, the man stood up, and threw a glass of water at the woman sitting across him. Then, as the other woman reacted by getting out of her chair and trying to hit him with a newspaper, the man turned to her, and punched her three times in the face. After a few seconds the show host moved to stop the scuffle, and the commercial broke in.

Although this type of scene may be a routine in some morning trash–TV shows, the episode grabbed the media attention because the three people involved in the brawl were all members of the newly–elected Greek parliament. The lady to whom the water was targeted was Rena Dourou, from the left–wing coalition SYRIZA. The other woman, who had the less fortunate fate to get slapped, was Liana Kanelli, from the Greek Communist party KKE. Finally, the boisterous gentleman was Ilias Kasidiaris, spokesman of Golden Dawn, a radical right–wing party whose immigration policy slogan at the previous campaign was «Let's rid this country of the stench.»[1]

While this episode is surely an extreme case, it has two elements that recur in many narratives of political polarization across countries and political systems. One is the *ideological distance* between the positions that the actors stand for. The three MPs were there to represent three parties standing at the opposite extremes of the Greek political spectrum. On the left side, SYRIZA and KKE are two anti–capitalist entities that played during the last years a constant

1. See Associated Press. (2012, May 6). Golden Dawn: leader of far–right party lashes out at Greece's 'traitors'. The Guardian. Retrieved from http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/may/06/golden-dawn-far-right-greece, December 4, 2019.

opposition to the more moderate Greek socialist party (PASOK). The first, whose name means "Coalition of the radical left", was born as a merger between several radical left–wing movements, and emphasizes both economic and post–materialist issues, such as «human rights, the social state, ecology and freedom of expression» (Kotzaivazoglou and Zotos 2010, p. 132). The second is a more deep–rooted subcultural Marxist party, active since before the Second World War and strongly–reputed as an important actor of the resistance to the 1960s–1970s dictatorship (Magone 2011, p. 450). On the right side, Golden Dawn self–defines its own ideology as "ultra–nationalist" (Tsatsanis 2011) while its supporters are rather accused to be often leaning towards neo–nazism (Jones 2012). Thus, given the actors' backgrounds, the fight on Antena TV looked like a physical escalation of a highly–symbolic ideological conflict.

One could argue that extremist political actors on both ideological sides are not uncommon in European polities. However, the three parties represented in the debate were quite important in the Greek political landscape in the moment when the fight on Antena TV happened. After the election of May 2012, Golden Dawn was holding 21 seats at the national parliament (about 7% of the seat share), the KKE 26 seats (8.5%), and SYRIZA 52 seats (16.8%).[2] In other words, the three fighting MPs were representing about one third of the Greek people.

A second element that is fairly common in stories of political polarization is the *hostility* between the actors. The fight happened in the middle of a discussion about the Greek 1967–1974 military regime. Tension escalated quickly as Kanelli and Kasidiaris started calling each other, respectively, "fascist" and "old commie". Eventually, it was Dourou's accusation of «bringing the country back 500 years»

2. The following elections were held only ten days after the episode described here, on June 17th, due to the unwillingness of the three major parties (including SYRIZA) to find an agreement for a majority government. In fact, legislative studies show that party polarization increases the likelihood to encounter a legislative gridlock, due to the unwillingness of different veto players to behave cooperatively (see Jones 2001; Tsebelis 2002). While the formation of a government is a rather different case, it is reasonable to assert that the incapacity to cooperate shown by the Greek parties after the election of May 2012 was in great part due to an interplay between an even distribution of votes and the high degree of ideological distance between the three winners. In the following parliamentary arrangement, Golden Dawn obtained 18 seats, the KKE 12 seats, and SYRIZA 71 seats. However this time the most–voted party, the conservative New Democracy, obtained enough seats to allow the formation of a unity government with PASOK and the smaller social–democratic party DIMAR.

that triggered Kasidiaris' reaction, leading to the physical attack.[3] Similar examples of political enmity, ending in more or less spectacular ways, often happen inside of the insitutional buildings. Hetherington (2009) describes the escalation of a diatribe between Republican and Democrat legislators taking place no less than at the House Committee on Ways and Means of the US Congress, where Representatives ended up calling each other names (see also Hetherington and Weiler 2009, chap. 2). In a less solemn but arguably more entertaining way, pictures of scuffles inside parliamentary rooms appear from time to time in newspapers from all over the world. Italian journalists still mention what happened at the Senate in January 2008, when the speaker of the chamber read the vote count to the no–confidence motion that brough the center–left government led by PM Romano Prodi down. On that occasion, some opposition Senators reacted to the news by cheering, opening Champagne bottles, and even eating in an ostentive way some slices of *"mortadella"*, a variety of ham after which Prodi was nicknamed. The scene was heavily reported by all TV news channels, and became a symbol of the deep enmity that characterized Italian politics in the Second Republic.[4].

To be sure, ideological distance and disrespectful or aggressive behaviors are two different things, which not always go together. However, in the vast majority of the cases the latter are justified by the former. Scuffles of this kind between politicians or supporters often arise from substantive disputes, when one party accuses the other to lie or cheat, to report biased facts or to have nasty opinions, to act against the interest of the citizenry, and so on. It is when opponents are in a condition of great divergence that they are more likely to engage into an open conflict. Of course, politics can turn the hearts on. Political divergences are at the origin of violent outbreaks since the dawn of modern politics, and even the most harmless conversation about a recent government's play can lead to harsh words and bitterness. After all, political disputes are ultimately disputes over *power*. Thus, it should not come as a surprise if political conflicts are

3. The scene can be retrieved on the internet, e.g. https://youtu.be/xjVsaEUM2Ws (retrieved December 4, 2019)

4. The scene is also reported in some documentaries about Italian political history of the last decades, such as e.g. "Girlfriend in a Coma", by Annalisa Piras and Bill Emmott, or "Videocracy", by Erik Gandini. It can also be retrieved on–line, see e.g. https://youtu.be/5Scz-P50exE (retrieved December 4, 2019)

able to captivate many people.

Some times events of this kind happen during debates over particularly sensitive reforms (see e.g. the episode told by Hetherington 2009) or during periods of great economic or social discontent, when politics is called to provide answers to urgent societal demands. This is the case of the situation in Greece in June 2012. The incumbent Prime Minister, George Papandreou, leader of the socialist PASOK, had stepped down in late 2011, after agreeing with the leader of the opposition and the president about the formation of a national unity government that would aim to steer the country clear from the imminent danger of bankruptcy. Conflicts within the PASOK and against the opposition parties mainly came as a consequence of a series of austerity packages adopted by the Greek government in return for loans from other members of the eurozone, oriented to avoid the country's bankruptcy. The two Greek elections of 2012, in between which the episode on Antena TV happened, have been held in a context of deep social unrest, with the population being asked to choose whether to accept even harsher austerity measures or being ready to drop out of the eurozone.

Other times, the hostility towards the rival is part of the package that a political party offers. For instance in Hungary, the neat division between left–wing and right–wing coalitions, led respectively by the social–democrat MSZP and the national–conservative Fidesz, is not rooted in particularly deep economic cleavages, but it emerges rather from identitarian and socio–cultural divides (Vegetti 2019). These are in turn strongly determined by political elites, which since the fall of communism have been building «a steady division of the political spectrum into two camps that continuously produce themselves as a political unit through the construction of the other camp as their counterpart» (Palonen 2009, p. 320). In Italy, pundits spoke of "anti–communism without communism", referring to the tactic used by former PM Silvio Berlusconi since his entrance into politics in 1994 to systematically call his left–wing and center rivals "communists" (Diamanti 2009). Although the main left–wing party in the Italian political landscape was indeed until 1992 a communist party, this dialectical tool has been holding for almost two decades, in spite of the considerable moderation of the current main center–left party (Curini and Iacus 2008).

All in all, political polarization presents itself in many varieties across countries, although some fixed points can be identified. The

examples provided in this sections are not meant to form a complete list of the possible cases in which political polarization manifests itself, but they should rather provide a general idea of the elements that can be found in polarized polities. Among them, the two most common seem to be *ideological distance* and *mutual hostility*. Although these two factors do not have to occur together to make a political system polarized, they often do. However, to address the (potential) relationship between them requires a more general perspective than the reported cases brought as example in this section can provide. Thus, this point is tackled more explicitly in the next section.

1.1. Polarization: A Light Definition

The term "polarization" is used in social sciences to describe a number of phenomena. The most common use can be traced back to a synonym of "disagreement": two people are said to be polarized over a certain topic when their opinions are different from one another. In particular, being different here implies being incompatible, rather than multifaceted. In other words, polarization pictures a situation where the actors' positions are confronted *vis–a–vis* one another. This clarification is important, since polarization has been some times used as a synonym of "differentiation". However, while the concept of political differentiation covers a wider range of potential situations, including fragmentation of the interests into multiple areas or dimensions, the concept of political polarization indicates a more specific set of instances where the interests are mutually exclusive. This implies that a certain degree of satisfaction of a preference inevitably leads to an equal degree of dissatisfaction of the opposite preference. Thus, polarization does imply a form of opinion differentiation, but it refers in particular to a situation where the opinions are antithetical.[5]

The latter specification suggests a second layer of meaning attached to the concept of polarization. In this sense, the term is some times used as a synonym of "conflict". In other words, the same word can be used to describe both a type of *arrangement* of the actors'

5. For instance, the Oxford English Dictionary defines polarization as «[t]he accentuation of a difference between two things or groups; division into two sharply contrasting groups or sets of beliefs or opinions; an instance of this.» See "polarization, n.". OED. Oxford University Press.

preferences or opinions, and a type of *interaction* between the actors themselves. While disagreement is a property of how the opinions are distributed, conflict is a property of the relationship that we would expect to find between actors whose opinions diverge substantially. This view borrows from conflict studies, where polarization is conceived as a stage of conflict escalation where a win–win solution is no longer likely or desirable (Pruitt and Olczak 1995). As defined above, a scenario where actors' preferences are polarized implies precisely a situation where the advantage of the one corresponds to the disadvantage of the other. Thus, a statement such as "two actors are polarized" implies that a solution that accommodates both actors' preferences is not viable.

One could argue that the occurrence of a conflictual relationship is not really implied in the concept of polarization but it is rather a consequence of it, and therefore, for the sake of conceptual clarity, the two aspects should stay separated. This is fully acceptable. However, if we accept a definition of polarization as a great distance between contrasting positions, then what other type of interaction that is not conflictual should we expect from polarized actors? In how many cases polarization leads to an outcome that is different from conflict? Theoretically, given their interest (or obligation) to deal with each other at all, an alternative type of interaction that the actors could establish is cooperation. In a condition of disagreement, to cooperate implies to focus on the source of the discordance, and try to solve it by finding a shared solution. By contrast, a conflictual relationship has no shared solution, as every gain for one party implies a loss for the other. In this view, the difference between conflict and cooperation can be reframed as difference of focus of the actors' attention. In case of cooperation, the actors are focused on the matter of discontent, i.e. on the problem or issue that needs to find a shared solution. On the other hand, in case of conflict, the actors are focused on the actors themselves, on their own qualities and on the qualities of the opponents who will take advantage of their own losses, in a logic of "us against them".[6] Thus, a reformulation of the question posited above would sound like: given a polarized arrangement of preferences, do we expect the actors to focus more on the substantive

6. This definition is directly attached to the concept of polarization by Pruitt and Olczak (1995), who define it as a stage of conflict escalation where stereotyped (negative) images of the enemy are formed.

topic of disagreement, or on their own and others' identities?

To answer this question for the specific case of party polarization is one of the tasks of this study. However, what I argue from now is that the decision whether to focus on the topic of disagreement or on the actors is largely in the hands of the actors themselves, i.e. in the case of this study, the political elites. This does not change the nature of the phenomenon itself, which in any case is derived from a certain distribution of preferences or opinions. In fact, while in principle it is surely possible that political actors are willing to enter into open conflict without their preferences being divergent, the way in which modern democratic confrontations are structured will force them to adapt their substantive positions to justify a condition of conflict. Thus, while conflict can happen or not, a fixed point in the definition of a polarized political system is a divergent distribution of preferences. For this reason I propose here a "light" definition of polarization as *the degree of disagreement between the actors' opinions and preferences*. This represents a basic concept upon which, in the following chapters, specific claims and expectations will be built.

1.2. Polarization as an Elite–Driven Phenomenon

So far I have established the aim of this study, i.e. to assess the electoral consequences of ideological party polarization, and I have provided a general definition of the concept of polarization itself. In this section I will briefly discuss *what causes* polarization. In particular, I will use this section to define and defend one assumption that will be held constant throughout this book: that polarization is largely a top–down phenomenon.

The idea that many political phenomena are elite–driven has been supported by several prominent studies over the years (e.g. Carmines and Stimson 1989; Zaller 1992), and polarization is all but an exception (see Hetherington 2001, 2009; Layman, Carsey, and Menasce Horowitz 2006; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Poole and Rosenthal 1984). However, especially when a comparative perspective is taken, the top–down view in the literature is often accompained by a second one, that sees polarization as a bottom–up process. According to this view, polarization is a mere political reflection of the level of conflict taking place within a society. In other words, party systems are assumed to *channel* the conflict and *express* it into

the political arena, i.e. to convert it into a particular party configuration that can be, in fact, more or less polarized (Sani and Sartori 1983; Sartori 1976). This type of approach was conjugated in the most successful way by the theory of social *cleavages* (Lipset and Rokkan 1967), and it set the ground for following theories that studied political phenomena through the lens of social modernization (Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck 1984). Yet, it was exactly the renewed interest for the context that motivated political scientists, in recent years, to challenge this view (Thomassen 2005). The claim that "politics matters" is primarily based on the observation that national trajectories of political change are better understood when the behavior of political elites is considered. Thus, in this sense, the top–down perspective can be currently regarded as an agreed–upon view of political phenomena.

Yet, the full complexity of polarization can extend way beyond the top–down/bottom–up dichotomy. In particular, even assuming a top–down process, the motives of the "top" can come from the "bottom". In other words, if we assume that parties are vote seekers (a very common assumtpion in political science), then we should allow their positioning to have at least something to do with the voters and their preferences. Thus, the literature on the causes of party polarization can be rather seen as a long list of incentives, or of «conditions under which centrifugal incentives (i.e. factors that cause parties to take distinctly noncentrist positions) tend to dominate centripetal incentives (i.e. factors that make parties converge toward the center of voter distribution)» (Curini and Hino 2012, p. 461). These incentives could lie in different aspects of the political reality, such as the institutional make–up or the economy. However, it is reasonable to argue that the choice whether to take or not to take these chances is always in the parties' hands.

Among the institutional features that influence party polarization, literature has identified a number of factors, such as the number of parties (Cox 1990) and its interplay with the expectations regarding coalition formation (Curini and Hino 2012), or the number of veto players in the legislative process, including federalist institutions (Schmitt and Freire 2012). However, some characteristics that should theoretically reduce polarization, such as a smaller number of parties and the presence of federalist veto player, did not prevent the Republican and Democrat elites in the US to grow increasingly polarized over the decades. In this respect, a factor that has been

found to affect the degree of political polarization relates to the macro–economic context. American scholars have pointed out a strong inter–connection between economic inequalities and ideological divergence among the political elites (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Moreover, historical research on political systems of the past that are often taken as examples of high polarization, such as the Weimar Republic in Germany (see Sartori 1976, pp. 131–173), suggests that the electoral fortunes of ideological extreme parties can be strongly related to the worsening of a country's economic conditions (King et al. 2008; Pelizzo and Babones 2007). Yet again, the connection between these two phenomena seems to relate more to political elites taking opportunities for promoting more radical messages, rather than a mere representation of the social divisions. In fact, characteristics related to the strength of social cleavages have been found to have no effect on party polarization (Schmitt and Freire 2012).

What all these studies show is a set of varying conditions. Yet the choice whether to compete in a centripetal or in a centrifugal way is largely made by the parties. In this sense, I argue that polarization should be intended as a feature of the *style of competition*. This view is coherent with much literature on parties' behavior, and its connection to the voters (Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005). This perspective will be kept throughout the book, as the electoral consequences of different aspects related to parties' behavior are studied.

Chapter II

Elements of Polarization

So far, polarization has been defined as a condition of disagreement. Yet in order to be operational, any definition of polarization requires some parameters to be specified, i.e. elements regarding the matter of discontent and the actors involved in it, that must be "plugged–in" to make it intelligible in the political reality. More specifically, these elements are the *positions* between which the distance is assessed, the *dimension* on which we want to determine the degree of polarization, and the *actors* that we want to observe. Together, these three factors cover the full range of elements that build a polarized landscape. They will be discussed one by one in the following paragraphs.

2.1. The meaning of a position

The first and most simple step is to define the meaning of a position. Here I adopt the perspective assumed by most of the literature in political science, as well as by most of the people in their everyday conversations about politics: a position is a *preference*. To say that a person's position is against nuclear energy means that that person prefers not to use nuclear power plants to produce energy than to use them. As Benoit and Laver (2006) point out, to call "position" a preference on a political topic is not at all symptomatic of the use of some obscure political scientist jargon, but it is rather the norm in many public debates. «It is difficult if not impossible to have a serious discussion about the substance of real politics without referring to "where" key actors stand on substantive matters at issue.» (Benoit and Laver 2006, p. 14). Nevertheless, the use of the word "position" in political science recalls almost automatically the Downsian spatial model. Here, the utility income deriving from voting for a certain party is related to the *benefits* that a person expects to derive from voting (Downs 1957a, pp. 36–37). According to Downs, and even more

according to those who developed an extensive spatial framework building on Downs' work (see Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005; Armstrong et al. 2014; Enelow and Hinich 1982, 1984; Hinich and Munger 1992, 1994; Merrill and Grofman 1999), people have meaningful ideal positions on issues, and they use them as a benchmark to evaluate parties. Such positions are assumed to be *exogenous* to the evaluations, often said to derive entirely from self–interest. The origin of the self–interest is not a matter of concern for spatial modelers: what is important (and indeed assumed) is that individual preferences are identifiable and exogenous, i.e. they are not influenced by party evaluations themselves.

A different, although related, perspective is taken within social psychology, where a position is generally called *attitude*, «a general and enduring positive or negative feeling about some person, object or issue» (Petty and Cacioppo 1981, p. 7). Here the assumption that an individual position emerges from a rational calculus of costs and benefits is unnecessary, as attitudes are much simpler constructs defined positionally by a *direction* (e.g. to be in favor or against same–sex marriages) and a certain degree of *extremity* (e.g. to be strongly against or moderately in favor of the use of nuclear power plants).[1] The difference between this perspective and the Downsian framework lies primarily in what determines a person's position (a rather straightforward response to an object for the first, a meticulous calculus for the second) and, secondarily, by the fact that attitudes in psychology are defined essentially in a bipolar way, while for Downs positions taken by the actors are set on a continuum of infinite, identically meaningful and equally likely placements.[2] On the other hand,

1. In fact, literature in political psychology points out to many other characteristics of attitudes that do not necessarily pertain their positional features (see Boninger, Krosnick, and Berent 1995; Krosnick et al. 1993; Krosnick and Petty 1995). However, to discuss this in detail would go beyond the purposes of this section.

2. The difference between these two conceptions of the issue space can be regarded as irrelevant, given the assumption that both of them should lead to the same prediction regarding people's choice mechanism. This view was questioned by Rabinowitz and MacDonald (1989)'s theory of *directional voting*. In its original enunciation, the directional model of voting was conceived as alternative to the Downsian proximity–based framework. The study published by Rabinowitz and MacDonald created a great debate that led to the production of an impressive amount of research (see e.g. Claassen 2007; Lacy and Paolino 2010; Lewis and King 1999; MacDonald, Listhaug, and Rabinowitz 1991; MacDonald, Rabinowitz, and Listhaug 1998; Tomz and Van Houweling 2008; Warwick 2004; Westholm 1997, and all the articles in the special issue dedicated to this topic by the Journal of Theoretical Politics, 1997, vol. 9, issue 1).

these two perspectives have in common the general assumption that actors' positions are single–peaked, i.e. they can be identified by a single point on the space. This is not the only way to represent a person's preference on some certain topic (for example, Social Judgment Theory defines some latitudes of acceptance as segments or ranges on the issue space where people can find an acceptable compromise, see Sherif and Hovland 1961) although it is generally considered a parsimonious and rather accurate way to synthesize people's will on political matters. Thus, in this work I will use the words "position", "attitude" and "preference" interchangeably, and will assume that a person's position is a valid synthetic description of his/her view on a certain topic.

2.2. Dimensions of political disagreement: issues and ideology

While it is not necessary to specify every time the meaning of a position when talking about polarization, it is essential to be explicit about the other two parameters, i.e. what is the topic of the disagreement, and among which actors. This is the case because, in spite of being always related to between–actor disagreement, polarization can indicate rather different phenomena when it is observed at the party system or at the mass public level, and the implications for our understanding of the type of conflict we are dealing with can vary tremendously depending on the type of dimension on which polarization is observed. Regarding the latter point, the matter of the disagreement, there are generally two different types of polarization that are interesting for political scientists. One is polarization over *issues*, or single policy domains, and the other is polarization over *ideological views*. The first concept is rather straightforward, and describes a situation where the actors are polarized on one specific political problem. Thus, if in a group of two actors one is strongly in favor of giving migrant workers the right vote at the local elections, and the other is strongly against it, there will be a situation of high polarization on the issues of the voting rights for labor immigrants.

This ultimately led some scholars to seek for a "unified model" of issue voting (see Merrill and Grofman 1999) and others to focus on the contextual conditions that favor one model instead of another (see Pardos-Prado and Dinas 2010; Fazekas and Méder 2013, for the focus on the impact of system polarization on the predictive power of both models).

Polarization can also be observed on a *multidimensional* issue space, i.e. on different issues at the same time. In this case, actors may disagree over some issues and agree over others, and the different domains will be kept separate from one another. However, the disagreement may also be more generalized and regard, rather than single policy issues, entire ideological views. This type of polarization is the phenomenon that this book focuses on. Given the ambiguity and the often controversial use of the term "ideology", this section provides a discussion over such a concept, and its particular mapping on the *left–right* (or *liberal–conservative*) dimension.[3]

The labels "left" and "right", as well as "liberal" and "conservative", are probably among the most widely used terms across modern democracies to qualify anything related to politics. One can use these categories to define a party or a candidate, but also a program, a reasoning or an idea. A certain legislation can be said to be left–wing or right–wing, and the fact that a politician votes for it would in turn qualify him/her as a left–wing or right–wing politician. Although several political systems throughout history have experienced the rise of movements who claimed their non–involvement with the left–right categorization, it is hard to find in practice a political statement that can not be put into one of the two categories (Bobbio 1997). This is mainly the case because these terms are associated to opposite sets of values that jointly define the nature of political disagreement among the vast majority of democracies in the world.

Although many political scientists would agree on the fact that ideology is a multidimensional construct, i.e. it characterizes actors' positions on more than one single topic, the most of the times where this construct is taken into account in empirical analyses, it is regarded as a single dimension. For instance, some people may call

3. It is not uncommon among scholars to use the term "ideological polarization" to describe a situation of diverging preferences over single political issues. This use of the term is justified by the fact that different positions over policy matters are assumed to stem directly from different ideological views. While this may be true (and we will see how below), I argue that having diverging preferences over policy issues does not necessarily mean that the actors' ideological views are polarized. In fact, two actors may hold different positions over e.g. wealth redistribution or same–sex marriages, because of mere self–interest, i.e. their economic and social status would be personally affected by the implementation of some policies. This type of determinant of issue preferences contrasts with the definition of ideology that I provide in this section. Thus, the term "ideological polarization" employed in this study refers exclusively to polarization of the ideological views.

themselves "conservatives" or "right–wingers" because they oppose same–sex marriages, while others may do it because they want to reduce social services. However, while we are talking about two different issues, one in the domain of social policies and the other in the domain of economic policies, both these groups would end up being positioned on the right, were they placed on the ideological dimension. This apparent paradox is made possible by the essentially abstract nature of ideological categories, which makes them flexible enough to cover a wide range of dimensions of political action. Downs, the first and most cited advocate of unidimensionality, defines ideology «as a verbal image of the good society and of the chief means of constructing such a society.» (Downs 1957a, p. 96). In his view, ideology has the precise function of helping citizens making sense of party positions on a potentially high number of issue dimensions on the one hand, and helping parties maintaining their potential support as wide as possible in a constantly changing society on the other. Hence, a first definition of ideology is that it is a *short–cut device*, or a simplification that helps people understanding an otherwise too complex political reality (see Higgs 1987; Hinich and Munger 1994).

This functional definition of ideology is generally paired with a substantial definition, i.e. a description of *how* ideology can fulfill its summarizing function in a multidimensional policy conflict. In this respect, political ideologies are generally described as belief systems, i.e. coherent sets of abstract values that guide people's policy preferences, but also cognitions, behaviors, goals and self–explanations of the reality. This definition builds on early conceptualizations of ideology, in particular on Converse (1964)'s highly influential work. According to Converse, a belief system is a «configuration of ideas and attitudes in which the elements are bound together by some form of constraint or functional interdependence» (Converse 1964, p. 207). Here the emphasis is on the *constraint*, i.e. on the coherence between a person's attitudes towards different political topics. The logic driving this argument is that ideologies organize political topics in the citizens' minds by stating «what goes with what» (Converse 1964, p. 212), or in other words, which position on one issue is coherent with another position on another issue. The potential reasons why ideologies are able to provide people with psychological constraint in their position–taking are several. Among the most relevant, Converse points out the importance of semi–logical associations

stemming from abstract principles, or world views, that are mostly driven by political elites, or in general, make sense in the particular social and political context where some specific configurations are evaluated.

With some refinements, this conceptualization is still accepted by political scientists nowadays (see Feldman 1988, 2003; Jacoby 1995; Judd and Milburn 1980; Peffley and Hurwitz 1985; Sniderman and Bullock 2004; Stimson 1975). However, while its biggest merit consists in introducing and elaborating the concept of constraint, the account of the reasons behind the regular appearance of some patterns of associations in different political contexts has been left aside. This point has become particularly relevant among scholars in the context of two distinct debates: the (now outdated) theoretical debate about the "end of ideology", and the more empirical debate about the cross–country comparability of the ideological labels, in light of the ever–growing availability of comparative survey data. In both cases, to assess whether ideologies are disappeared and/or whether they have a comparable function in the most of the political contexts, requires scholars to address explicitly the issue of the meaning of the ideological labels. In this respect, three different perspective are generally taken.

One perspective assumes that left and right have a fixed and stable issue content, whatever the context where it is observed (see Budge et al. 2001; Klingemann et al. 2006; Laver 2001; Laver and Garry 2000). This view, which has been applied mostly to the comparative study of party policy platforms, seeks to identify the "observable regularities" among issue positions of left and right parties. Thus, left–wing positions are assumed to emphasize economic planning and market regulation, protectionism, nationalization of enterprises and expansion of social services, together with a general positive attitude towards cosmopolitanism, peace and democracy, and a negative attitude towards the use of military force. On the other hand, right–wing positions are characterized by a general preference for pro–market and libertarian economic policies, matched with emphasis on traditional morality, law and order, and a positive attitude for military intervention (see e.g. the "RILE" code established by the Comparative Manifesto Project Klingemann et al. 2006, p. 5).

A second way to reach a general definition of the ideological divide is to recognize the relative "freedom" of the meaning of left and right from any absolute and invariant policy content, and regard

it rather as a *super–issue*, i.e. a summary dimension of the relevant issue conflicts that take place in a certain political context at a certain time (Inglehart 1984, 1990; Inglehart and Klingemann 1976; Schmitt and van der Eijk 2009; van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder 2005). In this view, the main providers of content to the ideological categories are still the parties, which use them to «label the most *important* issues of a given era.» (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976, p. 244, emphasis in the original). Although this perspective and the previous one seem to be diametrically opposed to one another, they have one thing in common: they both focus on the *policy* content of the left–right distinction. In doing so, while the "super–issue" perspective is agnostic about the mix of policy associations that can be observed in different contexts, the "invariant meaning" perspective simply adopts the most "historical" of these associations, and generalizes it over different contexts. However, while both views recognize the presence of an ideological glue keeping the policies together, none of them deals explicitly with the issue of identifying what this glue is made of.

This step is made by a third perspective, which aims to identify the abstract principles that lie at the *core* of the left–right (or liberal–conservative) ideological divide, providing in turn a source of orientation for people to evaluate the peripheral, context–specific, issue dimensions. This endeavor has been undertaken to a great extent by social psychologists studying people's need to hold some ideological belief instead of another. In general, studies on the core attitudes at the base of political ideologies seem to converge on identifying two relevant dimensions (see Jost et al. 2003; Jost 2006; Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009). The first is between preference for more social and economic *equality* on the one hand, and acceptance (or promotion) of *inequalities* on the other. The second is between acceptance of *social change* (and *tolerance* for the dissent from the status quo) on the one hand, and observance of the *tradition* (and *support of authority* to punish dissenters) on the other hand. The identification of these two dimensions is in line with other normative–based conceptualizations that investigate the meaning of the distinction between left and right from the very origins of the terms, at the times of the French revolution (Bobbio 1997).

This latter conceptualization reduces the multi–dimensionality of many possible complex mixes of political issues to only two core value dimensions. It has the advantage of allowing the relevance (and,

occasionally, the direction) of specific policies to vary freely from one context to another without giving up the expectations about quasi–logical associations between them that are not purely context–specific. However, even such a simplified scenario looks too complex, if compared to the actual meaning that is attributed to the labels "left" ("liberal") and "right" ("conservative"). In fact, these two dimensions are almost never regarded as completely orthogonal to each other, but, at least in Western democracies, they present a quite regular pattern of association (which is not always regarded as valid, see for instance Bobbio 1997). A left–wing position is generally associated with a positive attitude towards equality, social change and tolerance, and a right–wing position with a positive attitude towards inequality, tradition and respect for authority (see e.g. Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin 1988; McClosky and Zaller 1984). In other words, even these two core values seem to be glued to one another.

Possible explanations for this further connection, that would essentially bring the reduction of complexity assumed by so many spatial theorists to a substantive conclusion, are currently of great interest for political researchers. For instance, System Justification Theory provides an explanation for right–wing or conservative preferences that takes into account the tendency to both justify inequalities and hold a general predilection for maintaining the status quo (Jost, Federico, and Napier 2009). In this framework, system justification is defined as a cognitive bias that affects some people and makes them more likely to «defend, legitimize, and bolster the social and political systems on which [they] are psychologically dependent» (Jost, Kay, and Thorisdottir 2009, p. 8), including all the social and economic inequalities that characterize their environment. Thus, the root of the core values that distinguish left–wing from right–wing people would consist in different cognitive styles, possibly implied by different types of personality and epistemic needs (see Gerber et al. 2010; Jost et al. 2003). Other scholars pushed themselves even further in the study of the individual underpinnings of ideological preferences, arguing that the individual differences in terms of ideology are strongly influenced by people's genonic profiles (Alford, Funk, and Hibbing 2005) and their interaction with the social environment (see Hatemi et al. 2011; Smith et al. 2012).

While an accurate survey of the research that follows a genuinely psychological or biological approach to the study of ideology would lead too far away from the main topic of this book, a first conclu-

sion regarding the ideological left–right dimension can be drawn at this point. The studies discussed above suggest three important things. First, the ideological labels are related to *preferences for policies*. Thus, to know an actor's position on the ideological space will provide meaningful information about his/her position on a set of concrete political issues. Second, the transition from a multitude of more or less relevant issues to one single ideological dimension is made possible by the logical or semi–logical *constraint* that characterizes different preferences for policies under ideological thinking. Third, this constraint is provided by more abstract core dimensions, that reflect generic individual *value orientations*, and are likely to be product of fundamental needs and predispositions. Thus, while the concrete policy content of the ideological labels may vary from one political system to another, due to context–specific patterns of issue salience and even direction, their core bases should be more stable and generalizable, as they reflect more fundamental cleavages that tend to constantly emerge from different combinations of issues in different places and times.

The discussion of political ideologies presented so far was based on the assumption that divisions between left and right positions are directly translatable into diverging issue or policy preferences. Yet some studies have been challenging this view over the years, suggesting that the ideological labels may have an important *identitarian component*. The stream of research advocating such a radical change of perspective came as a rather direct consequence of Converse's conceptual work. In particular, Converse noted that the most of the American public seemed to hold "nonattitudes" rather than attitudes, i.e. their answers to political issue questions appeared to be made up on the spot, rather than coming from abstract ideological considerations. Moreover, while Converse noted the important role of political sophistication in defining citizens' ability in making sense of political issues, he also noted that very few people are informed and/or sophisticated enough to qualify as ideologues (see Converse 1964, 2000; Saris and Sniderman 2004). Whereas these observations laid the foundations for a prolific body of research interested in political sophistication (e.g. Luskin 1987), counterintuitive results coming from other studies show that, while a substantial portion of the electorate was not able to identify the left and the right side of several policy issues (or even reversed the meaning of the two in open–ended questions), the ideological labels themselves had a strong

predictive power on people's vote choice (Holm and Robinson 1978; Klingemann 1979; Levitin and Miller 1979).

In the most important study elaborating on these insights, Conover and Feldman (1981) provide a conceptual framework where to define the ideological labels and their potential independence from issue preferences. Building on the "symbolic politics" theory (see Edelman 1964; Sears 1993; Sears, Hensler, and Speer 1979; Sears et al. 1980), the authors regard ideological labels as political *symbols*, i.e. as attitude objects that are able to «evoke and mobilize human emotions» (Sears 1993, p. 113). According to the mechanism posited by this theory, people's responses to political symbols are assumed to be driven by long–lasting predispositions acquired in their childhood. Such predispositions persist throughout the adult life, and trigger people's affective responses as they encounter new symbols that resemble those that their first emotional responses are associated to (Sears, Hensler, and Speer 1979). What is central in this framework, compared to other conceptualizations of the antecedents of attitude strength (see e.g. Krosnick and Petty 1995), is the fact that here individuals will respond positively to a symbol if and only if such a symbol is positively related to their long–lasting predispositions. In other words, symbolic politics theory predicts a great stability in people's attitudes, and excludes any role of self–interest in influencing them, leaving everything in the hands of *affect* (Kinder and Sears 1981; Sears et al. 1980).

Conover and Feldman (1981) partially integrate this view in their conceptualization. To them, people's ideological self–categorizations (namely, people's self–placement on the ideological dimension) are supposed to be influenced in part by a *cognitive component*, (the substantive policy information that they associate to the ideological labels), and in part by an *evaluative component* (their affect towards the social groups that the labels define, e.g. the "liberals" and the "conservatives").[4] Here policy issues are expected to have both a direct effect, by defining the cognitive content of the ideological labels, and an indirect effect, by providing further associations that will influence people's evaluations. For instance, people may evalu-

4. Notice that Conover and Feldman (1981)'s description is closer to the early conceptualization of symbolic politics proposed by Edelman (1964), while later works employing the definition of symbolic politics (see e.g. the works coauthored by David Sears cited in this chapter) ignore explicitly the self–interest related part of Edelman's argumentation.

ate the "liberals" more positively, if they associate them to an issue position that they like (Conover and Feldman 1981, p. 622). Thus, people's self–definition should come after their evaluation of the groups, not before. In other words, when individuals are supposed to describe themselves as "liberal" ("left–wing") or "conservative" ("right–wing") they will do it according to which one of the two groups they like better. This leads to a definition of ideological self–placement as a form of *group attachment*. Hence in this view, when an actor defines herself as e.g. a "leftist" or "liberal", she is not necessarily providing information regarding her policy preferences, but rather she is voicing her membership to a specific social group.[5]

A criticism that could be moved against this conceptualization of ideology is that it is too much centered on American politics, in particular on the definition of *party identification* emerging from the very early Michigan studies on American citizens' voting habits (Campbell et al. 1960). In this respect, these findings would simply reflect an *overlap* between partisan identification and ideology. Such a tendency is possibly helped by the two–party nature of the American political landscape, and thus by the fact that, for each ideological side, American voters can refer to only one party (a similar argument regarding the difference of partisanship between American and European politics can be found in Schmitt 2009a). However, this suspect is dismissed by the empirical assessment of the independent effect of ideological and partisan identification (Holm and Robinson 1978; Levitin and Miller 1979). Moreover, in a rare comparative study of ideology based on qualitative evidence, Klingemann (1979) shows that the tendency to define "left" and "right" in terms of political parties or social groups is even more marked in European countries such as the Netherlands, Britain, Germany and Austria (three of which are characterized by multiparty systems), while in the US such labels seem to be more related to affective definitions, such as "good" or "bad". Although the hypothesis of a correlation between ideology and partisanship is not at all overruled, that may be the very essence of the evaluative component of left–right identities. In fact, as Vegetti and

5. Another rather important point stressed in Conover and Feldman (1981)'s study is the non–polar nature of the ideological space, i.e. the two labels would not refer to opposite poles of the same dimension, but to completely different sets of values and interest. However, the authors' findings on this respect have been questioned on the basis of further evidence taking measurement error into account (Green 1988).

Širinić (2019) argue, in countries where left–right self–identifications correlate more with partisan attachments, people are more likely to perceive parties' left–right position as they belonged to different categorical groups.

In spite of conceptualizing ideological self–identifications as being mainly an evaluative process, rather than cognitive, this view presents some points of overlap with the one defining ideologies as belief systems. The first, and most obvious, is that the symbols that are associated to being "liberal" and "conservative" are substantively very similar to the core values previously discussed as the root of left and right policy preferences. The authors state explicitly that «the major symbolic referents» of the labels are «the reformist and radical left for liberals, and capitalism, social control and the status quo for conservatives» (Conover and Feldman 1981, p. 643). Second, the authors admit a certain degree of variation in the symbolic content, that would keep the labels updated with the political conflicts of the day. As they argue, «at any point in time the major symbols of change and progress become associated with evaluations of liberals, while the symbols associated with the preservation of traditional values determine evaluations of conservatives,» and thus «liberal / conservative identifications should always reflect in symbolic terms the dominant cleavages in society» (Conover and Feldman 1981, p. 643). This view resembles the "left–right as a super–issue" perspective adopted by much comparative literature.

These final remarks leave us with a number of summarizing conclusions regarding the nature of the left–right or liberal–conservative ideology. These conclusions are based on a review of the most important studies interested in defining the concept of ideology conducted over the past fifty years, and will serve as foundations for a definition of ideological polarization. First, ideological labels are flexible constructs, that are able to capture in most cases the most relevant constellations of contrasts that ultimately define the political alternatives over which an election is disputed. This implies that, although the topics of the debate between left and right politicians in Germany in the 1970s are surely different than those in Spain or Italy in the 2000s, they should be regarded as equally representative of the political disputes taking place at their time and in their place. Second, however varying is the mix of issues, it should be possible in the most of the cases to track opposing policy preferences back to opposing worldviews, possibly regarding themes such as *equality*

and *social change*. Thus, if issue preferences are based on ideological considerations at all (and not on, for instance, pure self–interest or chance), they will present some form of coherent pattern revolving around core values that are stable and comparable between different contexts. Finally, literature suggests that actors' ideological considerations derive in part from *policy–related information* and in part from *evaluations of the political objects*. Thus, while on the one hand actors' ideological perceptions of the self and the others can be expected to come from what they know about the issues, on the other hand they are argued to reflect the extent to which actors "like" or "dislike" the symbolic content that the labels convey.

It can be argued that the relative balance of the two components varies from actor to actor, and from context to context (see Vegetti and Širinić 2019), in a similar fashion as single policy issues can be more or less salient for defining actors' perceptions of ideological distinctions. However, for the purposes of the present study, this does not make a difference. Insofar as ideological labels can be connected in a comparable way to actors' political decisions, the question whether they stem from informed beliefs on policy issues or more primitive reactions to the labels associated to political objects is not relevant. What is more important for the purposes of this study is to find a definition of ideological polarization that accommodates all the valid descriptions of ideology that have been proposed.

In light of the topics discussed in this section, I argue that polarization over ideology should be regarded as an expression of *political conflict*. This definition is based on two considerations. First, assuming a substantively–rich view of ideology, a population of actors whose ideological views are polarized will hold dramatically different preferences over the most important policies. This will make any agreement between the actors more difficult to reach. Moreover, given the constraining nature of ideology, the disagreement between the actors in such a case will span over issue dimensions, reducing the space of common interest between the opposing groups to virtually none. Second, assuming a group–based view of ideology, higher polarization will reflect the tendency of actors to evaluate very positively one label or group, and very negatively the other. In such a case, again, a common ground of cooperation between the two groups will be unlikely. Rather, the relationship between actors holding different ideological views in a polarized setting will be more easily characterized by feelings of enmity. To sum up, what-

ever is the mix of components concurring to an actor's ideological self–definition, an increase of the degree of ideological polarization should always increase conflictuality.

This definition qualifies ideological polarization, or polarization over ideological views, as something fundamentally different from, and much more important than, polarization over any single policy dimension. More specifically, whatever the definition of ideology that one would accept, actors' issue positions are expected to reflect their ideological preferences, rather than entering in direct competition with them. Thus, while different issue dimensions can counterbalance each other with respect of actors' disagreement, when the disagreement is ideological it should necessarily extend across all the relevant issues discussed within a certain context. This also implies that, while actors can be polarized over one or more specific policy issues without at the same time holding polarized ideological views, the opposite case will be much less likely, and should affect only the most marginal issues, those on which actors' preferences are not (yet) integrated in their ideological narratives. Thus, ideological polarization is an indicator of a generalized political conflict, that can extend over issues and political groups, and ultimately defines the degree of mutual exclusiveness between the actors' political preferences.

2.3. Political actors and varieties of polarization: the mass public and the parties

The third element of polarization discussed in this chapter aims to answer the question: polarization among who? The general term "political polarization", often employed by scholars and pundits, tends to refer to two distinct phenomena, namely polarization among a generic *public*, such as a country's citizens and polarization among more specific political actors. However, even this distinction seems rather fuzzy, given the potential presence of middle categories and further ramifications. In this respect, the political characteristics of the context under investigation play an important role in defining the shortlist of actors whose polarization can be an interesting topic of investigation. For instance, American scholars may be interested in identifying different patterns of polarization between political elites, partisan groups among the citizens and party activists (see Layman, Carsey, and Menasce Horowitz 2006), or rather be focused on the

whole mass public (see Fiorina and Abrams 2008). Moreover, the political elites under investigation may be elected representatives at national or local institutions (e.g. state or regional), and the focus may be put on the behavior of parties as unitary actors or on individual candidates. Given the comparative perspective of this study, and the particular focus on European political systems, I identify two types of actors that are of general relevance: the *citizens* and the *political parties*. Whereas the phenomenon under the spotlight of this study is party polarization, I provide in this section a brief discussion of the ways in which both groups of actors can be regarded as polarized. As I will argue, there are important differences between these two categories of actors, which imply for each of them to identify the most proper way or ways to conceptualize polarization. Thus, the aim of this review is also to show how the word "polarization" can describe a multitude of phenomena, not all of them being necessarily symptomatic of the same structure of interaction between the actors.

A first population for which social scientists are usually interested in assessing the degree of polarization is made by the common citizens. Here the phenomenon under study is often called "public opinion polarization", "mass polarization", "popular polarization", or "social polarization". Independently from the dimension under consideration, the first important characteristic of this type of polarization, compared to the one between parties, is that it involves a large number of actors. This point is not trivial, as it requires being explicit about what a polarized crowd means. For instance, one could define as polarized a scenario in which *N* people hold *N* different positions, but also one in which half of them hold one position and half of them hold another. Both scenarios picture a situation of disagreement, and they both lead to potentially interesting social consequences. However, while in the first scenario the actors' preferences are dispersed, in the second they rather look entrenched. The need for a further specification does not emerge from any standard definition of "polarization as disagreement". However, it does when we realize that disagreement can take different shapes, and impact in different ways on the individuals who belong to the population. This implies that we should take into account the reasons why we want to study mass polarization in the process of defining polarization itself. If fact, given the multiple potential implications of a polarized society, and the different perspectives taken over the years by researchers interested in studying it, mass polarization has been conceptualized

and measured in different ways.

In one of the most influential works on this topic, DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson (1996) are focused on mass polarization as a potential trigger for social conflict. The authors define four different dimensions, two being functions of the distribution of issue preferences among the population, and two of the relationships between such distributions. Together, the four constructs are meant to capture the conditions under which differences among citizens' preferences are likely to lead to political mobilization. The first two dimensions are the most interesting for the purposes of this study, as they focus on some properties of the population as a whole, such as the "dispersion" and the "bimodality" of people's preferences. *Dispersion* simply refers to the overall disagreement or «the extent to which any two randomly selected respondents are likely to differ in their opinions» (DiMaggio, Evans, and Bryson 1996, p. 694). With the second dimension the authors go one step further towards assessing the potential for conflict, looking for the presence of *clusters* of opinion within the population. In this logic, people's views over a topic are more polarized the more clearly we can identify the presence of two independent groups. The further apart the two modes are from each other, the more the preferences of the two groups are distant, and thus the conflict to accommodate them should be of more difficult resolution (see also Fiorina and Abrams 2008). In other words, fhe first feature is a function of the general disagreement, as as such it defines a situation in which diverging opinions are rather sparse and disorganized. The second feature aims to capture to what extent the diverging opinions are likely to be organized into common group identities, which are likely to mobilize the more the preferences of members of different groups are distant from one another. All in all, the definition of polarization as a function of the disagreement between the political actors provided earlier still holds. However, for very large numbers of actors, focusing on groups, rather than individuals, seems to be a more appropriate choice.

On the opposite end of the table where the political game is played we have the *political elites*. I use term "elites" here to refer in particular to those political actors who occupy or seek to occupy any position in the institutional structure that grants or would grant them an influence on public policy making and policy execution. Because the focus of this study is on democratic systems, the positions of political power that are discussed require, in order to be

reached, some sort of legitimization deriving from an expression of the popular will through the vote. However, my definition of elites extends to both the elected officials and those who present themselves as candidates and are eligible to run for office. This includes all the competitors within the electoral arena, whether they are incumbent or not. Moreover, the definition includes individual actors, such as e.g. local or national candidates, members of parliament, council members or ministers, and collective entities, such as *political parties*. The latter is the type of political elites that this present work focuses on. Following a very common assumption among scholars of electoral politics, I regard political parties as unitary actors. To be sure, this assumption does not imply that party positions on issues or ideological considerations are always expected to be punctual (i.e. to occupy a precise and recognizable geometrical point). Indeed, party positions can present some variation due to an intrinsic policy uncertainty, as already posited by Downs (1957a). In this view, parties ought not focus on a single social group (e.g. workers or managers) but rather keep their ideological view open to the interest of several different groups. Because citizens do not hold a perfect knowledge of every aspect of party policies, this strategy allows parties to diversify their appeal to reach a wider variety actors characterized by different interests, arguably within a given ideological range. Moreover, because parties are uncertain themselves about what the majority of the voters want, to avoid occupying one exact position would avoid the effort to relate each possible move to voters' reaction, reducing the costs of decision–making (Downs 1957a, chap. 7). Thus, the assumption that parties act as unitary actors does not relate to the question whether their positions are assessed with more or less certainty, which is surely a property of their political communication, and thus to a certain extent of the similarity of the statements of their members, but also of the informational environment and the citizens' cognitive capabilities.

When it gets to assess party polarization, scholars are usually confronted with a number of issues to be considered. The first is how to assess *party positions*. Even focusing on a general ideological dimension, party preferences are much more abstract and elusive constructs than those of the ordinary people. Party positions can be captured by observing the legislative voting behavior of their members, by analyzing the content of their electoral programs, by asking to party candidates and party members themselves, by relying

on experts' evaluations, or by recording citizens' perceptions. Each of these strategies focuses on a particular aspect of what makes a party position meaningful. Thus, legislators' behavior is meant to capture the concrete policy choices of party elites, which will take into account their real preferences and their tactical considerations, including their agreement with other party members. On the other hand, party programs often include promises that are hardly kept, because of the necessary negotiations with other parties, and some times cover policy aspects that are not particularly salient to the parties, but are there because they must be mentioned somehow. Assessing party preferences via surveys can hide another set of potential problems. Most of all, while a spatial terminology is rather well understood by the most of the people, to actually translate a set of ideas to a spatial position could lead to a considerable amount of error. While much of this error can be regarded as random, people will tend in some cases to rationalize the way in which they perceive parties to make it congruent with the way in which they perceive themselves. In other words, people could *project* their own position on the ones of other political actors, leading to a biased perception of party preferences. These effects are assumed to be weaker when using expert assessments, although such an assumption is rather arbitrary. Given the variety of pros and cons associated to each type of measure, the most proper way to assess party positions always depends on what one wants to do with it. In this respect, if one is interested in the impact of party positions (including their polarization) on the citizens, the most accurate way to assess them should take into consideration how the citizens perceive them.

A second issue that arises when trying to assess party polarization regards the *number* of parties acting in a political system. Here, the main distinction is between two–party and multiparty systems. The first case is also the simpler, and can be summarized as follows: in two–party systems, polarization corresponds to the difference between the preferences of the two parties. This theoretically ties the degree of polarization of a political system to the behavior of one single party. In the US, if the Republican party moves towards the right, the overall systemic polarization increases. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) offer a more structured definition of polarization in the American context, that can be easily applied to every two–party system. According to their conceptualization, which appears similar to the one of partisan sorting discussed a few paragraphs ago,

party polarization is a function of the ideological *distance* between the members of the two parties, and of the ideological *homogeneity* among members of the same party. To be sure, this definition is partially dependent on the way in which McCarty and colleagues measure party position, that is by scaling the voting behavior in Congress of the Democrat and the Republican elected representatives (see Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Thus, in this case, the "unitary actor" assumption is turned into a variable, with the level of "unitariness" being used as an indicator of polarization. However, it is important to notice that such a way to conceptualize polarization emphasizes the reduction of the overlapping space between the two actors' preferences, regardless of whether this is achieved primarily through actual distancing or rather through internal homogenization. The logic is that, the smaller the common ideological ground, the fewer the chances that parties can reach a compromise. This view fits with the general definition, according to which a highly polarized two–party system is nothing more than a scenario where the preferences of two actors are mutually exclusive.

As the number of parties increases, so does the number of ways in which polarization can be conceived. In a simplistic way, multiparty systems can be regarded as a "standard" population of actors with more than two elements. Thus, in theory, the same concepts that have been discussed in regard to mass polarization should apply to this case too. However, a very large population, such as the one represented by the citizens of a country, is still different from a middle–sized population. More specifically, in a middle–sized population the difference among the actors' *weight* becomes more important than in a large population. To give an example, let us imagine that we have a population of four people, two adults and two children, who need to decide about what to do on a Sunday afternoon. If one of the two grown–ups and one of the two children want to go to the cinema, and the other two want to go to the park, the group may engage in a discussion, where the supporters of one position will try to convince the supporters of the other position about doing what they prefer, and the other way round. However, if the two adults want to go to the cinema, and the two children want to go to the park, it is much more likely that the group will end up at the cinema, following the two adults' will. Why so? Because in that particular group, the two adults have more resources than the two children, or more in general they have more *power*. In other words, in the collective bargaining

process within our group of four, the preferences of two grown–ups have a higher weight. However, in a population of one thousand people, the relations of power would be set in a different way. Even imagining a situation where five hundred adults and five hundred children are entrenched into two opposite positions, in such a big population it will be the group's *size* that determines the relevance of a position.

All in all, the importance of the actors' weights emerges in mid–sized populations, such as multiparty systems, while it is irrelevant in two–party systems and it becomes a property of the subgroups in very large populations. That being said, scholars who studied polarization in multiparty systems over the years were moved by different normative interests. This in turn led them to emphasize different aspects of the phenomenon, and to measure it accordingly. In general, one can identify three ways in which polarization has been conceptualized: as a function of the *range* of preferences within the population, as a function of the degree of *extremity* of the actors' preferences, or as a function of the *isolation* of the actors from one another. The first approach seeks to assess the portion of ideological space that is covered by the population of parties. Here polarization increases the more the range covered by the party system becomes large. This view builds on Sartori (1976)'s concept of "space elasticity", and is based on one main assumption: that each party "controls", factually or potentially, a certain range of ideological or policy space, and therefore the area captured within the range of the party system is expected to be completely covered by the parties. Scholars who adopt this view of polarization are generally interested in assessing how diversified is the ideological or policy supply that voters face at an election (e.g. Wessels and Schmitt 2008). Thus, the aspect of polarization that is emphasized in this view is how diverse the actors' positions can be. Of course, this way to assess party polarization considers all the parties to be equally important, a property that, as we discussed above, is not desirable given the type of population considered. This is especially problematic in a population such as multiparty systems, where some very small parties can take particularly extreme positions, and precisely for their extremity be systematically ignored in case of coalition bargaining or other practices of power–sharing where small parties can play a role. In such a case, using a range measure the party system may end up looking extremely polarized, while in fact the main competition is fought among moderate parties.

A strategy adopted in some cases to solve this issue is to establish a rule to select only the relevant parties that is based on qualitative criteria. For instance, a quite popular criteria is proposed by Sartori and qualifies as relevant those parties that are able to enter coalitions and/or to influence the other parties' behavior thanks to their blackmail potential (see Sartori 1976, p. 131).

Other strategies to assess polarization in multiparty systems generally take into account party relevance by relying on the vote share that parties have obtained at a certain election (as a proxy of their importance among the voters), or the share of seats that they hold at the parliament (as a proxy of their legislative strength), or possibly both. The first type of weight is the most comparable across political systems, as it is not directly sensitive to the specific type of electoral rule used to convert votes into seats, while the second is often used when comparisons are made between different elections in the same political system. In this framework, the most common way to conceive polarization is as a function of actors' extremity on a given dimension. The logic is straightforward: a party system should be regarded as more polarized the more the relevant parties take opposite extreme positions. Hence, polarization here is conceptualized as a *weighted standard deviation*. Differently from the standard measure of dispersion that can be applied to large populations of actors, as discussed earlier in this section, the weighted standard deviation applied to middle–sized populations has the property to capture systemic tendencies towards bimodality, and reaches the theoretical maximum when the population consists in two equally sizable groups (i.e. clusters of parties or single parties) positioned at the opposite extremities of the dimension under consideration. In other words, this approach takes into account both the range of the overall distribution of actors, and the relative positioning of the most important actors. If the range is wide, but the most heavily–weighting actors are concentrated around the center, the distribution of opinions is to be considered dispersed, rather than polarized. In a population arranged in this way there may be some actors having extreme preferences, but the most important ones, i.e. the actors with a greater decisional power, will be more likely to agree with each other. To be sure, this approach requires to define what is the *center*, and what does a central position mean. Conceptualizing polarization as a function of the actors' extremity relies more or less implicitly on the assumption that the center does not represent a pole itself,

but rather a compromise position between the poles. In other words, the preferences of an actor positioned at the center are assumed not to be alternative to those of the actors on the left and on the right, but rather to accommodate both. This view masks again a "dyadic" concept of politics (see e.g. Bobbio 1997, chap. 1), where the structure of disagreement is essentially bipolar, and clashes to a certain extent with Sartori's conceptualization, according to which polarization in multiparty systems would actually be a consequence of "multipolar disagreement", more specifically of bilateral oppositions to a strong center (Sartori 1976, p. 134). In fact, Hazan (1995) shows that systems where center parties are strong may still be characterized by high polarization, but only when this implies that moderate parties are very small (and thus the the relevant positions are only around the center and the extreme poles) or that they move towards the extremes. However, strong center parties do not directly imply that the center is mutually–exclusive with the other polar positions. Moreover, in some political systems center parties may actually represent one of the two poles (such as e.g. the Italian First Republic, where the two main competing parties were one on the center and one on the left). This suggests that the center, conceived as the compromise position, is to be assessed empirically, rather than arbitrarily. In this respect, party weights are also often used to obtain the weighted mean among all parties' positions, and thus empirically determine the position where the actors' preferences converge. This type of approach to conceptualize and measure party polarization is based on reasonable assumptions regarding which type of arrangement is to be regarded indicative of a high degree of disagreement, and it is flexible enough to extend to different types of middle–sized populations (in fact it can also be applied to two–party systems, becoming equivalent to a simple measure of distance between the two parties). For these reasons, it is by far the most widely used method by scholars interested in assessing party polarization in a comparative perspective (e.g. Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Dalton 2008; Hazan 1995; Lachat 2008; Sigelman and Yough 1978; Taylor and Herman 1971; van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder 2005).

In sum, this section identifies two populations of actors that are relevant for studying political polarization in a comparative perspective. One population, the mass public, is generally characterized by a large number of actors. In this case, polarization is considered as a function of the existence of big and homogeneous groups that

hold preferences that are very different from one another. A second population, the political parties, generally consists in middle–sized populations, and can be made in one particular case by only two actors. For this type of population, a general strategy to assess the degree of polarization is to take in to account the actors' distribution, but also their relative importance within the population. All in all, we have all the components that we need to conceptualize and possibly derive empirically polarization over different types of populations and over dimensions of smaller or greater level of generality. In the next chapter these components will be eventually assembled into a measure of ideological polarization of party systems.

Chapter III

Measuring Party Polarization

The previous chapter discusses theoretical issues related to polarization, namely the meaning of a position in a spatial framework, the concept of ideology and ideological disagreement, and in which circumstances different populations can be regarded as polarized. While theoretical specifications are crucial, polarization remains in fact a genuinely empirical phenomenon. Thus, this chapter provides a brief discussion over measurement issues, with the aim to identify a valid way to assess polarization empirically and to apply it to party ideological positions in a wide array of countries.

3.1. Party position and importance

The discussion in the previous chapter highlights the relevance of two elements that concur in defining the degree of polarization in a multiparty system. One is the parties' *positions*, and the other is their relative *importance*. While the first element is what really determines polarization, the second has to be taken into account in case polarization is to be assessed on a middle–sized population, where shares of power across individuals indicate whose preferences are most likely to be followed. If the most important parties agree, the presence of some small parties taking extreme positions will not make a system polarized. In such a case, the advocates of the most extreme solutions may be vocal in expressing their dissent, but they will be most likely given scarce attention by the main actors in the bargain. On the other hand, if the most important parties are standing at the opposite extremes of an issue space, then to reach an agreement at all will be less likely, even though standing between them there could be some small parties taking moderate stands. To be sure, this does not mean that a measure of polarization that takes into account party importance can not be applied to two–party systems as well. In this type of systems, party importance

is simply assumed to be equal among both parties. However, to attribute importance weights to parties when assessing polarization can only increase the generalizability of the measure, rather than a decrease it. Thus, a desirable property for a measure of polarization that is comparable across different political systems implies that it takes into account both party positions and their relative weight.

Party positions can be measured at different levels. They can be assessed by party programs, by what their members say or by their legislative behavior. In this work I rely exclusively on *voters' perceptions* of party ideological stands. This choice is justified by two reasons. First, perceptions of party positions among the citizens are the closest level of measurement to the mass public's decisions and behaviors. Even if we assume that parties do hold identifiable ideological positions, an assumption that Downs himself had problems making (see Downs 1957a, chap. 7), it would be much harder to postulate that they can communicate them perfectly to the citizens. As I discussed in the previous section, ideological arguments are based on very abstract concepts, that require a certain degree of sophistication to be accurately captured. Yet the vast majority of citizens are able to position the parties on a given ideological scale. This implies that the political discourse, as captured and reported by the media or emerging from everyday talk to other people, allows the citizens to have a more or less accurate idea of how parties are arranged ideologically. To be sure, the picture that voters have in their mind may not correspond exactly to the actual course of action that party members follow when they make legislative choices or when they participate to public debates. On the other hand, those courses of action are themselves imperfect representations of parties' actual preferences, as they are influenced by strategic considerations and several other factors that only emerge in the very contingencies when choices are made. There are several "true positions" that parties can be attributed, and all of them have equal right to be regarded as valid expressions of their preferences. When scholars have to assess party behavior, they usually rely on the positions that are taken within the context of interaction that the research is focused on. As this work focuses on the interaction between parties and citizens, the most accurate estimate of party preferences is therefore how citizens themselves perceive those preferences to be.

A second reason to use voters' perceptions to assess party positions is that this measure does not require any assumption regarding

the substantive content of the left–right. As I discussed in the previous chapter, ideological considerations can be based on rather complex set of policy preferences, as well as on evaluations of the political objects. The balance between these elements may vary from person to person, and from context to context. While the first source of variation can be assumed to be randomly distributed around some stable "pillars" given by parties' historical identities, the second depends on context–specific factors that are there for all the citizens of a given country at the time of a given election. Because party polarization is a contextual property, to rely on measures of party positions that capture only some of the aspects of ideology (such as e.g. economic policy preferences in party programs) may systematically bias the assessment of polarization in some countries more than in others. Thus, citizens' perceptions of party positions also help reducing the bias given by the different balance of cognitive and evaluative components within the ideological narrative of a given country, and by the different mix of policies that are relevant in defining ideological differences.

To observe party positions, respondents to public opinion surveys are generally given batteries of questions where they are asked to place themselves and the relevant parties on a left–right scale. The type of scale varies from five or seven–point, with every category being labeled (most common in US surveys) to ten or eleven–point scales, where only the extreme "left" and "right" categories are labeled. To give an example, the surveys conducted within European Election Studies ask the following type of question to their respondents:[1]

> In political matters people talk of "the left" and "the right". What is your position? Please indicate your views using any number on a 10–point–scale. On this scale, where 1 means "left" and 10 means "right," which number best describes your position? You may use any number between 1 and 10 to specify your views.
> And about where would you place the following parties on this scale?

To obtain unique election–level assessments of party positions a measure of central tendency is applied to such responses. The

1. Question wording taken from the 1999 questionnaire, reported in van der Eijk et al. (2002).

resulting positions are estimates of how the public perceives parties to be placed on the left–right.

The second element commonly used to assess party polarization in multiparty systems is a set of weights that capture parties' relative importance at a certain election. As I discussed in the previous chapter, there are two types of weights that are generally used by scholars. One is the share of seats held by a party at the (National or European) parliament, and the other is the share of valid votes obtained at a certain election, usually the same under investigation or the previous one. Here, too, the best choice strongly depends on the aims of the researcher and the type of research design. For cross–country comparative research, the vote shares are generally preferred to the seat shares, as the former are less influenced by national–specific rules to convert votes into seats. To be sure, a source of indirect influence of the electoral law is the one that leads voters to behave strategically, for instance by concentrating on bigger parties in order not to waste their vote in countries ruled by majoritarian electoral systems (see Blais and Carty 1991). However, vote shares are surely less influenced by electoral rules than seat shares, and thus they are still to be regarded as more accurate pictures of parties' importance. A further criticism that could be moved against this type of weight is that party vote shares are known to the voters only after the election, and therefore they should not be used to compute measures that are introduced in statistical models aimed to predict people's behavior at the time of the election. However, this problem is indeed relevant when the aim is to study electoral contexts where opinion polls are not as widely used and reported by the media as they have been for the last decades in modern democracies. Fortunately, this study is focused on a historical time and a set of countries where quite accurate information regarding parties' likely success at the election are widely known to the public opinion before the election. Hence, in this book, weights will be assessed using party vote shares.

3.2. A measure of polarization

Chapter 2 discusses a few different ways to calculate polarization found in the literature. This section focuses on one in particular, which takes into account both party positions and their relative importance. It emphasizes parties' *extremity*, and therefore is assessed

by means of a measure of dispersion such as the standard deviation. Polarization indices based on measures of party dispersion are very common in the literature. They are all based on the same procedure, that can be summarized in three steps. The first consists in identifying the center, the second in measuring party absolute distances from it, and the third in normalizing the index by weighting the distances and, possibly, applying some scaling parameter. In this part I discuss the measure proposed by van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder (2005), that will also be used for the empirical analyses conducted later. The index (from now on *vdE*) maintains all the properties of other dispersion–based measures of polarization (see Dalton 2008; Hazan 1995; Taylor and Herman 1971), but in addition it has the advantage of being scaled using a theoretical maximum, i.e. the degree of polarization measured in a system where two equally strong parties stand at the opposite extremes of the scale used to assess party positions. The resulting measure is a value included between zero and one, that can be directly interpreted keeping in mind that zero means that all the parties hold the same position, and one indicates the highest possible degree of polarization. This is a particularly desirable property when the index is computed on different data sources, that may employ different scales to measure party positions. However, even when scales are the same, the vdE index represent a rather easy–to–interpret measure of party polarization, and therefore it is preferred to other measures that do not apply any scaling parameter. For a population of N parties, the index is computed using the following formula:

$$\text{Pol}_{(vdE)} = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^{N} \mid \bar{x} - x_i \mid w_i}{\text{Pmax}} \tag{3.1}$$

where $\bar{x}$ is the ideological center of the party system, calculated as the weighted mean of each party i's position x, w are the weights attached to the parties, and *Pmax* is the theoretical maximum value of the index. Here each party's extremity is assessed using absolute distances from the center, rather than squared distances (as e.g. in Hazan 1995), a choice that would make the measure look more like a variance than a standard deviation. This makes the distribution of the index much less skewed, and therefore more symmetric, than in case squared distances were used. Moreover the weights are used twice, once to compute $\bar{x}$, and once to assign each party its degree

of importance in contributing to the overall system polarization. For a population of N parties, $\bar{x}$, namely the center of the party system, is obtained via the following formula:

$$\bar{x} = \sum_{i=1}^{N} x_i w_i. \qquad (3.2)$$

The choice of using weights to determine the center keeps us from observing degrees of polarization that are artificially inflated when the ideological arrangement of the party system is unbalanced, for instance due to the presence of one very strong party placed on the left or the right. The implicit assumption here is that party weights also contribute in determining the center, i.e. the likely compromise position reached by the parties. This is rather intuitive if we consider that, in a process of negotiation, stronger actors are generally expected to concede less than weaker actors, and therefore be willing to deviate within a smaller range from their ideal point. To give an example of how the index works, a measure of polarization is estimated on the European Election data used for the empirical analyses in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5. The data come from four waves of the European Election Study collected after the elections for the European parliament in 1994, 1999, 2004 and 2009 (see, respectively, Schmitt et al. 1996; van der Eijk et al. 2002; Schmitt et al. 2009; van Egmond et al. 2010). These waves have been chosen because they contain all the variables needed in this study, and keep a common format of measurement, as we shall see in the following chapters. The total number of elections considered here is 82. At each wave, left–right positions of the relevant parties running for the election in each country have been measured.[2] In the waves of 1994, 1999 and 2004, party positions are observed on a ten–point scale going from 1 to 10, while in 2009 they are observed on an eleven–point scale going from 0 to 10. However, for this study the observations coming from the latter wave have been rescaled to go from 1 to 10 as well.[3] The weights are given by the vote shares obtained by the parties at the elections under investigation, and are normalized to sum up to the

2. A complete list of countries, parties and variables used from the EES study can be found in the Appendix

3. On a scale from 1 to 10, Pmax = 4.5.

unit given the parties observed in each country.

Figure 3.1 is a simple histogram of the values of the indices measured for these elections. As the figure shows, 60% of the observations fall within a range between 0.25 and 0.43, i.e. a rather low degree of polarization given the theoretical maximum being set at 1. This means that the most of the EU countries in the period of time considered are not even halfway to the theorized maximum level of polarization. Moreover, even the most polarized cases have values around 0.6, a rather high level but still quite far from the maximum. The mean of the distribution is about 0.33, with a standard deviation of 0.11, and the median is of 0.32. This indicates that the index is distributed quite symmetrically. To be sure, the distribution in Figure 3.1 does no look exactly as normal, but we should take into account that the histogram is based on eighty–two cases only, where there seem to be no outliers.

To provide a more detailed inspection of the variable, Figure 3.2

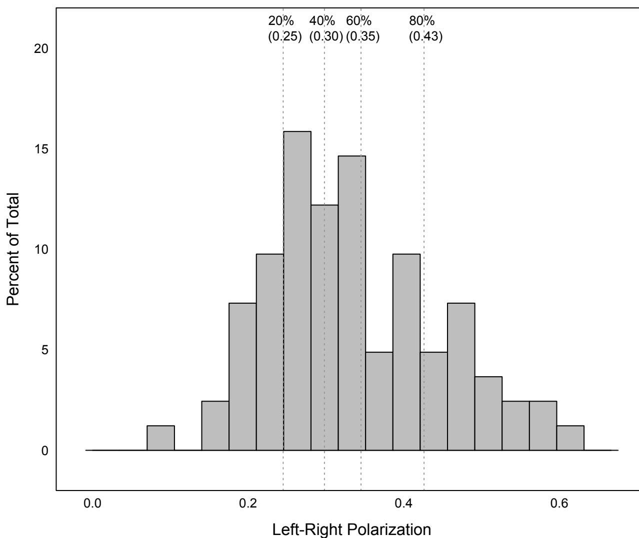

Figure 3.1. Distribution of party system polarization in Europe, 1994–2009. SOURCE: EES.

shows the degree of polarization among EU political systems from 1994 to 2009 as measured by the index. The figure combines information regarding both the distributions of the variable, in the legend above, and the range of values where every single observation falls. The five degrees of gray represent five quintiles of the distribution, with brighter colors indicating lower polarization, and darker colors higher polarization.

As the figure shows, the most polarized political systems in the EU are mainly found in Southern and Central–Eastern europe. In the first group Cyprus, Malta, Spain, Italy, and despite a decreasing trend, France and Greece, are all within the two highest polarized quintiles of the distributions in the most of the years. Portugal shows a more irregular pattern, although its degree of polarization is rather high in 2009. Two observations deviating from apparent trends are Greece in 2009, and Italy in 1999. Interestingly, while Greece shows a trend of depolarization during the time span observed, the rise of ideologically radical parties on the left and on the right, such as SYRIZA and Golden Dawn, could probably be reflecting a brand new process of re–polarization following the crisis in the Eurozone. Moving to the Central–Eastern European systems, Hungary and Czech Republic surely own the most polarized political systems, though Bulgaria and Slovenia seem to be catching up. Finally, among Northern European countries, only Sweden and, in less recent times, Denmark score relatively high in polarization.

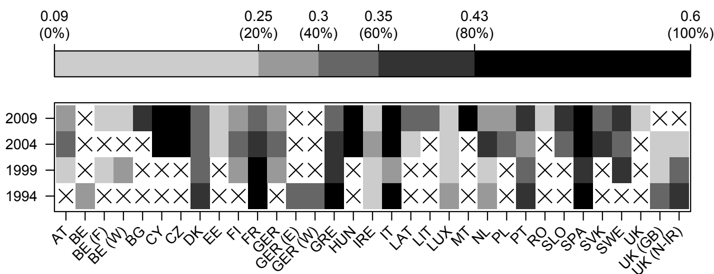

Figure 3.2. Three measures of polarization in Europe, 1994–2009. SOURCE: EES.

In sum, the vdE index seems to offer an acceptable assessment of party polarization on the left–right that is comparable across European political systems. Starting from here, the next chapters will deal with some important implications of party polarization for the voters, explicitly considering both the implications of party differentiation and of party conflict. In both chapters, polarization will be calculated using the van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder (2005)'s index, computed and distributed in the way shown in this chapter.

Chapter IV

Party Polarization and Voters Availability

In the introduction, we mentioned electoral *availability* as a property of the electorate that has important consequences for party competition. Available voters represent the portion of electorate that is open to change their party allegiance in case other options turn out to be more appealing on policy grounds or any other relevant evaluative criteria. Voters of this kind are crucial for democracies, as they determine «through their 'potential' defection the anticipated reactions of the elite and therefore their responsiveness to public opinion orientation» (Bartolini 1999, p. 461). Moreover, available voters are those that parties seek as they aim to enlarge their supporting base. If no or only a few voters are sensitive to party appeals, parties will have no incentives to directly compete with each other, i.e. to try to convince the same voters. This may open the door to collusive behaviors at the level of policy–making (Bartolini 1999) and, possibly, to a growing dissatisfaction at the level of the public opinion.

This chapter deals with the *mechanical effects* of polarized party systems on voters' availability. The concept of "mechanical effect" refers here to the direct impact that a certain distribution of parties will have on the way in which these parties are evaluated. By referring to the pure distributional properties of the political supply, this definition is very similar to other examples in the literature. For Duverger (1951), electoral laws exert a constraining effect on the number of legislative parties that is to a great extent mechanical, because it comes from the strict application of the law itself (see Benoit 2002; Taagepera and Shugart 1993). For Sartori (1976), the format of a party system can contain mechanical predispositions, as the dynamics of party competition are largely influenced by the number of parties competing. Here the idea is that, before formulating any expectation regarding the type of interaction that we expect to have between the parties, polarized systems should bear consequences on people's voting behavior, just for the way in which parties are arranged on the

ideological space. In other words, this part of the study investigates how we expect voters to behave in polarized political elections if we assume that their evaluations are moved by *pure spatial considerations*.

Polarization is, before anything else, a matter of *distance*. As I discussed in the previous chapters, the most simple way to see polarization is as a situation where the actors' preferences diverge. Of course great distance, especially when it regards ideological views, is likely to mask a certain pattern of interaction, as I will discuss in Chapter 5. However, the first and most obvious routine that systematically characterizes polarized elections is that voters are called to choose among policy options that are considerably different from one another. This implies that, on average, to switch from one party to another will imply taking a far greater leap, compared to a scenario where party stances are more similar. Given this premise, the chapter asks whether this simple rule can affect voters' willingness to make a leap at all. To be sure, there are several reasons why voters may want to switch from one party to another, and they are not all related to how parties are arranged. For instance, voters could remain loyal to the same party simply because they are constantly satisfied by the way they are represented by it, and not because the alternatives are way too different. For this reason, the task here is rather to assess voters' *potential* switching, or in other terms, their *openness* to consider voting for more than one party. So in sum, this chapter treats polarization as a structural condition that could influence electoral availability and, by extension, the competitiveness of a certain electoral context.

4.1. Preferences and Choice: A Model of Voting Behavior

In political research, the act of voting is often conceptualized as the final step of a chain of causality, where considerations made at different steps converge to a final, observable outcome. Probably, the most widely employed example is the Michigan school's "funnel of causality". Here long–term loyalties, learned in the early stages of a person's political socialization, work as underlying organizing factors for the subsequent evaluation of shorter–term stimuli provided by the electoral campaigns, such as a candidate's characteristics, or parties' position over the issue of the day (Campbell et al. 1960). Following this logic, long–term predispositions always exert a signif-

icant influence over short–term evaluations. For instance, feelings of group membership such as partisan loyalties (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), or normative core values such as ideology (Jost 2006), can impact on the way in which people reason upon new information by providing a set of expectations and pre–ordered evaluations regarding what is acceptable, what is desirable, and even what is true (e.g. Taber and Lodge 2006). In this view, to fully understand the decisional process that leads to the vote choice, it is necessary to take into account the influence that decisional steps happening earlier in the funnel exert on more recent evaluations.

Other models conceive voting as a process involving different steps without necessarily distinguishing between long–term and short–term influences, but rather separating the actual choice from the considerations that led to it. An example is the Downsian model (Downs 1957a). Here, as a first step, voters evaluate parties or candidates in order to assess how much they can profit from them being in a position of power. This quantity, i.e. the amount of potential satisfaction expected from a party's rule, is called in this literature "party *utility*". After assessing independent utilities for each party, in a second step, voters are ready to make a choice. In the Downsian specification, this is simply assumed to fall on the party being judged as the one yielding the highest utility:[1]

> Each citizen estimates the utility income from government action he expects each party would provide him if it were in power in the forthcoming election period, that is, he first estimates the utility income Party A would provide him, then the income Party B would provide, and so on. He votes for whatever party he believes would provide him with the highest utility income from government action. (Downs 1957b, p. 138)

Models of voting based on this framework have evolved in the last decades to cover aspects of the process of preference–making on

1. In the literature on voting behavior the term "utility" is often employed as a synonym of "preference". Yet, adopting a strict acceptation, the two words would have slightly different meanings. In fact, while following the usage in economics "party utility" would be defined as the degree of *satisfaction* that a person expects from a party to win the election, "party preference" rather refers to the *motivation* to vote for it (see Tillie 1995). Thus, in a hypothetical causal chain, the former event would come somewhat before the latter. However, provided that the discussion conducted in these pages will not venture into territories where this difference is relevant, I will use the terms "party utilities" and "party preferences" interchangeably, although favoring the latter for its slightly more overarching significance.

the one hand, and of the conversion of the preferences into actual choices on the other, that are neglected in the first formulation made by Downs (1957a, 1957b). In the first domain, i.e. the determinants of party preferences, recent accounts have expanded the so–called "policy–only" Downsian model to include also "non–policy" factors, such as e.g. partisanship, demographic characteristics, evaluations of candidate's past performances, and so on. In this case, the utility prodiced by voting for a party does not come from pure policy or ideological considerations, but also from other sources of potential satisfaction, such as e.g. having the own favorite party to win against the others, or rewarding a party that delivered a good performance in the past (see Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005). In the second domain, i.e. how preferences are converted into votes, more sophisticated models have relaxed the assumption that the vote choice falls deterministically upon the most preferred party, introducing an error term between the preference and the choice. Such a model is called "probabilistic voting" as it takes into account the uncertainty that citizens and parties have regarding each other's actual preferences.

While the latter point is often disregarded,[2] the first point, i.e. the inclusion of both policy and non–policy related considerations into the process of preference–building, helps defining an important assumption regarding how the process of vote choice is to be conceptualized. In particular, it is relevant to note that *every consideration*, be it long or short–term, be it based on ideology or any other type of assessments, has to "pass by" party preferences before turning into a party choice. In other words, as summarized in Figure 4.1, party preferences are a snapshot of *all* considerations that contribute to a person's evaluation of the political options, and provide the motiva-

2. For instance, Adams, Merrill, and Grofman (2005, p. 20) note that models of probabilistic voting are «only marginally more realistic» than the deterministic model.

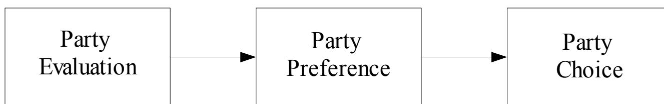

Figure 4.1. A Model of Vote Choice.

tional drive for people to make a political choice.[3] To be sure, the emphasis on party preferences as the product of different types of considerations, and not only policy–related ones, serves mainly to distinguish the concept adopted here from the strict policy–driven concept of utility employed by many Downsian modelers. However, this is not to deny the importance of policy factors or more abstract ideological characterizations for the voters.

The conceptualization of voting as a process that necessarily passes through the formation of party preferences has led some scholars to distinguish empirically between the explanation of party choice and the explanation of preferences themselves (Tillie 1995). After all, if preferences are assumed to be the most direct consequence of a person's evaluations, then observing the impact of some variables on party preferences should be equally valid as doing it for party choices. Yet, the direct observations of party preferences provides a considerably bigger amount of information respect to the single party choice. This is because, while the vote choice is an *ipsative* measure, and therefore it only provides information about the *first option*, a person can have in fact more or less nuanced preferences for the several options under consideration (van der Eijk et al. 2006).

The way in which preferences are distributed across the options *within* a person's mind can vary tremendously *between* individuals. A person can be equally motivated to vote for two parties, and eventually pick one because on the way to the polling station he/she has seen its logo printed on a poster. Although this vote counts as much as the vote of a hard–line partisan, nobody would doubt that the reason that produced such a choice is much more fragile. In principle, it is possible to have a better glance of the "rootedness" of a person's choice by observing the repeated voting behavior. In such a case, the hard–line partisan, or the self–reflective ideological voter, should behave less volatile than the random–decider (assuming a minimum degree of stability on the parties' side). However, observing how party preferences are distributed in a person's mind can provide the

3. In fact the full chain of psychological steps that lead to the vote choice can be more complex than this (see e.g. Rosema 2004, 2006). However, to build a fully comprehensive model of vote choice is not in the scope of this work. For the focus here is on identifying the ways in which party polarization impacts on citizens' political behavior, a parsimonious yet widely–accepted model of voting as the one presented in this section is in fact a more desirable foundation than a complex solution.

same type of information, without the need of repeated observations.

All in all, to directly observe voters' preferences can help assessing in a rather efficient way their expected "elasticity", or, to go back to our normative premise, their *availability*. Indeed, this point is recognized by Bartolini (1999) himself, who notices that a voter «can be 'at stake' in the sense of being available to to change his/her partisan choice even if in the end s/he will record the vote for the same party as before» (Bartolini 1999, p. 467). In this framework, the first question to be asked is: how are preferences of stable voters (or, by extension, switchers) likely to be distributed? This question is particularly important when the aim is to explain how different party arrangements are reflected within voters' minds by different distributions of preferences. To provide an answer to the question, this section discusses a single construct that can effectively provide a synthetic description of the distribution of a person's party preferences, and therefore should be directly connected to individual volatility: the certainty of party preferences.

4.2. The Certainty of Party Preferences

Certainty is defined here as the differential between a person's first and second preferences. In the everyday use, the concept refers to the recognition of something as well–established, not subject of further discussion or rethink. A researcher is certain about her findings when the margin of error is small enough to exclude other explanations, including the possibility that they are due to mere chance. A voter is certain about her party choice when she is confident that additional thought or information–gathering about political matters will not change her mind. In other words, greater certainty is generally associated with a *reduction of the alternatives*. In this view, certainty about party preferences is observed when voting for any other party but one is completely out of question.

When preferences are allowed to be nuanced, and not only "yes/no" options, certainty becomes an indicator of "how big of a difference" it makes for a voter to switch from one party to another. In other words, if we allow preferences to be non–ipsative (van der Eijk et al. 2006), it follows that the level of certainty is equivalent to the difference in magnitude between the highest and second highest preference. Of course, in most real–life situations, people are called

to choose between more than just two options. In the context of political choices, this becomes obvious when multiparty systems are concerned. However, even when choice options are many, a person's certainty can still be captured by the difference between her two largest preferences, as the lower–ranked alternatives do not directly challenge the supremacy of the best option. This is because, in most cases, the act of voting implies that people are asked to cast one single preference. Thus, to assess a voter's certainty, it is enough to determine how much *that* preference is given, or, in other words, to what extent it is not susceptible to new events that could affect her evaluation.[4]

In general, there are reasons to expect certainty to be stable over time, and reasons to expect it to be relatively volatile. The first set of reasons refers to individual processes or traits that contribute in maintaining people's beliefs and attitudes consistent, while the second refers to external, possibly election–specific, stimuli that concur in changing them. Although the concept of preference has been defined here as the extent to which someone is motivated to vote for a certain party, this construct is necessarily related to a person's attitude towards it. Given the nature of certainty as a compounded measure, obtained by observing the independent assessment of preferences for each party, it can be argued that more certain voters are also those who are more extreme in their positive or negative attitudes towards parties. Political psychology has identified for long the relationship between attitude extremity and resistance to change, due to a selective exposure to new information and other processes of rationalization (Krosnick et al. 1993; Krosnick and Petty 1995; Taber and Lodge 2006). Thus, to the extent that party evaluations are influenced by people's attitudes towards them, preference certainty should be rather stable.

Moreover, despite the focus on spatial considerations of this chapter, it would be naive to ignore that for many people party evaluations are influenced to a great extent by their partisan loyalty. In the original conception of the Michigan school, party identification has been portrayed as a form of group identification (Campbell et al. 1960; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), paralleling the connection

4. Other studies have discussed similar concepts before, see for instance Rosema (2006)'s "strength of the party preference" or Kroh, van der Brug, and van der Eijk (2007)'s "potential for vote switching".

between social group membership and vote choice made in the European context by the cleavage theory (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). Given the important role played by party or group identification for political considerations, it is reasonable to expect voters who feel attached to a party to keep some degree of certainty about their preferences over time.

On the other hand, events that occur before an election can also undermine or strengthen voters' certainty, increasing or decreasing the attractiveness of alternative options, and therefore making vote intention more or less resistant. For instance, a party that was considered unattractive to some voters for long, can suddenly become attractive due to a recent repositioning on some issues, or the arrival of a particularly charismatic leader. Moreover, some voters may find themselves in the condition to reconsider their preferences in case their favorite party is involved in a political scandal, or delivers a very poor performance in office. All in all, people's certainty should be, to a great extent, a function of what they are offered at the moment when preferences are assessed. The tension between long and short–term determinants of preference certainty is something to be settled empirically, rather than theoretically. However, it is reasonable to expect that both types of factors share equal importance in influencing voters' elasticity.

4.3. Certainty and Party Positions

As discussed previously, spatial models of vote choice describe party preferences largely as a product of the utility that a person expects from a certain party being in government, or, more generally, in the condition to exert influence on the policy–making. In this view, party preferences are a function of the proximity between a person's own ideological preferences and the ideological positions taken by the parties running for office (Downs 1957a; Enelow and Hinich 1984). Given this premise, preference certainty should be affected by the number of attractive options that a voter is surrounded by, i.e. the number of parties holding similar, or at least acceptable, ideological views. To put it differently, given a fixed number of parties, the closer each of them will be positioned to a voter (and, by extension, to each other), the lower should be her certainty.

Figure 4.2 provides a visual example of the impact of party posi-

tioning on voters' certainty. The figure shows one hypothetical voter (V) and two parties (P_1 and P_2) arranged in two different ways. In both scenarios, V is positioned on the left of the ideological scale, and P_1 is always the party placed closest to V, once slightly more extreme, and once slightly less. V's maximum preference, i.e. her *ideal point*, is obviously on her own position, and it has a value of 10. The *proximity function*, i.e. how much V's preference decreases the more a hypothetical party position itself far from V's ideal point, is set in this example as a linear function of the distance, and it is represented by the continuous black line.[5] While none of the two parties in both scenarios is standing exactly on V's ideal point, P_1 is always placed 0.5 points away from it, producing in both cases a preference of $10 - -0.5 = 9.5$. What changes between the two scenarios is the position of P_2, that places itself on the center in the top scenario, and further on the right in the bottom scenario.

While the position of V does not change, and neither does the distance from V's first preference P_1, it is the distance between the two parties that makes the difference. In the top panel, P_2 is a center party, positioned only 3 points away from V, and thus V, with a preference of $10 - -3 = 7$, is moderately attracted by it. In the bottom panel the situation is rather different, as P_2 is positioned fairly on the right, i.e. 6 points away from V, and therefore V is not much attracted by it, with a preference of $10 - -6 = 4$. As a consequence, in the scenario at the top V will be less certain about her preference for P_1 than in the scenario at the bottom. More specifically, V's certainty will be $9.5 - -7 = 2.5$ in the former case, and $9.5 - -4 = 5.5$ in the latter.

This example in Figure 4.2 shows how the difference in distance between the closest and the second closest party is converted into a

5. This type of function is based on the linear absolute distance (also called "city block") between the voter and each party, and it is calculated with the following equation:

$$U_{ij} = 10 - \left|V_i - P_j\right| \tag{4.1}$$

Where U_{ij} is the utility of Voter i for Party j. Some other scholars of spatial voting rather model the utility loss by using the squared Euclidean distance between the voter and the party. However, the two options are conceptually similar (see e.g. Lewis and King 1999). Next to the abstract nature of the example, and the fact that Figure 4.2 represents *preferences* and not *utilities*, the discussion at this point is based on linear distances for simplicity.

larger difference between the first and the second preferences, and therefore into higher certainty. This simple rule will hold as long as we assume that preferences are purely determined by positional considerations. Moreover, this should apply even when the number of options to be evaluated is larger than two. This is because the shape of the proximity function implies that any other party that is positioned further apart from the second closest option will fall out of the "window of consideration". This point is strictly related to the degree of party polarization, as in polarized systems the distance between every two parties is, on average, larger. In general, the main effect of polarization on voters' certainty hypothesized on the assumption that only party positions matter, is mainly *local*, i.e. related to the arrangement of the parties that are immediately close to a voter. In other words, depending on their own ideological views (i.e. the self–positioning on the ideological scale), voters are confronted

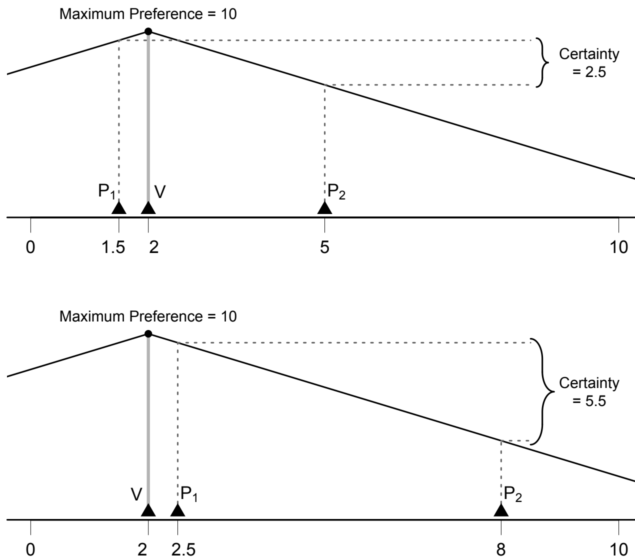

Figure 4.2. Party Positioning and Voter's Preference Certainty.

with different constellations of parties. This implies that, in the same electoral context, voters placed in different ideological areas will be more or less certain, depending on the configuration of parties surrounding them. However, these local effects should aggregate at the *global* level, i.e. at the macro level of the electoral context, into an average higher certainty in more polarized systems.

Even if we assume that voters build their preferences based on pure spatial considerations, one important factor to be taken into account, especially in multiparty systems, is the relative *size* of the parties. If we think realistically about the possible factors influencing party preferences, we would admit that not all the parties holding a certain general ideological view (e.g. the "left–wing" or "right–wing" parties) are equally attractive for their segment of electorate. As van der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie (2000) point out, a rational vote follows the wish to influence public policy–making. In this sense, especially in multiparty systems, ideological vote can be seen as a choice focused on the "indication" that one wishes to give to public policy. However, different parties start with different baseline probabilities to impact public policy, depending on their political power or, more simply, their size. Thus, voting for a very proximate party that is virtually insignificant can be less rational than choosing a slightly more distant party that is very likely to have an impact. Moreover, the importance of party strength for voters' evaluations is not necessarily limited to strategic considerations. A very small party can generate low attractiveness simply because citizens do not have much information about it. Especially in cases where the political debate is led by a few big parties, people may not consider to vote for the smaller ones simply because they know a little about their policy position and their competence, or because there is no way to assess the quality of their past performance in office.

Apart from single–issue parties, which compete for specific subsets of the electorate, issue ownership may be also less effective if a party's credibility is eclipsed by its weakness compared to other competitors. Tillie (1995) defines two ideal–types of voters, based on the role played by parties' relative power in influencing their preferences: the "idealistic" voters, who are moved only by ideological (or spatial) considerations, and the "pragmatic" voters, who are attracted entirely by political power. While the most of the people fall in the middle, Tillie admits that the relevance of these two aspects can be also influenced by characteristics of the parties themselves: «if

size is relatively constant, that is, in the comparison of two large or two small parties, party utility is predominantly determined by the perceived ideological distance between voter and party» (Tillie 1995, p. 115). This point suggests that, even when the focus is on determining how certainty varies as a function of pure spatial considerations, voters' certainty should vary as a function of how the closest parties are arranged, and how power is distributed across them.

4.4. Predicting Preference Certainty

The aim of this section is to test the hypothesis that voters' preference certainty is influenced by the arrangement of the parties surrounding them. As shown in Figure 4.2, the expectation is that certainty is higher the larger the difference in distance between the closest and the second closest parties. This is related to the degree of party polarization, as in more polarized contexts the distance between every two parties is larger on average. Thus, two expectations are tested in this section. First, higher party system polarization, as measured using the *vdE index*, will have a positive impact on voters' preference certainty. Second, a larger distance difference between the two closest parties will have the same effect. The latter expectation is based on the assumption that voters' preferences are influenced by ideological spatial considerations. Bringing this assumption to its extreme (i.e. assuming that voters' preferences are determined solely by spatial considerations) will lead to the expectation that, once information regarding the parties positioned immediately close to the voter are added to the model, the effect of polarization should disappear. Thus, the test conducted in this section allows for an assessment of the extent to which the impact of party polarization on citizens' preferences is to be regarded as purely *mechanical*.

Besides the vdE index of party polarization, two central variables discussed in this chapter are the respondent's *distance* from the closest party, and the *distance difference* between the first and the second closest parties. While the latter is the relevant factor for the purposes of this investigation, the function of the former is to control for voters' relative isolation from the party system. However, under the assumption that preferences are determined as a linear (or "city–block") function of the distance between the voter and the party, as depicted in Figure 4.2, the distance from the closest party should not

make any difference for voters' certainty. Both distances are calculated using respondents' individual *self–placements* on the left–right as reference point, and taking parties' *mean perceived positions* to calculate voter–party distances. This should ensure that the individual assessed distances are as clear as possible from perceptual biases due to rationalization, such as "projection" or "persuasion" effects (Brody and Page 1972).

One implication of calculating distances holding party positions constant is that it is possible to observe how voters' certainty *should* be distributed, given their self–placement along the left–right continuum, in every country. This is because, for each point of the left–right scale, there is only one "most proximate party", and one "second most proximate party", for all the voters positioned there. Thus, by calculating the distance difference between the two, it is possible to obtain predictions regarding voters' certainty at each point, and compare it with the positions of the parties. Moreover, it is possible to observe to what extent the actual, empirical distribution of voters' certainty is congruent with the prediction made based on the theory.

Figure 4.3 provides an example of how the predicted and the observed certainty covary, together with the party positions. For ease of display, the example is based on twenty–eight political systems only, i.e. all the countries included in the European Election Study (EES) of 2009.[6] However, the rest of the empirical evidence provided in this section will be based on the pooled dataset of the European Election Study, already introduced in Chapter 3.[7] The fact that the elections for the European Parliament are considered to be *second–order* elections (Reif and Schmitt 1980) should not represent a problem here, because of the "timeless" nature of the PTV variables. As discussed above, the formulation of the PTV questions does not refer to the vote at the election when the study is conducted, but rather to a more generic probability to *ever* vote for a party. While the principal aim of this formulation is to relax as much as possible the ipsativity of the vote choice (van der Eijk et al. 2006), a side effect of it is that it essentially unbinds the respondent's evaluation from any election–specific considerations. Thus, as pointed out by

6. The European Election of 2009 was conducted in all the EU 27 countries. However, Belgium has been split in two distinct political systems, i.e. the Flanders and Wallonia.

7. While the full pooled EES dataset includes 82 elections, Luxembourg 2004 will be excluded for the analyses in this chapter for the lack of some relevant variables.

van der Brug, Fennema, and Tillie (2005, p. 550) European elections can be simply regarded as «an opportune moment for collecting data about national political party support in comparable terms across a large number of countries.»

Figure 4.3 shows three pieces of information. The black bars represent the parties, i.e. their left–right position on the x–axis, and their relative size on the y–axis. The red dots represent the *predicted certainty*, i.e. the spatial utility differential between the closest and the second closest party, given by the difference in distance between each point of the scale and the two most proximate parties to that point.[8] Finally, the blue line represents the mean *observed certainty* of the respondents across the left–right scale, obtained by a LOESS smoothing function, with the estimated 95% confidence interval.

This first thing to be said about the figure is that voters' certainty as predicted by the spatial theory is, on average, rather low in all the political systems observed. This is due to the fact that in none of these systems parties are excessively far from one another. This may be also due to the fact that the theoretical maximum by which differences are divided is fairly unrealistic. However, in general, there are a very few situations where the distance between the two closest parties is noticeably large. That being said, the figure shows that, for some voters in some countries, the predicted certainty can be considerably large. This is the case, for instance, of extreme left–wing voters in Bulgaria, Cyprus and Germany, or extreme right–wing voters in Malta, Spain and, somewhat less, Lithuania and Luxembourg. For some countries, such as Cyprus and Finland, and to a minor extent Czech Republic and Sweden, the predicted certainty grows symmetricaly for the extreme voters on both sides of the ideological space. In other systems more certain voters are expected to be found rather around the center, such as in Denmark, Hungary, Italy or Portugal.

All in all, judging from Figure 4.3 the theoretically–predicted certainty does not seem to follow any systematic pattern related to polarization. The political systems just mentioned, where relatively

8. The range of both certainty and party size are is scaled from 0 to 1, and therefore the values of the y–axis are interpretable in the same way for the two variables. In order to constrain the predicted certainty on the same scale, the distance difference has been divided for the figure by its theoretical maximum, that is, the distance between two parties positioned at the opposite extremes of the left–right scale. On a scale from 1 to 10 this value is equal to 9.

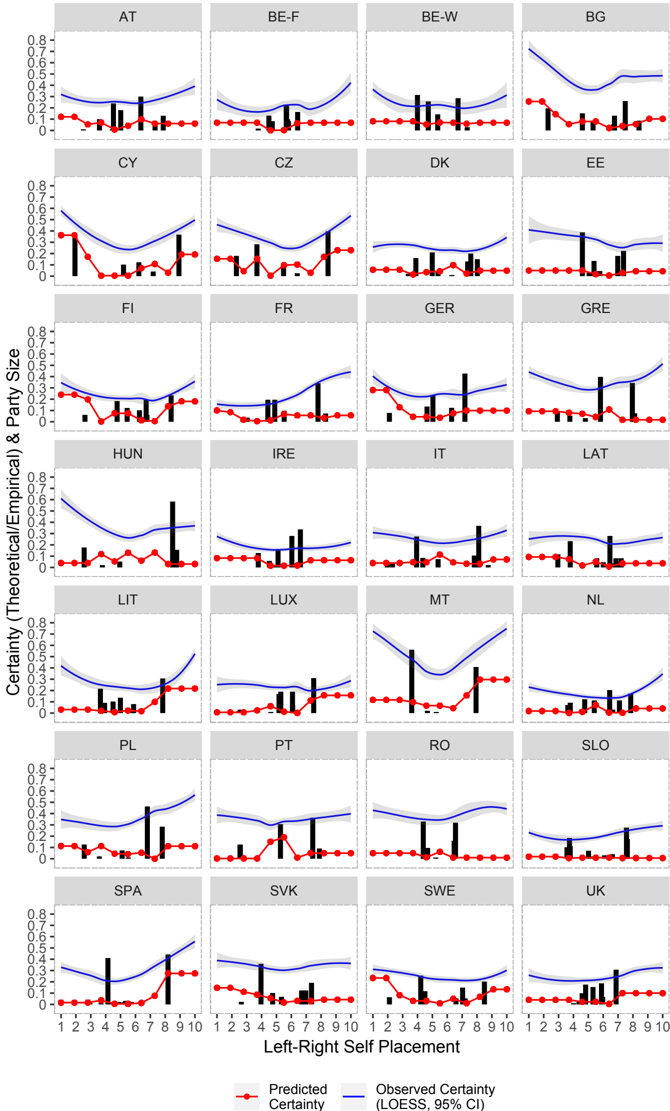

Figure 4.3. Party positions, utility differential and preference certainty in 2009. SOURCE: EES.

larger values are observed, are not systematically more polarized than the systems where the distribution of predicted certainty looks more flat. For instance, higher certainty at the extremes is observed in Malta ($Pol_{(vdE)} = 0.46$), Cyprus (0.60) and Spain (0.45), i.e. three among the most polarized countries,[9] but also in countries where polarization is not particularly high, such as Germany (0.28), Lithuania (0.33) and even Luxembourg (0.21). On the other hand, in some other quite polarized countries, such as Hungary (0.46) and Italy (0.45), the predicted certainty is distributed in a rather flat manner along the left–right. Such a dealignment between the values of polarization as captured by the vdE index, and the actual presence of large "gaps" in the party distribution (that is what essentially determines large utility differentials) is due to the importance of party sizes for assessing polarization. As the black bars show, Hungary is indeed rather polarized, while Luxembourg and Germany much less. While this discrepancy may diminish once a fully–specified model including other characteristics of the closest parties, such as the sizes, is taken into account, for the moment it casts some doubts regarding the purely–spatial (or mechanical) nature of the effect of polarization on voters' certainty.

This point becomes even more evident when predicted and observed certainties are compared. As Figure 4.3 shows, the actual level of voters' certainty is always considerably higher than the predicted one, with no exception. Moreover, the observed certainty seems to follow a pattern that is more coherent with the party distributions when also sizes are taken into account. Thus, for instance, certainty follows a U–shaped curve along the left–right in several countries. This is particularly true for some countries where the level of polarization is influenced by the presence of two big parties diverging towards the ideological extremes, such as Malta or Cyprus. Also in this case, the level of certainty can also grow asymmetrically on one of the two sides more than the other.

In sum, Figure 4.3 shows, first, a general discrepancy in terms of absolute values between predicted and observed certainty and, second, a less clear relationship between the two when it gets to the within–country variation along the ideological continuum. In some cases, such as Bulgaria or Cyprus, the two distributions look strikingly similar, while in others, such as France and Hungary, differ-

9. Recall that the vdE index goes from 0 to 1.

ences are quite remarkable. All in all, these findings suggest a more complex relationship between polarization and voters' preference certainty than a simple mechanical effect. Thus, the next step will be to test for this association in a multivariate setting.

The second piece of empirical evidence provided in this section is based on three multilevel linear models, with preference certainty as dependent variable. The first model (Model 4.1) includes only individual–level predictors, the second (Model 4.2) introduces context–level variables (with the *election* being the relevant context), and the third (Model 4.3) finally includes information regarding the two parties that are most proximate to the respondents' positions. The variables introduced in Model 4.3 are, as discussed above, the distance from the closest party and the distance difference between the first and the second closest parties. However, given the importance of parties' relative electoral strength, two important controls mirroring the two spatial variables are also included: the *size* of the closest party, and the *size difference* between the two closest parties. Following Tillie (1995)'s finding that political power plays an important role for citizens' party evaluations, a general expectation is that preference certainty will be higher for the voters who are positioned close to a big party, and when the size difference between the two most proximate parties is larger.

Individual–level predictors include some social–structural indicators, such as gender and age, and some controls that should impact voters' certainty, such as political interest, a dummy indicating whether the respondent is a partisan, and the individual extremity on the left–right. Although there are no specific hypotheses regarding the effect of these predictors, the general expectation is that all of them will be associated to positive coefficients. People who are more interested in politics should be more likely to evaluate parties based on larger amounts of information than people who are less interested. Thus, their first preference will be more "robust", or at least less susceptible to random events, simply because it should be more self–reflected than the one of less informed voters. Partisans should simply have a larger difference between the preference for their own party and the one for any other party. This should be reflected in a more "sharply–peaked" preference distribution. Finally, as Figure 4.3 shows, left–right extremity should correlate positively with certainty, no matter the relative positioning of the parties.

One individual–level control that requires particular attention

is the *strength* of the first preference. As discussed in the previous section, certainty is a *compounded measure*, and therefore its value is dependent on the magnitude of the highest preference expressed by the respondents. Because of this dependency, some individual characteristics that can cause respondents to give a higher value for the first preference will directly affect the dependent variable. For instance, some respondents could have more "intense" preferences, due to an extreme response style. This could be reflected also by a more extreme self–placement on the left–right. Thus, to include preference strength as a predictor will prevent spurious effects of other variables to be observed.

Contextual predictors include polarization, measured with the vdE index, the effective number of electoral party (ENEP), and a dummy for Central–Eastern European (CEE) countries. Besides polarization, of which the expected effect is rather clear at this point, the other variables are meant to capture different characteristics of the context that may impact on voters' certainty. The number of party simply refers to the number of options requiring evaluation that a voter is exposed to in a given political context. This variable should have a straightforward effect on certainty, as in systems with more parties the chance to encounter an interesting options is simply higher. Thus, the larger the number of parties running at a given election, the lower should be the average voters' certainty. The CEE dummy aims to capture the level of consolidation of the party system. Previous research shows that, in Central and Eastern European countries, impatient political elites' behavior lies at the base of greater electoral volatility (Tavits 2008). This type of behavior should be reflected by a lower certainty among the voters in those countries.

As discussed above, European Elections are generally regarded as a snapshot of the state of political competition and voters' preference distributions in a large number of contexts. The only potential source of concern here is represented by the fact that European Parliament elections fall in different countries at different points of the electoral cycle (see Reif and Schmitt 1980). This implies that, for instance, European elections that are held further apart in time from first order elections are subject of a less intensive electoral campaign, and possibly a weaker media coverage, than those happening closer to national–level appointments. The relative proximity to first order elections may be reflected by party evaluations, that should be, other things being equal, more or less accurate because based on different

baseline–levels of information availability. This should be captured by a lower average certainty when the European election is held further away from the closest national election. Thus, to control for possible electoral cycle effects, a variable indicating the distance in months of the European election from the closest national election is included in the model specification. A general expectation is that, the further apart a European election from a first order election, the lower will be the certainty of the voters, due to less intensive campaign and more limited availability of party–related information.

Table 4.1. Multilevel Linear Models for Preference Certainty.

	Dependent variable:		
	Preference Certainty		
	(Model 4.1)	(Model 4.2)	(Model 4.3)
Preference Strength	0.552***	0.552***	0.553***
	(0.005)	(0.005)	(0.005)
Political Interest	−0.032***	−0.032***	−0.030***
	(0.004)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Gender (Female)	−0.010***	−0.010***	−0.010***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Age	0.002***	0.002***	0.002***
	(0.0001)	(0.0001)	(0.0001)
left–right Extremity	0.006***	0.006***	−0.008***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Is a Partisan	0.056***	0.056***	0.056***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.002)
Polarization		0.172*	0.164*
		(0.078)	(0.071)
ENEP		−0.033***	−0.028***
		(0.006)	(0.005)
Time Dist. from Nat. Elec.		−0.002	−0.002
		(0.001)	(0.001)
CEE Country		0.049*	0.050**
		(0.021)	(0.019)
Distance Closest Party			0.026***
			(0.002)
Dist. Difference 2 Closest Parties			0.036***
			(0.002)
Size Closest Party			0.004**
			(0.002)
Size Difference 2 Closest Parties			0.001
			(0.001)
Constant	−0.238***	−0.142***	−0.185***

	(0.016)	(0.040)	(0.037)
Var Intercept (Election):	0.004	0.004	0.004
Var Intercept (Country):	0.004	0.000	0.000
Var Residual:	0.064	0.064	0.063
Observations	58,475	58,475	58,475
Groups (Election)	81	81	81
Groups (Country)	27	27	27
AIC	5,476	5,484	5,134
BIC	5,566	5,610	5,295

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 4.1 reports the results of the three models. Because the dependent variable goes from zero to one, the coefficients can be expressed in percentage points. Model 4.1 provides the first interesting finding. While the effect of both left–right extremity and partisanship goes in the expected (positive) direction, political interest has a negative and highly significant impact on certainty, which holds throughout the other two model specifications. This contradicts the first expectation regarding the impact of this variable, i.e. that more interested voters are also more informed and self–reflective about their party evaluations, and thus they should be more certain. A possible explanation for the negative coefficient is that citizens that are more interested in politics are also more open to consider voting for different parties. In this sense, these voters could employ the amount of information that they collect in a more critical way, challenging their prior beliefs and listening to what all parties say, without being particularly attached to one of them. Besides political interest, the effect of the predictors in Model 4.1, including preference strength, is hardly a surprise. Notably, female voters are slightly less certain than male, for about 1 point.

Moving to Model 4.2, the first thing to be noticed is that, adding the election level predictors, the model fit does not improve, but it rather becomes worse. This is reflected in the values of both the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) and the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), which slightly increase between the models 4.1 and 4.2. However, almost all the contextual predictors have a significant effect on voters' certainty. Starting from the obvious, as the effective number of parties increases, the number of potentially attractive options do too, and voters become less certain about their preferences. In particular, for every one point increase in the variable,

voters' preference certainty drops on average of about 3 percentage points. The effect of time distance from the closest first–order election has a negative effect, although only marginally significant. Another counterintuitive finding comes from the effect of the CEE dummy. According to the model results, citizens of Central and Eastern European countries are, on average, 5 points more certain in their party preferences than citizens in West Europe. This goes against the prior expectations, motivated by the lower consolidation of party systems in post–communist countries. However, in spite of a less stable political supply, voters in CEE countries are found here to be less cross–pressured in their vote choice than other European citizens.

Finally, the effect of polarization is positive and significant. Because the range of the vdE index goes from zero to one, the increase of about 17 percentage points shown by the coefficient is to be expected when polarization goes from the minimum to the maximum value. While the range of values among the party systems considered here is rather narrower, some country comparisons could give a clearer idea of the impact of the variable. Going back to the 2009 example, the preferences of an Italian voter are about 3 points more certain than those of a German voter, and the preferences of a voter in Cyprus are almost 7 points more certain than in Luxembourg. All in all, along the full range of polarization from the least to the most polarized party system in the pooled EES data used here, preference certainty varies of about 9 percentage points. This confirms one hypothesized effect, namely that in more polarized systems voters' preferences are more certain.

Finally, Model 4.3 shows the impact on voters' preference certainty of the relative positioning and size of the two parties that are most ideologically proximate to them. The results reveal a number of interesting findings. First of all, the model fit increases considerably compared to both Model 4.1 and Model 4.2. This indicates that the inclusion of the spatial variables in the model significantly helps to explain the variance of the dependent variable. Secondly, the effect of all the predictors already included in the previous two models remains essentially untouched, with one exception: the coefficient of left–right extremity is now reversed. This contradicts what is shown by the LOESS predictions in almost all countries in Figure 4.3, i.e. that voters' preference certainty tends to *grow* as a function of individual extremity. Moreover, this result is also rather implausible,

as more ideologically extreme voters should be less likely to be cross–pressured in their party evaluations than voters who take central or moderate positions. In fact, this result could be an artifact given by multicollinearity.

A thing that needs to be taken into account is that, in most countries, the voters who are more isolated from the party system (i.e. those for whom the distance from the closest party is larger) are also the most extreme ones. As a brief look at Figure 4.3 can confirm (for 2009), there are very few situations where the parties are arranged such that voters positioned around the center are far enough from the closest party. In the figure, this is the case of Cyprus, Hungary or Italy, i.e. countries with a rather large empty space in the middle of the left–right continuum. This regularity is confirmed by a particularly high correlation ($r = 0.69$) between the two variables. Moreover, this correlation should vary as a function of polarization too, as the more extreme the parties are placed, the less individual extremity will imply for a voter to be isolated from the party system. Thus, the negative coefficient for individual extremity in this context can not be considered reliable.

The coefficients of the variables related to the party sizes essentially confirm the expectation that larger parties produce more utility (Tillie 1995). However, rather than the size difference between the two closest parties, it is the absolute size of the closest one that makes voters more or less certain. In other words, voters who gravitate around larger parties will hold more certain preferences, regardless how smaller (or larger) other proximate parties are. The magnitude of the effect is not particularly strong, as the variable is coded in a way such that every single point increase corresponds to 10% of (relative) vote share more. To give an example, the preferences of a voter close to a party as big as 40% will be only 1.2 percentage points more certain than those of a voter lying next to a 10% large party.

The effect of the distance difference between the closest and the second closest party is positive and significant, confirming the second expectation stated before in this section. However, the magnitude of the effect is not particularly large, if we take into account that, for every distance point difference (on a 1–10 scale), voters' preference certainty raises more than 3 percentage points. Thus, since the range of the variable is 3.26 points, the preferences of the voters positioned in a way such that the distance between the two closest parties is the larger will be between 10 and 12 points more certain than those of

the voters placed equally distant from two parties.

Notably, the coefficient of the distance from the closer party is positive and significant. This indicates that, the more isolated a voter is from the party system, the more he / she will hold certain preferences. However, according to the basics of spatial theory, of which Figure 4.2 provided a summary, the only thing that matters for preference certainty should be the distance difference between the two closest parties. One possible explanation for this effect relates to the way in which voters assess party preferences based on spatial ideological considerations. In fact, the finding that preference certainty increases as a function of the distance from the closest party is consistent with a conceptualization of voters' proximity function as *non–linear*.

As briefly mentioned earlier in this chapter, many scholars model voters' utility as a negative function of the quadratic Euclidean distance between a voter and a party, instead of the absolute or "city–block" distance, on which the example in Figure 4.2 is based. Generally, these two ways to conceive the proximity function are regarded as equivalent, and discussions on which one should be used tend to focus on pragmatic considerations (see Lewis and King 1999; Westholm 1997). However, in this case, the positive coefficient of the distance from the closest party may indicate that people weight the differences between the parties more heavily the more they are distant from them. To argue that voters' preferences drop as a quadratic function of the distance from their ideal point is equivalent to say that people tend to discount more easily parties that are not in their immediate proximity. This has virtually no implications when the utility differential produced by the varying distance between two parties is concerned (besides a difference in the predicted magnitude). However this implies that, holding constant the distance between the parties, the perceived differential will be larger the further apart the voter is positioned from them. However, this is only one possible account for this finding. Other alternative explanations could be based on factors that are not related to pure spatial considerations. For instance, voters whose position is more peripheral in respect to the party system may be relatively insensitive to ideological appeals, and thus their evaluations may be more heavily influenced by non–spatial considerations.

In general terms, these results show that spatial considerations play a relevant role in influencing voters' preference distributions, but they are not the whole story. This consideration comes in part

from observing the impact of party polarization. While, on average, voters hold more certain preferences in more polarized countries, the reasons why it happens are not necessarily related to the mere way in which parties are arranged. However this topic, i.e. what polarization implies for the voters beyond the parties' distribution, will be left for the following chapter.

Chapter V

Party Polarization, Perceptions and Evaluations[1]

As discussed in Chapter 1, the basic concept of polarization lies in the divergence between actors' positions. If we stop here, i.e. if we do not make any hypotheses regarding the way in which actors relate to each other when their preferences diverge, then the expected consequences of higher party polarization are purely "mechanical". This means that the only thing that counts is the *distance* between the parties. This type of mechanism has been discussed in Chapter 4, where it has been also showed that in more polarized systems voters are, on average, more reluctant to switch their party support because of a larger distance between the alternatives. However, in order to fully understand the impact of party polarization on voting behavior, a second step to be made is to discuss what type of *interaction* corresponds to a greater divergence of preferences. This means, to use a language that is more familiar to the context of electoral research, understanding how parties *compete* when polarization is high, and how this influences the way in which voters make decisions.

This is where the concept of "salience effect" is introduced. In political science, the term "salience" is most often used to refer to the *importance* of an issue or some other matters of debate. This concept refers primarily to the focus of the attention. An issue is salient when it plays an important role in determining voters' evaluations, i.e. when voters *think about it* as they outline the pros and the cons of a party's (potential) rule. Thus, to study the salience effects of party polarization means essentially to assess which elements of the political scenario become more relevant for the voters as polarization increases. However, I argue that this necessarily implies taking into

1. Reprinted from *Electoral Studies*, 35, Vegetti, F., "From political conflict to partisan evaluations: How citizens assess party ideology and competence in polarized elections," 230–241, Copyright (2014), with permission from Elsevier."

consideration the type of interaction, or competition, that it is likely to be found in polarized elections.

As discussed in Section 1.1, a pattern of interaction that can emerge from polarized contexts is *conflict*. This is because the more the actors' preferences diverge, the less likely it is for them to find a win–win solution (Pruitt and Olczak 1995). However, even in case of great divergence, the actors can choose to *cooperate*. In such a case, the focus of their attention will be on the problem to be solved, i.e. the source of the discordance. On the other hand, in case of conflict, the actors will be focused on the actors themselves, on their own qualities and on the qualities of the opponents who may take advantage of their losses, following a logic of "us against them". Thus, the question of what becomes more or less relevant for the voters as party polarization varies, relates to a great extent to the way in which parties interact. When polarization corresponds to a conflictual relationship, party identities should play an important role in guiding voters' judgments. This chapter, which is a reprint of an article appeared on *Electoral Studies* in 2014, deals with this aspect of polarization.

5.1. Introduction

The question how people evaluate political parties or candidates has been the core focus of the studies on voting behavior since the early years of the discipline. A related body of research seeks to explain how these evaluations vary across political contexts. This perspective is important as it helps understanding how the political environment can affect the individual–level mechanisms that regulate citizens' political behaviors.

A question that captured the attention of several scholars in the last decade is how context can influence the impact of party ideological positions and competence on voters' preferences. Scholarly literature has been suggesting that ideological evaluations and competence assessments are in part influenced by the same contextual conditions. In particular, what is found to be a relevant moderating factor for both these antecedents of voting behavior is the degree of polarization of the party system. However, there is not much agreement about the sign of the effect. While higher polarization has been found to foster policy and ideological voting (Alvarez and Na-

gler 2004; Dalton 2008; Lachat 2008, 2011; van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder 2005), evidence of its impact on competence voting has been so far controversial. On the one hand, following the original conception of "valence issues" proposed by Stokes (1963, 1992), greater ideological consensus (and thus lower polarization) has been argued to increase the importance of competence assessments for party evaluations (Green 2007; Green and Hobolt 2008). On the other hand, further empirical research has found the opposite relationship (Clark and Leiter 2014; Pardos-Prado 2012).

Understanding the logic behind these controversial findings is important for two reasons. First, accepting different explanations of the impact of polarization on the relevance of competence considerations for the citizens implies drawing different substantial conclusions regarding the way in which voters evaluate parties in polarized elections. A stronger effect of competence attributions on the vote is interpreted in the valence framework as an indicator of the fact that there is agreement over the policy goals to be pursued (Green 2007; Sanders et al. 2011). Thus, to observe this association growing stronger as a function of party polarization can lead to the conclusion that there can be "valence beyond consensus" (Pardos-Prado 2012) or, more generally, that polarized elections make voters more likely to reward or punish parties based on their performance. If this is coupled with the greater importance of ideology and policy–based considerations documented by other studies (Lachat 2008, 2011), the final, normative, message that can be read from this body of research is that proper "responsible electorates" emerge from polarized political environments. A second reason for dealing with this controversy is that it raises the suspect that the heightened relevance of both ideology and competence in polarized elections could be in part explained by a third, lurking factor. In this respect, the candidate suggested in this paper is party identification. I argue that accounting for partisanship in this context is very important for two major reasons. First, partisan cues have been repeatedly shown to induce a significant bias in the way in which people perceive and evaluate political objects, including party performance and ideologies (Bartels 2002, 2008; Carsey and Layman 2006; Evans and Andersen 2004, 2006; Evans and Pickup 2010; Tilley and Hobolt 2011). Second, some single–country and comparative studies show that polarized elections are associated with greater mass partisanship (Hetherington 2001; Schmitt 2009b; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995). Given these

premises, it is argued here that the more a system is polarized, the higher the impact of partisanship on perceptions of party ideology and competence. This leads to opposite implications, in respect to those discussed above, regarding how voters evaluate parties in polarized elections. In particular, this mechanism pictures polarization as a situation of increased partisan *conflict*, where feelings of loyalty are what really guides citizens' evaluations.

This article proceeds as follows: in the next two sections I first discuss the literature that links party polarization to valence voting, and the puzzling findings that show a positive association between the two, and secondly, I report a mirror discussion of the literature on polarization and issue/ideological voting. In the following two sections, I first review literature on the meaning of ideological labels and discuss the implications of these definitions for our understanding of ideological polarization, then I link polarization with party identification. Finally, I provide individual–level evidence using a pooled data set of European Election Studies spanning from 1994 to 2009.

Results of multilevel logit models show that (1) higher polarization is positively associated with the probability that citizens have a party identification, and, for those who have it (2), that they will evaluate as ideologically closest and most competent the same party that they feel attach to. Moreover (3) in more polarized elections, the probability that the perceived most competent party is also the ideologically closest is significantly higher for partisans, but not for non–partisans.

The contribution of these findings to the literature on the electoral consequences of party polarization is both substantive and methodological. Substantively, they suggest that, in polarized elections, citizens have higher incentives to rely on partisan cues as they evaluate parties, both on ideological and on valence–based grounds. This has two major consequences for our understanding of how voters evaluate parties in polarized elections: first, for the scholars interested in the dispute between valence and positional voting, it suggests that to observe a larger effect of competence is not necessarily related to the fact that parties agree on ideological grounds, but quite the opposite. Second, it suggests that in more conflictual political environments even the presence of a largely rational behavior such as ideological/policy voting can be confounded with an expression of partisan loyalty. From the methodological point of view, these

findings suggest that, as polarization increases, so does the collinearity between ideological and competence assessments. Thus, studies interested in comparing the relative strength of these two predictors of the vote in a comparative perspective should take into account in their explanation the fact that their overlap is systematically related to some characteristics of the political context.

5.2. Valence with or without consensus?

The concept of "valence" is used in psychology to indicate a set of positive or negative emotions attached to a certain object (Frijda 1986, p. 207), and it is first introduced in political science by Stokes (see 1963, 1992). The main strength of the concept lies in its clear reference to a vertical distinction between positive and negative evaluations, opposed to the conception of a horizontal space where parties can take different positions that are attractive to different groups of voters (as with "positional" issues). Stokes describes valence issues as issues that «merely involve the linking of the parties with some condition that is positively or negatively valued by the electorate» (Stokes 1963, p. 373). Positive valence is associated with good past performance and with the ability to deliver positive conditions in the future, i.e. with perception of competence. In Stokes' view, the same issues can be regarded as positional or valence, depending on whether they offer alternative preferences or not. The extent to which they belong to one type or another is an empirical matter, and it mainly depends on how the political actors compete. Thus, the take–home messages that subsequent research built on are essentially two. First, for issues to be considered "valence", there needs to be ideological agreement. Second, when voters evaluate parties on valence issues, competence becomes the distinctive criterion.

Following research has been investigating the evaluations of parties and candidates on two fronts. The first and more prolific studies the electoral effects of policy–related valence factors. These are the factors considered in this present study as well. The second front is focused on nonpolicy–related components, e.g. leader or candidate attributes such as honesty and integrity. These traits are generally referred to as as character–based valence factors (Clark 2009; Clark and Leiter 2014). Both these factors have been proven to exert a significant influence on voters' preferences, although in both cases the

moderating effect of party polarization leads to contradicting results.

The assumption that competence attributions become more important as party ideological positions converge is also derived formally by Green (2007) and empirically tested for the UK by Green and Hobolt (2008).[2] Here the greater importance of competence evaluations is accounted "by difference" with the decreasing effect of spatial considerations on the vote, due to the ideological convergence of the major parties since the rise of the "New Labour". The model shows that, as parties converge towards a similar position, the distances between a voter and the different parties become more and more similar. As a consequence, the parameter associated with ideological proximity weakens (Green 2007). Substantively this means that when party positions become more and more similar, citizens find it increasingly difficult to choose between them based on positional considerations. Thus, «when policy distances between parties are modest, we can expect vote choice to be largely determined on the basis of which party is best trusted to deliver on this particular issue dimension» (Green and Hobolt 2008, p. 463).

This mechanism is based on the assumption that ideology and competence are a zero–sum game (Pardos-Prado 2012). While this assumption builds in part on Stokes' claim that issues can occur in both valence and positional form, depending on how controversial they are, the model neglects the fact that competence may still be taken into consideration when parties' ideological stands diverge. As Pardos–Prado points out, party polarization «can increase voters' and media interest in all aspects of political competition, including party competence» (2012, p. 344). In fact, comparative evidence shows that competence evaluations have a stronger impact on party preferences in *more* polarized elections, and their effect even correlates positively with the impact of ideological proximities (Pardos-Prado 2012). Furthermore, Sanders et al. (2011) show that people's perceptions of competence are in turn influenced by positional policy consid-

2. Policy–related valence factors are generally studied in the framework of the "issue ownership" theory. This is the body of literature where Green (2007)'s and Green and Hobolt (2008)'s studies are placed. The two important elements of valence in this model are *issue salience* and *competence attributions*. Parties are assumed to compete by increasing the salience of the issues on which they have a competitive advantage (i.e. the issues on which they are perceived as most competent). Voters are assumed to seek for the most competent party in handling the issues that they find more important. For more on this see e.g. Budge and Farlie (1983), Petrocik (1996), and van der Brug (2004).

erations. This suggests that voters may evaluate a party as more competent *because of its position*. These findings put into question the hypothesized advantage that competence considerations should have as party policy differences become less relevant, and, ultimately, the independence between these two types of evaluations.

Similarly contrasting results are found by scholars interested in character–based valence factors. Buttice and Stone (2012) show that in, US Congressional elections, the effect of candidates' character qualities is strong when their ideological differences are minimal, and decreases when differences grow. On the other hand, results of Clark and Leiter (2014)'s cross–country study show the opposite, i.e. the more dispersed parties' ideological positions are, the stronger is the effect of party competence, integrity and unity.

These controversial findings leave an open question when it gets to ultimately define the impact of party polarization on competence voting. While theoretical reasons why these two phenomena should be inversely related to one another are based on the very nature of valence issues (Green 2007; Stokes 1963), explanations for the opposite effect are lacking. Results of the empirical analyses do not, admittedly, follow the hypothesized direction (Clark and Leiter 2014) or they are taken as support for the argument against the assumption of a zero–sum game between ideology and competence (Pardos-Prado 2012). However, even allowing for a persistent importance of competence when parties diverge positionally, none of these accounts explain why in more polarized elections the effect of valence considerations should be systematically stronger. In fact, this relationship resembles the one, more established in the literature, between party polarization and the importance of positional issue or ideological considerations.

5.3. An Uncontroversial Story: Issue differentiation and issue salience

The model of party convergence and competence voting formulated by Green (2007) is the mirror image of a more widely investigated "salience effect" relating party polarization with issue or ideological voting. This mechanism builds on the Downsian spatial proximity model (Downs 1957a), and in particular on the importance of the *utility differential* that voters perceive from two or more parties holding policy positions that are different from one another. In this view, the more the parties' positions diverge over a given topic, the more the

topic is likely to become salient for the voters. In other words, when parties are polarized on some issue or ideological dispute, odds are that such a dispute will stand out among the criteria used by the citizens to evaluate parties and get to their vote choice.

There are two types of argument in the literature that build on this mechanism. One focuses mainly on the meaningfulness of the alternatives supplied to the voters, i.e. on the extent to which the electoral success of one party instead of another corresponds to a different expected policy outcome (Dalton 2008; Wessels and Schmitt 2008). A second argument focuses on the contextual factors that make policy voting easier. As parties differentiate themselves from each other for strategic reasons, they should emphasize their differences during the campaign, referring more often to policies in their communication. This will increase the availability of policy–related information in the voters' mind, that they will use to evaluate parties (Alvarez and Nagler 2004; Kroh 2009; Lachat 2008, 2011).

Both these explanations ideally refer to a between–issue comparison, where different policy dimensions are used as counterfactuals for different levels of party differentiation. Yet many studies interested in the effects of polarization in a comparative perspective measure it on a single general left–right scale (see e.g. Dalton 2008; Kroh 2009; Lachat 2008; van der Eijk, Schmitt, and Binder 2005). This is also the case of the two comparative studies that find a positive effect of polarization on valence voting (Clark and Leiter 2014; Pardos-Prado 2012). While this might be the best way to effectively compare party positions across countries, literature on the meaning and the function of left–right ideologies suggest that the observed levels of left–right polarization may reflect something more than pure policy differentiation.

5.4. The implications of left–right polarization: more than policy differences?

I sustain in this section that party polarization, as measured on the left–right, is rather a measure of political *conflict*. To be sure, policy differentiation implies unavoidable contrast between supporters of the different sides. However, the claim here is rather that high left–right polarization implies a situation where conflict spans across issue domains, affecting party images by providing them with strong

ideological profiles and identities. This view builds on a body of research focused on the meaning of ideology and the function of ideological labels, and can provide a key to read the observed effects of ideological polarization on citizens' behavior.

The substantive content of the labels "left" and "right" has been found to be rather variable (Schmitt and van der Eijk 2009). While the most common use in modern political discourse relates them to different preferences regarding the role of the state in the economy, the semantic emptiness of these labels makes the left–right a rather flexible construct (Sartori 1976). This view is endorsed by many comparative studies, which generally assume that the left–right is a "super–issue", which reflects what ever is the political conflict taking place at a given election (Inglehart 1990).

Other studies have been interested in conceptualizing the ideological labels from a psychological point of view. One perspective sees ideologies as *belief systems*, i.e. as coherent sets of core values that provide an underlying structure for people's attitudes and preferences (Converse 1964; Jost 2006). Another perspective argues that ideological labels are better understood as *self–identifications*, i.e. as a form of group identity driven by the evaluation of the major political objects (Conover and Feldman 1981; Levitin and Miller 1979). Here, being "left", or "liberal", implies defining the self as a part of a specific social group. When the group identity is salient, it can influence the way in which people evaluate political objects, such as issues, parties or candidates, introducing a set of cognitive biases. These will include a tendency to evaluate more positively objects related to the in–group, and more negatively objects related to the out–group (see Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Turner et al. 1994).

Both accounts imply reading left–right polarization as a more encompassing phenomenon than a mere expression of policy differences. If ideologies are defined as belief systems, then ideological polarization should imply a type of political conflict that spans across issue domains, where the sum is more important than the parts. As Baldassarri and Gelman point out, polarization «constitutes a threat to the extent that it induces alignment along multiple lines of political conflict and organizes individuals and groups around exclusive identities, thus crystallizing interests into opposite factions» (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008, p. 409). In other words, while the issue salience effect discussed in the previous section drives people's attention from the policy domains where parties agree towards those where par-

ties disagree, ideological polarization might rather consolidate the structure of issue preferences into proper identities.

The second view suggests that, for polarization to be an indicator of political conflict, the left–right does not even need to have a strong substantive content. While people are not always aware of their meanings, ideological labels have nevertheless a strong impact on their evaluations and behaviors (Levitin and Miller 1979). Thus, parties can be perceived as polarized not necessarily because of their policy positions, but because of a particularly hostile tone of the debate, or because in their discourse they appeal more often to ideological identities (for a description of this process in Hungary, see Palonen 2009).

5.5. From left–right polarization to partisanship

Both ways to conceptualize the left–right discussed above lead to a definition of polarization as a situation in which politics is essentially perceived as an "adversary enterprise" (Schmitt 2009b). This should have some implications for the way in which voters in more polarized contexts deal with politics. In particular, polarized political environments should motivate citizens to confront politics in a more *partisan* way. This implies *taking a side*, i.e. stating their partisan attachment to a political actor, and responding to every implicit or explicit call for evaluation of political objects following their partisan *loyalty*. This should be reflected, among other things, in the perception of greater ideological proximity and competence of the party that they are attached to.

The first phenomenon has been studied by scholars of US politics, assuming a top–down mechanism from the political elites to the public opinion (Zaller 1992). As Hetherington argues, «[b]ecause greater ideological differences between the parties on the elite level should produce a more partisan information stream, elite polarization should produce a more partisan mass response» (Hetherington 2001, p. 622). Besides ideological distance, other explanations linking party polarization to partisanship in the US look into conflict extension across issue domains (Layman and Carsey 2002) and a bigger ideological cohesion among the elites (Brewer 2005).

To be sure, the capability of party identification to capture political identities may vary considerably between the US and other

European contexts. For instance, in West Europe, encompassing political identities are more often associated with other group–related characteristics, such as social class or religion, while party identities are often said to play a weaker role (Shively 1979). However, feelings of partisan attachment can also be fueled by relatively short–term factors, such as a particularly intense type of competition. As Schmitt contends «[t]he more ideological conflict there is between parties, the more politicized and mobilized a society will be and the more partisanship we expect to find» (Schmitt 2009b, p. 76). The general idea is that, as elites set the tones of the political debate, citizens will confront political stimuli in a way that resembles their representatives' behavior. In fact, the few comparative studies relating polarization to partisanship show a connection between the two (Berglund et al. 2005; Schmitt 2009b; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995). This suggests that the way in which parties compete plays a relevant role in influencing people's tendency to feel attached to a particular party. This expectation leads to the first hypothesis:

> *H1: In elections characterized by higher degrees of party left–right polarization, citizens are more likely to state their attachment to a political party.*

This hypothesis is the first step in the discussion of the impact of polarization on citizens' political behavior. A second step is to assess whether party polarization is also related to the extent to which partisan attachment influences citizens' perceptions of ideological proximity and feelings of party competence. For what concerns the former, past research shows a considerable impact of party identification on people's perceptions of party policy stances, both in the US and in European contexts (see Carsey and Layman 2006; Evans and Andersen 2004, but see Milazzo et al. 2012). When it gets to assess whether this connection is moderated by polarization, evidence is lacking. US scholars provide evidence that the amount of partisan "sorting", i.e. the correlation between ideological self–placement and party identification, increases as a function of party polarization (Levendusky 2009). On the other hand, scholarly literature did not produce so far any comparative evidence supporting the same phenomenon.

I argue here that the same reasons why polarization should increase partisan attachments across political contexts should account

also for a stronger presence of a partisan perceptual bias. If a higher conflictual political context given by polarization mobilizes the voters to the point to trigger their feelings of partisan attachment, this should also make them more confident in relying on *partisan cues* at the same time. Thus, as a consequence of H1, we should expect the association between partisanship and ideological proximity to be higher in more polarized contexts:

> *H2: In elections characterized by higher degrees of party ideological polarization, partisans are more likely to perceive the party they support as the most proximate on the left–right.*

Perceptions of party competence should reflect the same pattern. Literature on partisanship provides abundant documentation of the cognitive mechanisms and the situations in which partisan cues induce biases in people's evaluation of party or government performances (Bartels 2002, 2008; Evans and Andersen 2006; Evans and Pickup 2010; Tilley and Hobolt 2011). If such cues are more relevant when parties are more polarized, we should expect the association between partisanship and perception of competence to be stronger in more polarized elections:

> *H3: In elections characterized by higher degrees of party ideological polarization, partisans are more likely to attribute competence to the party they support.*

If the hypotheses H2 and H3 are correct, in more polarized elections, partisans should end up evaluating party ideology and competence in the same way, i.e. the party perceived to be the ideologically closest and the one perceived as the most competent should be the same. However, to make sure that the effect of polarization on voters' evaluations is effectively moderated by their partisan attachment, we need to take into account also the *counterfactual* situation, namely those citizens who are not attached to any party. If the hypothesized mechanism is correct, for non–identifiers the chance that ideological and competence evaluations lead to the same party should remain essentially constant, regardless of the level of polarization. Thus, the last hypothesis states the effect of polarization on voters' perceptions of ideological proximity and competence to be moderated by partisanship:

H4: In elections characterized by higher degrees of party ideological polarization, partisans are more likely to attribute competence to the most proximate parties on the left–right. The same effect should not apply to non–partisans.

Figure 5.1 summarizes the theoretical expectations outlined in this section, and compares them with what has been found by previous literature. While previous studies mainly focused of the moderating effect of polarization on the determinants of the vote, this studies focuses on the prior step, i.e. on how the observed effects can reflect an increased partisan bias in more polarized elections. The next section provides comparative empirical evidence to quantify the extent of this phenomenon.

5.6. Data, model specification, and results

The empirical analyses conducted in this study are based on four waves of the European Election Study (EES), from 1994 to 2009.[3] Among the varieties of data offered, EES provides a cross–country post–election survey conducted on national representative samples in all the EU member states where European Parliament elections are

3. Belgium, Lithuania, Luxembourg and Malta (all 2004) are excluded from all the analyses due to missing variables. The total number of elections considered is 81. Cyprus (2009) and Northern Ireland (1999) are excluded from the analyses with perceptions of party competence for the same reason.

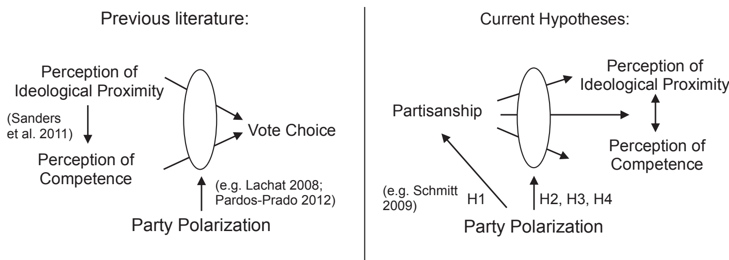

Figure 5.1. Previous findings and current theoretical expectations.

held.[4] Because of the uniform structure of the questionnaires, EES data are particularly fit for investigating cross–contextual variations in voting behavior and macro–micro relationships. In fact, several studies rely on these data (among those cited here see Lachat 2008; Pardos-Prado 2012). The pooled data set used here contains all the waves on which such studies are based on.

European Parliament elections are generally considered to be *second–order*, i.e. more likely to be influenced by national–level issues and patterns of competition than by topics that are directly related to European governance (Reif and Schmitt 1980). This should not represent a problem here, as all the questions on which this study is focused refer to national parties and national issues. The only problem that may affect the comparability of the results regards the varying distance in time across countries from the closest national elections, i.e. from contexts where the campaign is necessarily more intensive. For this reason, a variable indicating the distance in months from the closest first–order election is included in all the models.

The three main concepts that this study is based on are *partisan attachment*, *competence attribution* and *ideological proximity*.[5] The first consists in two pieces of information: a simple dummy indicating whether the respondent states that he/she feels "close to a particular party" (used to test H1) and, in case of affirmative answer, a further variable indicating which one.[6] Competence attribution is measured in a similar way: first, the respondent is asked about what he/she thinks is the most important problem facing the country at the moment of the interview, then a following question asks which party is the most competent in dealing with it. This information is used to compute a dummy variable telling whether the party indicated is the same that the respondent feels attached to (to test H3).[7] Finally,

4. For more information, see http://www.ees-homepage.net/

5. See the appendix of the original article for the question wordings of the relevant variables.

6. In some studies, a follow up question is asked to try to retrieve some respondents who either answer negatively or do not know. However, because such question is not present in all the EES waves, it was ignored in this operationalization. For a similar reason, i.e. the non comparability of the scales used across different waves, the analyses performed here can not account for the variation in strength of partisanship.

7. The 1994 study has a slightly different question wording, i.e. the first question asks for the most important issue. Although some studies have been pointing this out as an important difference (Jennings and Wlezien 2011), the main concern regards the comparability of the

ideological proximity combines information about respondents' self–positioning and perceived positions of the relevant parties on a left–right scale. These measures are used to calculate individual distances between the respondents and, first, the party that they indicate as the one they feel attached to (if any) and, second, the one they indicate as the most competent (if any). Two dummies tell whether each of the two distances correspond to the smallest individual distance from a party.[8] Such indicators are used to test, respectively, H2 and H4.[9]

Party polarization is operationalized using the sample mean perceptions of the party left–right placements as unique party positions, and applying a formula based on a weighted standard deviation:

$$\text{Pol} = \sum_{i=1}^{N} | \bar{x} - x_i | w_i \qquad (5.1)$$

Here x refers to the ideological center of the party system, and it is calculated as the weighted mean of all the party positions x_i. The weights w_i are the party vote shares, normalized by the total share of the parties considered in each study.[10]

information about the problems/issues themselves, rather than the follow–up question about the most competent party. However, to make sure that this difference does not bias the results, all the models that include competence assessments have been run without including 1994, obtaining similar results.

8. Some respondents perceive more than one single party as ideologically closest. For those people, the probability that the closest party corresponds to the one they identify with and the one they perceive as most competent should be greater. To account for potential biases given by those cases, the models including the left–right closest party have been rerun including a variable counting the ties as a control. The results remained substantially untouched.

9. An alternative operationalization would imply recalculating the distances using "objective" party positions, i.e. using for each party the sample mean placement. This type of operationalization should reduce some known perception biases in party and individual self–placements, such as *projection* or *persuasion* effects (Brody and Page 1972). However, rather than biases, such misperceptions are part of the effect hypothesized in this study. Interestingly, all the analyses lead to substantially similar effects if rerun with variables computed using objective distances.

10. Esteban and Ray (1994) developed an index of polarization willfully focused on capturing the conflict potential of large–n populations. When applied to party systems, the index is equivalent to a sum of weighted pairwise distances between the parties, with the possibility to put additional emphasis on party sizes by the means of an extra parameter. While the Esteban and Ray index is successful in capturing the presence of large and homogeneous clusters in big populations, when it is used to measure party polarization it shows a rather high correlation

Figure 5.2 shows the bivariate relationship between polarization and frequencies at the election level of the four dependent variables. Because all the measures are dichotomous, the y–axes of the figure report the percentage of respondents who score one within each election cluster. The plots reinforce the expectation that the relationship between polarization and the probability to score one in each of the four indicators is indeed positive. However, the figure also shows the presence of some rather severe outliers which could potentially

with the number of parties. On the other hand, when the extra emphasis on party sizes is reduced to zero, the index correlates even more strongly with the standard deviation based index used here. The models presented here have been rerun using the Esteban and Ray index to measure polarization, leading to very similar results.

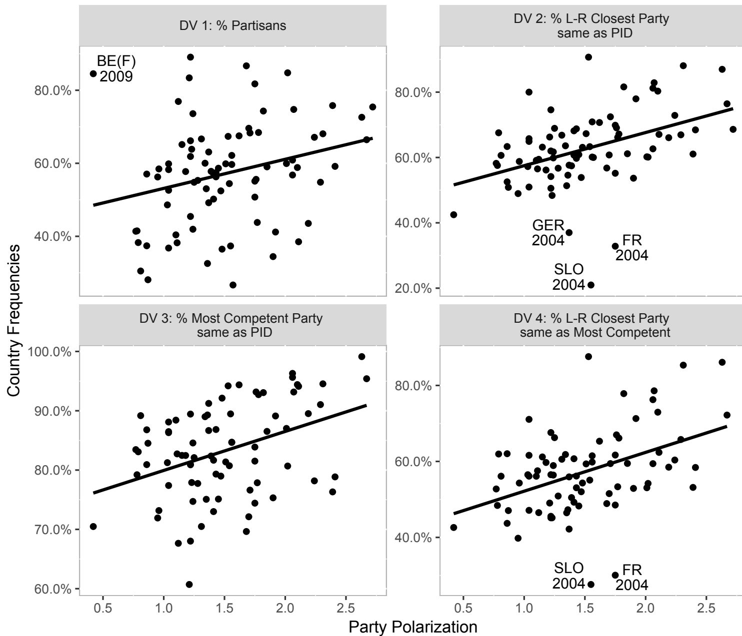

Figure 5.2. Scatter plots with polarization and election–level frequencies of the dependent variables. SOURCE: EES.

bias the results. The most evident case is Belgium (Flanders) in 2009, where a very low degree of polarization is associated with almost 85% of respondents defining themselves as attached to a party, as shown in the top–left plot of the figure. Other cases, such as Slovenia, France and Germany (all 2004) fall in the middle of the distribution on the x–axis, and therefore are less problematic for the estimation of the effect of polarization at level–2. However, the presence of these outliers is likely to bias the *intercept*, rather than the slope of the independent variable at the context level. To make sure that none of these cases will drive the coefficients of the relevant predictors in the multivariate models, they will be controlled for in the models by adding a set of dummy variables identifying them.[11]

Although the relevant context discussed in this study is the election, the presence of several elections for some countries requires that the individual–level analyses are specified with a hierarchical structure set on three levels. Thus, individual respondents are nested within elections that in turn are nested within countries. While the predictors included in the models are mostly at the individual or at the election level, the choice to add an additional level is made to control for the non–independence between observations belonging to the same country, which may be affected by common sources of correlation that go beyond the single electoral context. This implies accounting not only for the presence of multiple surveys for the same nation, but also for those cases where different samples (e.g. East and West Germany in 1994) or different political systems (e.g. Belgian Flanders and Wallonia) belong to the same county.[12]

Hypothesis 1 refers to the individual probability that respondents state their attachment to a certain party, and therefore is tested on the full sample. On the contrary, Hypotheses 2 and 3 are tested only on the sub–sample of respondents who score 1 on the partisanship dummy. For each of the first three models, the focus is on the main ef-

11. Alternative models estimated without the dummy variables lead to similar effects, but also to considerably lower model fits.

12. Note that this type of specification, which by estimating different country intercepts controls for correlation within country units, leads to the most conservative results. The analyses were replicated using several other model specifications, including nesting only at the election level and only at the country level (both rather usual practices in many published comparative articles), and always produced similar results, some times with even smaller standard errors. However, the specification reported here is the one producing the best fit in the most of the models.

fect of polarization, which is expected to be positive. Thus, in all three cases the equation specified is for a simple random–intercept model. Hypothesis 4 requires a slightly more complex specification, as the slope of polarization with the overlap between the most competent and the closest party is expected to be positive for partisans only. In this case, the main effect of partisanship is expected to vary across elections as a function of the degree of polarization. This requires specifying a random–slopes model, where the slope for partisanship is set free to vary across elections. Because the four dependent variables are dummies, all the models are logistic regressions.

Controls at the individual level include age and interest for politics, which may both affect the individual propensity to be a partisan. Given the inevitable association between party polarization and voters' ideological dispersion, individual left–right extremity is included to control for sample composition. Controls at the election level include the effective number of parties, and the time distance in months from the closest national election. Finally, to control for the presence of less established party systems that may have systematically fewer partisans, a country–level dummy identifying post–communist countries is included. Results are reported in Table 5.1.

Table 5 1 Multilevel Logit Models For Partisanship and Party Evaluations.

	Dependent variable:			
	DV1	DV2	DV3	DV4
	(Model 5.1)	(Model 5.2)	(Model 5.3)	(Model 5.4)
Age	0.013***	0.001	0.003***	0.002**
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Gender (Female)	0.003	−0.028	0.025	−0.022
	(0.018)	(0.023)	(0.033)	(0.023)
left–right Extremity	0.315***	0.303***	0.082***	0.269***
	(0.007)	(0.009)	(0.012)	(0.009)
Interest for Politics	1.833***	0.113***	0.130**	0.086**
	(0.035)	(0.043)	(0.064)	(0.044)
Partisan Attachment				−0.098
				(0.116)
Effective N of Parties	0.054	−0.089***	−0.153***	−0.118***
	(0.054)	(0.029)	(0.038)	(0.026)
Time from National Elections	−0.009	−0.012**	0.006	−0.008
	(0.009)	(0.005)	(0.006)	(0.005)
Post-Communist Country	−0.369	−0.270**	0.283	−0.137
	(0.231)	(0.110)	(0.177)	(0.099)

Polarization	0.520***	0.368***	0.470***	0.126
	(0.177)	(0.091)	(0.131)	(0.088)
Polarization X Partisan				0.278***
				(0.076)
Belgium (Flanders) 2009	1.869***	−0.378	−0.357	−0.166
	(0.574)	(0.389)	(0.388)	(0.396)
France 2004		−1.452***		−0.978***
		(0.374)		(0.319)
Slovenia 2004		−1.177***		−1.379***
		(0.435)		(0.395)
Germany 2004		−1.087***		
		(0.383)		
Constant	−2.303***	0.096	1.255***	0.052
	(0.397)	(0.211)	(0.296)	(0.194)
Var Intercept (Election):	0.234	0.125	0.082	0.077
Var (Partisan):				0.031
Var Intercept (Country):	0.192	0.000	0.120	0.000
Observations	63, 630	36, 806	26, 200	35, 191
Groups (Election)	81	81	79	79
Groups (Country)	27	27	27	27
AIC	71, 765	45, 598	24, 239	45, 419
BIC	71, 874	45, 726	24, 337	45, 572

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

DV1: Partisan Attachment

DV2: L–R Closest Party same as Partisanship

DV3: Most Competent Party same as Partisanship

DV4: L–R Closest Party same as Most Competent

Model 1 shows that the association between party polarization and the probability that citizens feel attached to a party is positive and significant ($p < 0.01$). To have a clear idea of the substantive relation between the two, Figure 5.3 shows how the predicted probability simulated using the model coefficients varies when party polarization goes from the minimum to the maximum value, holding other predictors constant at their mean value. The probability that citizens state their party attachment increases on average by 25%, rising from about 50% in elections with the lowest party polarization to 75% in highly–polarized contexts.

Models 2 and 3 tell a similar story, as polarization is positively associated with both the probability that partisans perceived the party they are attached to as the ideologically closest, and the probability that they indicate it as the most competent. Taken together, results of Model 1 and Models 2 and 3 confirm, first, what found by previous

studies regarding the main effect of a polarized electoral context on citizens' propensity to be partisan, and second, the hypotheses formulated here about the increased likelihood, in more polarized elections, that ideological and competence evaluations are performed following a partisan logic, i.e. indicating the party that the citizens feel attached to as the most ideologically similar to their own position and as the most competent.

To draw substantive conclusions from the coefficients of Models 2 and 3 as they are is rather difficult, because, next to the problem of interpreting the rough values of the linear predictor in logit models, the results refer to a specific sub–sample of the population, i.e. the partisans. This represents a problem insofar as the size of the partisan share of the population varies as a function of polarization as well, as the results of Model 1 show. Thus, a meaningful summary of the conclusions should take into account, first, the effect of polarization on the probability to be a partisan and, second, the probability that the party supported overlaps with ideological perceptions and competence assessments. To provide such a summary I combine Model 1 with, respectively, Model 2 and 3 using statistical simulation.

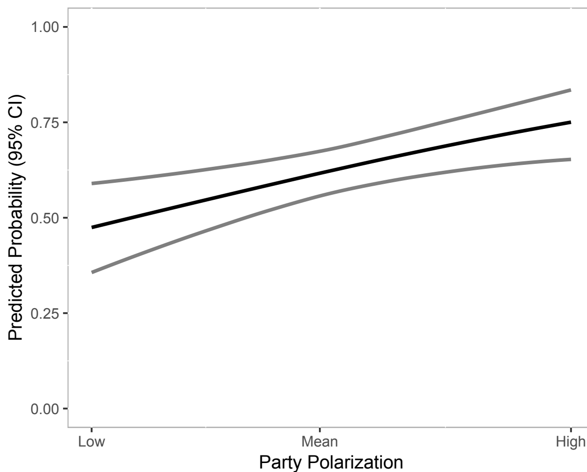

Figure 5.3. Predicted probability of individual partisanship and polarization. SOURCE: EES.

The procedure takes three steps. First, I predict the probability to be a partisan using the coefficients of Model 1. Second, I use this predicted probability to draw a single random trial from a binomial distribution. Third, if the number drawn is 0 (meaning that the observation is predicted to be a non–partisan) the probability is saved as it is. Conversely, if the number drawn is 1, there will be a further random draw, using this time the predicted probabilities obtained, respectively, from Models 2 and 3. The procedure is repeated a large number of times. At every round, a new predicted probability is simulated from the three models, using both the coefficients and the standard errors to take into account the uncertainty of the estimate. This routine is embedded in a further loop that repeats it for several levels of polarization, holding the effects of the controls constant at their mean. The resulting plots are shown in Figure 5.4.[13]

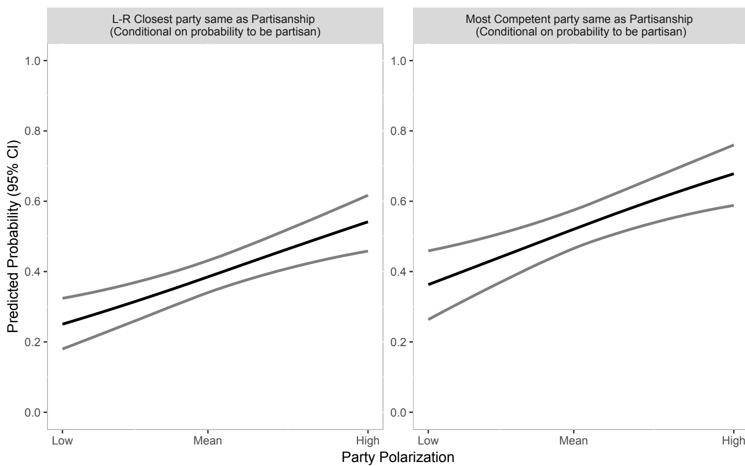

Figure 5.4. Conditional predicted probabilities of partisan evaluation of ideological proximity and competence. SOURCE: EES.

13. Because Model 3 is based on 79 elections instead of 81, the conditional probabilities simulated for Model 3 are based on a version of Model 1 which includes exactly the same elections. This implies that the substantive results shown on the right plot of Figure 5.4 do not involve Cyprus (2009) and Northern Ireland (1999).

The interpretation of the two plots in Figure 5.4 is straightforward. The left chart shows that, for an average citizen, the party perceived as the ideologically closest is the same he / she is partisan of in 30% of the cases in systems characterized by low polarization, and in 50% of the cases in highly–polarized systems. This implies that, in very polarized elections, the half of the times we observe a citizen voting ideologically, we can not really distinguish it from partisan voting. The situation gets somewhat worse as we move to competence assessments. As Figure 5.4 shows, the party indicated as the most competent to deal with the most important problem in the country, is in almost 70% of the cases, the same one a citizen is partisan of in highly–polarized elections. This proportion drops to 40% in elections where polarization is low. This has implications for both the evaluation of valence models based on competence voting and for the interpretation of aggregate perceptions of competence, used to assess which parties "own" which issues (see e.g. Petrocik 1996).

Before passing to a more detailed discussion of these results, an inspection of the coefficients of Model 4 confirms both the expectations formulated in Hypothesis 4. Here the dependent variable is the probability that the party mentioned as the most competent *and* the ideologically closest are the same. According to the hypothesis, the effect of polarization on the overlap between these two types of perceptions is meant to be moderated by whether citizens are partisan or not. Figure 5.5 shows the distribution of predicted probabilities for partisans and non–partisans.

As the figure shows, the probability that competence and ideological perceptions overlap for non–partisans is always around 50%, regardless the level of party polarization. However, for partisans this probability goes up to 70% in highly–polarized elections. Moreover, the difference between partisans and non–partisans is not significant for lower levels of polarization, indicating that in those contexts partisans and non–partisans evaluate parties essentially in the same way. To sum up, all four the effects hypothesized in the previous section find empirical support. In more polarized elections people are more likely to be attached to a political party, and partisans are more likely to perceive the supported party as the ideologically closest and most competent. Moreover, the results show no change for non–partisans, confirming that the mechanism by which polarization influences citizens' evaluations is moderated by their partisan attachment.

5.7. Discussion and Conclusions

Much comparative electoral research is concerned with the impact of characteristics of the political context on citizens' party preferences. In particular, the impact of two factors is known to be significantly influenced by the level of party polarization at the time of the elections: spatial/issue and valence/competence considerations. However, while the studies focused on the former set of considerations always led to the same, uncontroversial, conclusions, investigations on the latter have produced contradicting results.

This study takes cue from this puzzle, and argues that polarization has something to do with the way in which people perceive parties to be more or less ideologically similar to them, and more or less competent, in the first place. In particular, this paper argues that,

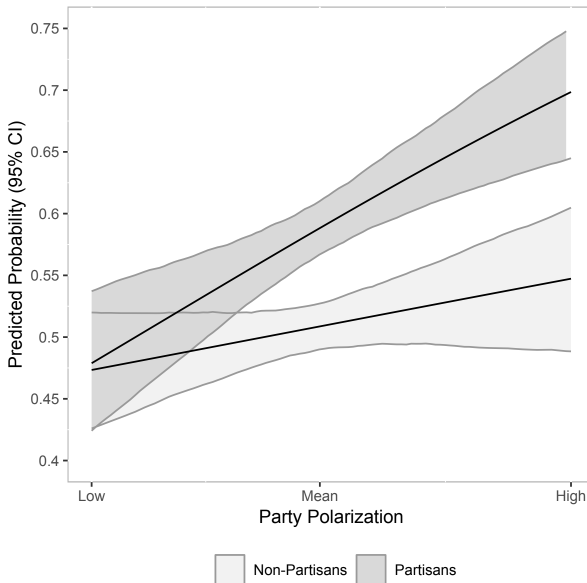

Figure 5.5. Overlap between ideological and competence perceptions for partisans and non–partisans. SOURCE: EES.

in polarized contexts, citizens are more likely to be attached to a certain party, and thus to perceive it as ideologically closest and to evaluate it as most competent. Empirical findings support these expectations, showing that, in highly–polarized systems, partisanship predicts which party is perceived as the ideologically closest in more than 50% of the cases, and which party is perceived as the most competent in almost 70% of the cases. Moreover, further analyses show that the probability that the party perceived to be the most competent is the same as the one perceived to be the ideologically closest grows as a function of polarization for partisans, but not for non–partisans. This indicates that the impact of party polarization on citizens' party evaluations is moderated by their partisan attachment.

This study makes three important contributions to the literature on the impact of the political context on people's behavior. First, it suggests that, when politics is polarized, citizens have higher incentives to rely on partisan cues as they evaluate parties, both on ideological and on valence–based grounds. Interestingly, the overlap with partisanship results from the analyses to be larger for competence assessments than for ideological proximity. A straightforward way to interpret this result is that competence assessments are more likely to reflect people's party identification than perceptions of ideological proximity. This could be driven by the method of measurement: in the data used for this study, party competence is assessed via one single question, while ideological proximity requires information about both the respondent's own positioning and where he/she perceives the parties to be placed. Thus, if these perceptions derive in part from an expression of partisan loyalty, this should be reflected more in the former than in the latter. However, this could also imply that competence assessments are more likely to be influenced by other types of evaluations. Recent studies have relied on different techniques, such as cross–lagged models on panel data, experiments and cognitive interviews, to show that valence considerations often reflect other types of evaluations (see Evans and Chzhen 2016; Therriault 2015; Wagner and Zeglovits 2014). While these studies have all been conducted in homogeneous contexts, the results of this paper suggests that the extent to which this phenomenon takes place can be related to some features of the political context, such as party polarization.

The second contribution of this study is related to the methodological implications of the findings. Essentially, the results show

that, as party polarization increases, ideological and competence considerations become less and less distinguishable from one another. Thus, research focused on comparing the relative strength of these two predictors of the vote in a comparative perspective should take into account in the explanation, and possibly in the measurement, the fact that their degree of collinearity is systematically related to some characteristics of the political context. If ignored, this aspect could lead to observe biased effects in case the two measures are included together in the model and interacted with polarization. This methodological point has also a substantial counterpart, as it implies that observing a larger effect of competence may not be necessarily due to the fact that parties agree on ideological grounds, but quite the opposite. If competence assessments reflect other types of considerations, their effect on the vote, at least based on the measure included in most surveys, should not be expected to be a zero–sum game with ideology.

A third contribution of this study regards our understanding of political behavior in polarized contexts. The findings show that, when parties are polarized, citizens are more likely to state their attachment to a party, to regard that party as competent, and to perceive it as ideologically similar to them. This suggests that some normative implications, mainly drawn from the assumption that higher policy differentiation encourages citizens to evaluate parties and candidates on more substantive grounds, should be revised. To be sure, if all parties offer the same thing, then the vote choice can be hardly regarded as meaningful (Wessels and Schmitt 2008). However, when polarization is high, the meaning of the vote choice can be reduced to nothing more than an expression of partisan loyalty. Thus, following the suggestion of Schmitt and Freire (2012), the relationship between polarization and the competitiveness of elections is better described with a bell–shaped pattern. When polarization is too low, and parties are barely distinguishable from each other, voters will be likely not to care about who wins the election, as the policy outcome will be similar. On the other hand, when polarization is too high, voters will be less sensitive to other parties' appeals, giving parties less incentives to adjust their policies according to where the most of the citizens stand and, ultimately, to behave competently.

Conclusions

Polarization means disagreement. In more formal terms, the concept indicates a situation where the interests of two or more political actors are mutually exclusive. As a consequence, in a polarized context, a certain degree of satisfaction of the preference of an individual or group will inevitably lead to an equal degree of dissatisfaction of the preference of other individuals or groups. This translates, in spatial terms, into a view of polarization as a matter of *distance*. The more two actors are ideologically distant, the more their views are different, antithetical, contrasting. In the political discourse, spatial terms are used exactly for this purpose: to express the difference between views, opinions, preferences for policies, or any other types of statements that provide meaning to an actor's political action. Thus, to study the positional properties of party systems and how they impact on the voters means, in the first place, to assess how people choose when the policy "packages" that are offered by the various parties are quite different from one another.

The first question asked in this study is whether or not greater differences between political options correspond in the voters' mind to smaller *choice sets*, and whether or not this is reflected by their tendency to switch among parties over time. The hypothesized effect is straigthforward: if the options offered by two parties are mutually exclusive, then moving from one to another will imply embracing new aspects (e.g. policies) while giving others up, with a degree of definiteness that increases as a function of the distance between them. Thus, in a polarized context, the average voter will probably think twice before switching his/her party choice.

This statement has implications for our understanding of individual voting behavior, as well as aggregate electoral results. At the individual level, it can help clarifying the psychological mechanisms that lie at the basis of a certain observable behavior (the choice of defecting from, or confirming the support for, the party supported previously), without speculating over the *preferences* that may have led to it. In some cases, to stick with a party does not mean that a

voter is extremely convinced about it, but rather than he/she sees no real alternatives. Thus, in order to fully understand a choice, it is important to know the structure of constraints upon which this choice is founded. This applies to aggregate electoral outcomes too. After all, polarization is a property of the party system. Given the constraining potential of a certain spatial distribution of parties for the choice sets of their (effective and potential) voters, people in polarized systems should be, on average, less willing to switch. However, and again, this can be completely independent from their preferences. Thus, to observe an incumbent government reconfirmed in office after a bad mandate may not necessarily mean that voters are enthusiastically rewarding a poor performance, but it might imply that the party system is structured in a way such that the alternatives that individual voters perceive as viable are few.

To be sure, the jump from the individual to the context is not so simple. This is especially evident in multiparty systems, where large distances can coexist with clusters of parties that are relatively similar to one another. This is why the discussion in chapter 4 distinguishes between "global" and "local" party competition, referring respectively to the overall competition between parties standing on different ideological sides, and the competition between ideologically similar parties. While the hypothesized individual mechanism remains untouched, its aggregation at the electorate's level passes by a middle step, namely the arrangement of the options that are immediately close to each voter. Next to explaining why in some contexts voters are less likely to punish incumbents that deliver poor performances than in others, taking into account the structure of the party system can also cast a light on why, within the same context, different groups of voters are more or less likely to defect from their previous vote. In general terms, to know how much constrained people's choices are can provide a better view of the conditions under which different voters and different electorates are expected to behave in a relatively similar way given similar inputs. This should be taken into account when aggregate electoral results are interpreted in substantive terms as as an expression of the "people's will".

Polarization, Political Conflict and Partisan Loyalties

To reiterate, polarization means disagreement. While in spatial terms this translates into a matter of *distance*, allowing us to model polarization as the degree of party dispersion on the space, one important aspect goes beyond the parties' placement: the possibility that, as disagreement grows, the nature of the interaction between them will probably change too. Section 1.1 provides a "light" definition of polarization centered on the incompatibility between two or more actors' preferences. However, the term is often used referring to a situation of "conflict". This is the case for instance in conflict studies, where polarization is conceived as a stage of escalation where a win–win solution is no longer likely, and mutual respect is threatened (e.g. Pruitt and Olczak 1995, p. 81). Even in the everyday language, the connection between the two concepts is so tight that they are often used as synonyms. Yet this view of polarization is generally overlooked in political science. More fairly, the concept of ideological conflict *is* indeed often associated with polarization, but the full implications of this connection are left unaddressed. This implies that, for instance, the question how citizens cope with political choices when they perceive higher hostility between the parties is neglected, and polarization is regarded as a matter of mere differentiation. However, as the results of Chapter 5 suggest, viewing party polarization as a more or less entrenched political conflict can provide a key to reading voters' evaluations in a way that accomodates previous puzzling results.

An important conceptual step to be made is to assess *why* party polarization, defined here as disagreement or divergence of interests, should convert into political conflict. In my view, this point requires to spend a few words over the dimension of controversy that has been considered in this book, i.e. the topic on which parties are polarized. As I discuss in the chapters 2 and 5, ideological views have been conceptualized over the years as cognitive shortcuts to describe policy preferences (e.g. Downs 1957a; Hinich and Munger 1994), as belief systems rooted into some core values (e.g. Converse 1964; Jost 2006), or even as statements of political self–identification (e.g. Conover and Feldman 1981; Vegetti and Širinić 2019). All these views more or less implicitly regard ideology as a construct able to capture the structure of political divisions in (almost) its entirety. In this perspective, ideological polarization describes a situation where the

disagreement spans across issue domains, becoming essentially an indicator of disagreement *tout court*. In other words, as polarization over ideological views grows, it becomes less and less likely to find an issue or a topic on which parties agree. This sets ground for conflict by providing a reason for it.

More specifically, it is reasonable to assert that conflict arises when the emphasis of the interaction is put on party identities, rather than on substantive policy issues. Here, besides giving concrete reasons for the strife, polarization plays an additional role: it makes party images more distinct from one another, allowing them to lean on ideological profiles that are clearly defined. This is the central point on which the concept of "partisan sorting" described by American scholars is built (see Levendusky 2009). When party ideological views are different enough, it will be easier for the citizens to link a certain ideological profile with a party label. This mechanism is known by social psychologists as "comparative fit": a collection of stimuli is more easily recognized as belonging to the same group when the differences among them are smaller, on average, than the difference between them and other "remaining" stimuli (Turner et al. 1994). This should involve both the voters' side (with the formation of partisan stereotypes) and the parties' side (with better chances to appeal to stereotypical rhetoric when highlighting own qualities against the others'). To be sure, the conceptual overlap between ideological polarization and conflict is imperfect, as polarization can lead to genuine will for negotiation and debate over policy problems. In fact, the argument made here is rahter than conflict is *more likely* to happen when there is polarization, simply because the latter facilitates the occurrence of former. Thus, to sum up, when ideological polarization is higher, strategies that involve appeals to group identity and loyalty have more chances to be successful, hence providing incentives for the parties to use them.

The concept of polarization as political conflict has one immediate consequence: that the more the parties are divided, the more the citizens should be motivated to *take a side*. This is argued in Chapter 5, and confirmed by the empirical data. As the political context grows polarized, the likelihood to find survey respondents who define themselves as *partisans* increases too. Moreover, and by the same logic, the data show that in more polarized contexts, partisanship is more likely to overlap with perceptions of ideological proximity and party competence. In general terms, the chapter suggests

that polarization has something to do with the *centrality of parties* in the political discourse, not only as protagonists of the political competition (Schmitt 2009b; Schmitt and Holmberg 1995), but also as providers of cues upon which citizens build their own opinions and preferences (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013; Taber and Lodge 2006).

The findings discussed have a number of implications for our understanting of voting behavior in a comparative perspective. Normatively, they challenge the assumption that higher policy differentiation encourages citizens to behave more rationally. This assumption is built on the reasonable expectation that a low differentiation of the policy supply (or, as Bartolini (1999) calls it, "decidability") undermines the substantive *meaningfulness* of the vote choice, or in other words, the extent to which a different choice implies a different policy outcome (e.g. Lachat 2011; Wessels and Schmitt 2008). To be sure, nobody can deny the fact that, if all parties offer the same thing, then the vote choice can be hardly regarded as meaningful. What is questioned here is rather the expectation that greater party differentiation would be *linearly* related to the decidability of the political supply. While within some reasonable limits policy differentiation contributes positively to the voters' choices, when the disagreement is too much, and especially, when it affects entire *worldviews*, the chances that political conflict is established overtake the beneficial effects of more decidability. That is to say, when polarization is high, the meaning of the vote choice can be quickly reduced to nothing more than an expression of partisan loyalty. Thus, following the suggestion of Schmitt and Freire (2012), the relationship between polarization and the competitiveness of elections is better described a bell–shaped pattern. When polarization is too low, and parties are barely distinguishable from each other, voters will be likely not to care about who wins the election, as the policy outcome will be similar. On the other hand, when polarization is too high, voters will be less sensitive to other parties' appeals, giving parties less incentives to adjust their policies according to where the most of the citizens stand and, ultimately, to behave competently.

In sum, these findings raise a question regarding the role of politics in the society, especially the function of parties as representatives of the societal divisions and the openness of the citizens to accept and build on each other's preferences. A very loud, conflictual and partisan behavior by the political elites does not help citizens to

evaluate and choose rationally what is better for them. If the tones of the political confrontation force people to choose an advocate to be loyal to, and to seek for a lens through which to evaluate the political environment, this may lead people to approach politics following a "black and white", or "us versus them", approach. In the long run, this could have some detrimental effects for the integration between politics and society, i.e. the ability of politics to *channel*, and not *fuel*, the social disagreement. This could eventually lead citizens to lose trust in the whole democratic system just because they are disappointed by "their own" party. In other words, given the party elites' relative freedom to confront each other in more or less consensual terms, a very conflictual competition may pay off in terms of having strong and loyal supporters, but it is probably not the best thing if we regard politics to be an expression of the citizens' will, and not of politics itself.

Appendix

Country/Election List

1994:
Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany (*East–Germany*, *West–Germany*), Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, UK (*Great Britain*, *Northern Ireland*).

1999:
Austria, Belgium (*Flanders*, *Wallonia*), Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, UK (*Great Britain*, *Northern Ireland*).

2004:
Austria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, UK (*Great Britain*, *Northern Ireland*).

2009:
Austria, Belgium (*Flanders*, *Wallonia*), Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, The Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Spain, Slovakia, Sweden, UK.

Party List

1994:
Belgium: VLD, CVP, SP, Anders Gaan Leven (AGALEV), Vlaams Blok, Volksunie, PS, PRL, PSC, Parti Ecologiste, FN
Denmark: Socialdemocratiet, Radikale Venstre, Konservative

Folkeparti, Centrum Demokraterne, Socialistik Folkeparti, Kristeligt Folkeparti, Venstre, Fremdskridtpartiet
France: Parti Communiste, Parti Socialiste, Mouvement Radicaux de Gauche, Union pour la Democratie Francaise, Rassemblement pour la Republique, Front National, Les Verts, Generation Ecologie
Germany:
West Germany: CDU–CSU, SPD, FDP, Buendnis 90–Die Grunen, Republikaner, Linke Liste – Partei Deutscher Sozialisten
East Germany: CDU, SPD, FDP, Buendnis 90–Die Grunen, Republikaner, Linke Liste – Partei Deutscher Sozialisten
Greece: PASOK, New Democracy, Politiki Anixi, KKE, Synaspismos
Ireland: Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, Labour, Green Party, Progressive Democrats, Sinn Fein, Democratic Left
Italy: Forza Italia, PDS, PPI, AN, Rifondazione Comunista, Lega Nord, Verdi
Luxembourg: Chretien Social (CSV), Letzebuerger Sozialistesch Arbechter Partei, Demokratesch Partei, dei Greng (GLEI–GAP), ADR, Nationalbewegung, KP, Nei Lenk,Neutral Onofhaengig Menschenrechterpartei, GLS
The Netherlands: CDA, PvdA, VVD, D66, Groen Links, Centrum Democraten, SGP, GPF, AOV
Portugal: PSD, CDU–PCP, CDS–PP, PS, Partido de Solidariedade Nacional
Spain: PSOE, PP, Izquierda Unida, Convergenzia y Unio, Partido Nationalista Vasco, Herri Batasuna
UK:
Great Britain: Conservatives, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, Green Party
Northern Ireland: Alliance, Ulster Unionist Party, Democratic Unionist Party, Sinn Fein, Social Democratic Labour Party, Labour, Conservatives, Green

1999:
Austria: SPOE, OEVP, FPOE, Gruene, Liberales Forum CSA – Christlich–Soziale Allianz
Belgium :
Flanders: SP, VLD, Agalev, CVP, Vlaams Blok, VU–ID21
Wallonia: PS, PRL–FDF–MCC, Ecolo, PSC, FN
Denmark: Socialdemokratiet, Venstre, Det Konservative Folkeparti, Socialistisk Folkeparti, JuniBevaegelsen, Folkebevaegelsen mod

EU, Dansk Folkeparti, Centrum–Demokraterne, Det Radikale Venstre, Enhedslisten – De Rod–Gronne, Kristeligt Folkeparti, Fremskridtspartiet
Finland: SDP, Keskusta, Kokoomus, RKP, Vihreat, Vasemmistoliitto, Kristilliset, PS Perussuomalaiset
France: PS–PRG, RPR, UDF, PC, Les Verts, Lutte Ouvriere–LCR, DL, FN/MN, Rassemblement pour la France
Germany: CDU/CSU, SPD, Buendnis 90/Die Gruenen, FDP, Republikaner, PDS
Greece: PASOK, New Democracy, KKE, Sinaspismos, DIKKI, Politiki Anixi, FILELEYTHERI
Ireland: Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, Labour, Progressive Democrats, Sinn Fein, Green party, Democratic Left
Italy: Forza Italia, DS, AN, Lista Pannella–Bonino, I Democratici, Lega Nord, Rifondazione Comunista, PPI, CCD, SDI, CDU, Comunisti Italiani, Federazione dei Verdi, UDEUR, Movimento Sociale Fiamma Tricolore
Luxembourg: CSV/PCS, DP/PD, LSAP/POSL, ADR, Dei Greng, Dei Lenk, GAL
The Netherlands: PvdA, CDA, VVD, D66, Groen Links, SGP, SP, CD, RPF, GPV
Portugal: PS, PSD, CDS–PP, CDU, Bloco de Esquerda
Spain: PP, PSOE, IU, CiU, PNV, EH
Sweden: Vansterpartiet, Socialdemokraterna, Miljopartiet, Centerpartiet, Folkpartiet, Kristdemokraterna, Moderaterna
UK:
Great Britain: Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, SNP, Plaid Cymru, Green Party, UKIP (UK Independent Party)
Northern Ireland: Alliance, Ulster Unionist Party, Democratic Unionist Party, UK Unionist Party, Progressive Unionist Party, Sinn Fein, Social Dem. and Lab. Party

2004:
Austria : SPOE, OEVP, FPOE, GRUENE, KPOE
Cyprus: AKEL, DISI, DIKO, EDEK
Czech Republic: CSSD, KDU–CSL, KSCM, ODS, US–DEU
Denmark:Social Democratic Party, Radical Liberals, Conservative People's Party, Socialist People's Party, Danish People's Party, Liberal Party, The Movement of June, The people's movement against EU
Estonia: Keskerakond, Res Publica, Reformierakond, Rahvaliit,

Isamaaliit, Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond, Eestimaa Uhendatud Rahvapartei, Eesti Kristlik Rahvapartei, Eesti Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Toopartei
Finland: Finnish Social Democratic Party, Centre Party of Finland, National Coalition Party, Left Alliance, Green League, Swedish People's Party, Christian Democrats in Finland, True Finns
France: LO, LCR, PC, PS, Des Verts, UDF, UMP, MPF, FN, MNR, CPNT
Germany: CDU, CSU, SPD, 90/Die Gruenen, PDS, FDP, Republikaner
Greece: New Democracy, PASOK, KKE, Sinaspismos, LAOS
Hungary: Fidesz, Hungarian Democratic Forum, Party of Hungarian Justice and Life, Hungarian Socialist Party, Workers Party, Alliance of Free Democrats
Ireland: Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, Green Party, Labour Party, PD's, Sinn Fein
Italy: Rifondazione comunista, DS, La Margherita, Comunisti Italiani, Verdi, SDI, UDEUR, IDV, Forza Italia, AN, UDC, Lega Nord, Nuovo PSI, Radicali
Latvia: Jaunais Laiks, PCTVL, Tautas Partija, Zalo un Zemnieku Savieniba, Latvijas Pirma Partija, Tevzemei un Brovobai/ LNNK, Latvijas Cels
Luxembourg: KPL, Dei Lenk, Dei Greng, LSAP, DP, CSV,ADR|
The Netherlands: PvdA, CDA,VVD, D66, Groen Links, LPF, ChristenUnie, SGP, SP
Poland: LPR, PSL, PiS, PO, Self–Defense, SdPL, SLD, UP, UW
Portugal: Bloco de Esquerda, CDS–PP, CDU/PCP, Partido da Nova Democracia, PS, PSD
Slovakia: L'S–HZDS, SMER, KSS, SDKU, SMK, KDH, ANO, SNS
Slovenia: LDS, SDS, ZLSD, NSI
Spain: PP,PSOE,IU,Galeusca–Pueblos de Europa, EdP, CC
Sweden: Left party, Social Democrats, Centre Party, Peoples Party (liberals), Moderate Party (conservatives), Christian Democrats, Green Party, June–list
UK:
Great Britain: Labour, Conservative Party, Liberal Democrats, UK Independence Party, Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru
Northern Ireland: Alliance Party, Democratic Unionist Party – DUP, Sinn Fein, SDLP, Ulster Unionist Party – UUP

2009:
Austria: SPOE, OEVP, FPOE, BZOE, GRUENE, Liste Hans Peter Martin, Junge Liberale, KPOE
Belgium :
Flanders: CD&V, Open VLD, SP–A, Vlaams Belang, Groen!, N–VA, LDD, SLP (was Spirit), PVDA+ (Partij van de Arbeid plus)
Wallonia: CDH, MR, PS, FN, ECOLO
Bulgaria: BSP, NDSV, DPS, ATAKA, GERB, SDS–DSB, NAPRED, RZS
Cyprus: AKEL, DISI, DIKO, EDEK, European Party, Ecological and Environmental Movement
Czech Republic: CSSD, KDU–CSL, KSCM, ODS, SZ
Germany: CDU/CSU, SPD, B90/Die Gruenen, Linke, FDP
Denmark: Socialdemokraterne, Det Radikale Venstre, De Konservative, Socialistisk Folkeparti, Dansk Folkeparti, Venstre, Liberal Alliance, Junibevaegelsen, Folkebevaegelsen mod EU
Estonia: Eesti Reformierakond, Eesti Keskerakond, Isamaa ja Res Publica Liit, Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Erakond, Erakond Eestimaa Rohelised, Eestimaa Rahvaliit
Greece: New Democracy, PASOK, KKE, SYRIZA, Popular Orthodox Rally, Ecologist Greens
Finland: SDP, KESK, KOK, VAS, VIHR, RKP, KD, PS
France: LO/NPA, PCF, PS, Les Verts, MoDem, UMP, FN, Le parti de gauche
Hungary: Fidesz, Jobbik, Magyar Kommunista Munkaspart, MDF, MSZP, SZDSZ, KDNP
Ireland: Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, Green Party, Labour Party, Sinn Fein, Libertas
Italy: PDL, Lega Nord, PD, IDV, UDC, Rifondazione/Comunisti Italiani, SEL, La Destra
Latvia: Peoples Party, Union of Greens and Farmers, New Era Party, Harmony Centre, Latvias First Party/Latvias Way, For Fatherland and Freedom, For Human Rights in United Latvia, Civic Union, Society for Other Politics
Lithuania: Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats, Social Democratic Party of Lithuania, National Resurrection Party, Order and Justice Party, Liberals Movement of the Republic of Lithuania, Labour Party, Liberal and Centre Union, Election Action of Lithuanias Poles, Lithuanian Peasant Popular Union, New Union Social Liberals

Luxembourg: Dei Greng, LSAP, DP, CSV, ADR, Dei Lenk, KPL, BL
Malta: Partit Nazzjonalista, Partit Laburista, Alternativa Demokratika, Azzjoni Nazzjonali
The Netherlands: PvdA, CDA, VVD, D66, Groen Links, PvdD, ChristenUnie, SGP, SP, PVV, Trots op Nederland TON (Verdonk)
Poland: Polish Peoples Party, Libertas, Coalition Agreement for the Future, SLD, Civic Platform, Law and Justice
Portugal: Bloco de Esquerda, CDS–PP, CDU (PCP/PEV), PS, PSD
Romania: PD–L, PSD, PNL, UDMR, PC, PNT–CD, PRM
Slovakia: L'S–HZDS, SMER, SDKU, SMK, KDH, SNS, KSS, SF
Slovenia: DESUS, LDS, SLS, SNS, SDS, SD, ZARES, NSi, SMS
Spain: PP, PSOE, IU/IC–V, UPyD, CiU, ERC, EAJ–PNV, BNG, CC–PNC, NA–BAI, EA, UPN
Sweden: Vaensterpartiet, Socialdemokraterna, Centerpartiet, Folkpartiet, Moderaterna, Kristdemokraterna, Miljopartiet, Sverigedemokraterna, Piratpartiet
UK: Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, UK Independence Party, British National Party, Green Party

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